

LOUISE MICHEL, PRIESTESS OF PITY AND VENGEANCE.

BY EMMA PADDOCK TELFORD.

IN the death of Louise Michel, variously known and designated as saint, sinner, Priestess of Pity, anarchist, poet, philanthropist, petrolleuse, musician and savant, the twentieth century loses one of its most romantic and remarkable figures; one whose name will doubtless go down to posterity with those of her countrywomen Joan of Arc and Charlotte Corday.

A born leader—though, by virtue of a massive virility and stormy impetuosity rather than feminine charm or personal magnetism—for nearly forty years she has swayed the militant socialistic party of France, fiercely carrying on the work of propoganda and at the same time acting the part of good angel to the turbulent elements of the under-world.

Born at the Castle of Vroncourt, in the department of the Haute-Marne, in 1839, she has lived a life full of the interest and intensity of human passion.

An illegitimate child, her early days were passed in an old feudal castle belonging to her father, surrounded by a "veritable menagerie of pets," as she says in her memoirs, and cared for by her mother and grandparents. Her earliest playmates included a pet deer, a tortoise, a tame wolf, several hares, owls, squirrels, bats, dogs in legions and cats in battalions, and among these the child Louise learned the law of compassion and pity that has dominated her whole life. Here, she first felt the spirit within her crying for vengeance upon the oppressors of her furred and feathered friends. She bought imprisoned larks and linnets as long as her toys held out as a medium of exchange, then failing the sinews of war for barter, she fell upon the enemy with tooth and nail, rescuing the tiny victims of childish inhumanity *vi et armis*.

"I took advantage," she naively admits, "of my strength over younger children; an excusable action on my part, since by so doing, I was placing my strength at the service of the right."

Thus she progressed toward womanhood—an ugly, homely child, with strongly marked features, dishevelled hair, skirts always too short, aprons torn, and the net in which she stored her toads usually dangling from her pocket; an unprepossessing exterior, doubtless, but the possessor of a heart pulsating with a passionate love of liberty and downtrodden humanity.

Her boon companion at this time was her cousin Jules, who romped with her through the woods, discussed all sorts of questions,



rearranged Victor Hugo's dramas and played them with her. Behind a convenient wall in the yard the children improvised a stage, and guillotine, and here they represented with great fidelity as to detail, the bloodiest scenes of the Reign of Terror, thus early showing a strange leaning toward the horrible.

Before she was fourteen, Louise had two suitors whom she summarily dismissed; the last one in the following emphatic words: "I do not love you. I shall never do so, and were I to be married to you, I should treat you as Madame Angelique treated Georges Daudin."

When Louise was fourteen years old, her grandparents died,

and she prepared herself for teaching. Pupils came in abundance, for the eccentric girl made friends among children as quickly as among animals; but her revolutionary sentiments soon proved her undoing with the authorities. She taught her scholars to sing the Marseillaise the first thing when school opened and the last thing before closing, and this often with weeping and on their bended knees. Such teaching, combined with newspaper essays comparing Napoleon to Domitian, brought her twice before the authorities.

In 1855 at the close of the Crimean war, Louise, then eighteen years of age, enthusiastic and passionately republican, came to Paris as an assistant teacher in the school of Madame Volliers. At this time, according to her own story, she and her mother, who was with her, were so poor and wages were so small that even a cook was better off and often lent them money. "Our black grenadine dresses," she said, "and our lace mantels were all got from second-hand shops, and seldom paid for in cash. To make ends meet we gave evening lessons and in that way earned a little more money." After her settlement in Paris, Louise Michel's revolutionary opinions grew apace, and she soon threw aside her books, became an avowed atheist and plunged madly into the cause of the people. She took part in many of the revolutionary meetings, and the lectures she gave and attended became centers of opposition to the Napoleonic dynasty. Soon the war came on and the Empire fell in a night. Louise, who had done what she could to protest against it, took her first conspicuous part in French politics by collecting signatures for the release of *Éndes* and *Brideau*, who had proclaimed the Republic before Sedan. She, with others, carried the petition to the Governor of Paris, but they were refused admittance. "We have come in the name of the people of Paris," she said, "and we will not go until our petition is read." From this time on she threw herself, heart and soul, into the commune. Habited in the costume of a National Guard and shouldering a rifle, she was present at all the places where excitement, danger and death reigned, the head and front of every movement. Although no special atrocity was ever laid to her charge, she was held more or less responsible for everything. When the last stand of that desperate band of revolutionists was made in the Montmartre Cemetery, Louise was one of the handful of men and women who made battlements of the walls by pulling down the stones with their hands and hiding behind these fragile defences, dodged the shells sent into their midst by the Versaillist troops. When at last the position was stormed, and the futile struggle ended, Louise was banished to New Caledonia, where she spent her time

nursing the sick among her fellow prisoners. She was also employed as school mistress, becoming so devoted to her wild little Kanaka scholars that she declared herself more than once tempted to return to them after the amnesty in 1880 which carried her back to Paris.

Her return from exile was celebrated by monster demonstrations on the part of the Parisian populace. She brought with her a curious red cat of some wild species which became famous in connection with its mistress. Again she took up the role of propogandist, transferring to anarchy the devotion she had formerly shown for republicanism. Soon again she found herself in prison, this time for inciting the poor to plunder bakers' shops. Since then her life has been a succession of controversies with the authorities. She has been imprisoned as a lunatic, convicted as a criminal, and locked up in St. Hazen with the poor girls of the town. She wrote the first volume of her memoirs in jail. Her later years she spent in Paris, at Dulwich and Sydenham, London. She never married, and, until a few years ago, lived with her mother, the old peasant woman. After her mother's death she lived alone with her books and cats. Now and again she would emerge to wave the fire-brand of anarchy in Hyde Park and other places. The rest of the time she busied herself with her books and pen. She was an accomplished musician and did much musical criticism under the name of Louis Michel, her chances with the editors being bettered in this way. She was a fine botanist and ready writer. Altogether some ten volumes have come from her pen. Her plays and novels are all based upon the one question of social reform, the best known of the later being *Les Microbes Humains*.

She was a firm believer in the education of the masses, claiming for them the right of happiness, better wages, shorter hours of labor and a chance for their expansion physically, intellectually and morally. American women she esteemed highly and is quoted as saying: "French women are beginning to understand that they must take their place as the American women have managed to do. They talk less of the right of voting and are trying more to instruct themselves and thus assure their independence, without male guardianship."

Totally forgetful of self and comfort in her unceasing struggle for the betterment of the waifs and derelicts of humanity, she always occupied wretched lodgings, piled up with disordered heaps of rickety furniture, books, music, magazines and cooking utensils, while her dress was that of a beggar. Domesticity was not one of her attributes. An American who visited her in her squalid sur-

roundings a few years ago gave this pen picture of the "Red Nun," as the Parisians called her, and her unconventional manners: "I was ushered," he said, "into a room poorly furnished and in indescribable confusion and disorder. All at once, a side door opened, and Louise Michel literally flew into my presence, clad only in a woman's innermost garment and a petticoat. Tall, gaunt, with high cheek bones, big mouth and massive chin, she was never handsome, and now with her dishevelled iron gray hair flying about in all directions, her prominent and haggard features, her unwashed linen and the petticoat torn in a hundred places, she more resembled a witch or sorceress of the dark ages than a civilized being of this enlightened period."

She was a brilliant conversationalist, never uttering a commonplace remark, while so great were her powers of pleasing that in conversation one almost forgot the dinginess and squalor of her surroundings. Her voice was low and moderate, seldom rising to a tone consistent with the wildness of her words. Her language was good and her construction grammatical. When sitting on the platform waiting for her turn to speak, her hands lay quietly on her lap or played absent-mindedly with her chin. When ready to speak she would rise quietly and with a certain appearance of dignity.

A few years ago she planned to visit America, accompanied by her young secretary, Charlotte Vevel, a French woman whose anarchistic tendencies had led her to share the doubtful fortunes of the "Angel Anarchist." Her object in coming was to earn money enough by a course of lectures on her political theories to erect a home in London for political outcasts from all countries of the globe. Formulating her plans she said: "In this home they will live for a short time until they can find employment, lodging and food. English lessons will be given them, that they may know the language of the country where they are compelled to live. Newspaper advertisements offering employment will be brought to their notice and explained. As the object is charity, this help will be extended to all regardless of party or nationality. I have witnessed the pitiful arrival of a great many of these unfortunates, absolutely destitute and not knowing where to turn, and this has given me the idea of founding this shelter."

Just before she sailed, however, Louise Michel received word from this country that her views would not meet with the approval of those in authority, and her project had to be abandoned.

She died in Marseilles, death following an attack of double

pneumonia contracted while on a lecturing tour of the Southern Provinces of her own beloved France.

To many of the present day, Louise Michel may seem to have been a poor, mad creature with a tragic past, albeit one singularly honest and pure. But if love for one's fellow man be taken into account, in the years to come, Louise Michel's name may, like Abou Ben Adhem's, lead all the rest.