

A Penitent Communist

The subject of this sketch, Louise Gimet Michel, was one of the worst among the Paris Communists in 1871 (says a writer in the 'Irish Monthly'). Her life was compiled by Dr Bois-sarie from facts given to him by Sister De la Garde, of St. Joseph's Convent, Montpellier, who was instrumental in the marvellous change and conversion in this remarkable penitent, who was thirty-three years of age at the time of the Commune.

Tall, strong, energetic, her expression of face was stern, yet now and then softened by gleams of brightness and sweetness; heart and soul she joined in the Revolution, and, being a friend of Garibaldi, she held a high position among the Freemasons, and developed a strong taste for military tactics, which she quickly acquired.

Under the Commune she took the name 'Captain Pigerre,' and wore the uniform of a captain with a red sash, usually attending at the head of her company at the deaths of condemned prisoners, thus gratifying her bloodthirsty nature. She presided at the shooting of Monsignor Darboy, Archbishop of Paris, on May 24, 1871. After the third round was fired he still breathed, and she went forward and despatched him with a brutal kick in the head, and then savagely trampled on his dead body. Four or five days later, when the Archbishop's remains were brought home, Abbé Schaeffer and other witnesses were surprised at finding the face disfigured and unrecognisable, the effects of Louise's maltreatment, no ball having struck the head.

On May 26 she again headed her men at the death of Pere Olivaint, S.J., reserving to herself the right of firing the first shot. At this moment Pere Olivaint, noticing the disguise, said: 'Madame, this costume is not becoming.' As time went on, if holy Pere Olivaint's name were mentioned in her hearing she trembled and could not conceal her remorseful expression. Later on the unhappy woman, among the many crimes and scandals of her past life, confessed to having

Murdered Thirteen Priests.

Arrested in arms on the Barricades, Pigerre was tried by court-martial and condemned to death. The superioress of St. Lazare, anxious to save this sinful soul, begged for a reprieve, which was granted. This delay saved Louise's life; her name, doubtless being overlooked, was not again called. She was imprisoned in St. Lazare, which was ultimately the happy cause of her conversion, as the nun who had saved her life now became the guide of this fierce nature. She often said: 'I want, and I will have, your soul.' At the beginning of Louise's conversion, in trying moments of mental struggle, her best solace was to pray at Pere Olivaint's tomb, whose last words were reprimanding her. While kneeling there, at 33 Rue de Sevres, the pious penitent was miraculously cured of a painful wound in the knee.

During her imprisonment she had only one book in her cell—a volume of Pere Olivaint's sermons, which so touched her heart that she observed to the superioress: 'Strange that a priest whose name I could not formerly utter without fury is now instrumental in bringing me to God.'

At Montpellier the Sisters of St. Joseph conducted an orphanage, as well as a separate community, consisting of a hundred young girls and women, who, having more or less erred, wished to redeem the past, and gave solemn promise of lasting reform. Under the name and wearing the habit of 'Children of Mary,' they are truly spiritual and are partly recruited by liberated prisoners. (But, alas! can we still speak thus in the present tense.)

After the defeat of the Commune, two hundred of these women, variously accused, were distributed among the different houses established in France, and at the termination of their sentence some begged to be allowed to remain under the care of the nuns, and proved models of piety and self-denial. Such was Louise Gimet, who henceforth for the remaining eighteen or twenty years of her life was devoted to

Prayer and Penance.

Surely this noble self-abnegation redeemed her former sinful life. The change was complete; no murmur, no uncharitable or critical remark ever passed her lips, and her greatest happiness was to help the dying. Thus Louise spent her last years. On her dying bed, being asked if she were tormented by fear, she replied: 'What can I fear? I have thrown myself completely on God's mercy.'

A former companion, also penitent, in some degree accounted for the grace granted to Louise, who, she said, always

preserved devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and besides was most charitable to the poor. During her youthful wanderings, going along a street at the foot of Fourvieres Hill, Lyons, she heard a passing youth blaspheme the name of our Blessed Lady; she turned back and struck him. About this time (1858) she visited the Cure d'Ars, who prophetically accosted her: "My daughter, unhappily you will do great evil, but in due time our merciful God in His goodness will grant you the grace to repent in reward for your devotion to His Mother." The Sisters of St. Joseph at Montpellier being dispersed by the Government, Louise returned to her native place, Marseilles, where she died a peaceful, saintly death in March, 1904.

Thus a depraved profligate, meeting in the path of life two holy souls, the Blessed Cure d'Ars and Venerable Pere Olivaint, found salvation in the consoling mystery of God's mercy; an encouraging lesson to those whose great mission is to instruct the ignorant and to reform sinners.

A Non-Catholic Tribute to Nuns

Mr Richard Harding Davis (one of the best known of American war correspondents and writers) has been travelling in Africa. One of the characteristics in his letters from there is his frank appreciation of the work and sacrifices of the Catholic missionaries in the Dark Continent. In 'Collier's Weekly' of September 7 Mr Davis makes a strong appeal on behalf of the Sisters of St. Joseph at Calabar. 'There are few women in Calabar' (he says). 'There are three or four, who are wives of officials, two nurses employed by the Government, and the Mother Superior and Sisters of the Order of St. Joseph. For the Sisters the officers, the Government people, the traders, the natives, even the rival missionaries, have the most tremendous respect and admiration. The sacrifice of the woman who, to be near her husband on the coast, consents to sicken and fade and grow old before her time, and of the nurse who, to preserve the health of others, risks her own, is very great; but the sacrifice of the Sisters, who have renounced all thought of home and husband, and who have exiled themselves to this steaming swampland, seems the most unselfish.

'In order to support the 150 little black boys and girls who are at school at the mission, the Sisters rob themselves of everything except the little that will keep them alive. Two, in addition to their work at the mission, act as nurses in the English hospital, and for that they receive together £120. This forms the sole regular income of the five women; for each £24 a year. With anything else that is given them in charity, they buy supplies for the little converts.

'They live in a house of sandstone and zinc that holds the heat like a flatiron, they are obliged to wear a uniform that is of material and fashion so unsuited to the tropics that Dr Chichester, in charge of the hospital, has written in protest against it to Rome, and on many days they fast, not because the Church bids them to do, but because they have no food. And with it all, these five gentlewomen are always eager, cheerful, sweet of temper, and a living blessing to all who meet them. What now troubles them is that they have no room to accommodate the many young heathens who come to them to be taught to wear clothes and to be good little boys and girls. This is causing the Sisters great distress. Anyone who does not believe in that selfish theory, that charity begins at home, but who would like to help to spread Christianity in Darkest Africa and give happiness to five noble women, who are giving their lives for others, should send a postal money order to Marie T. Martin, the Mother Superior of the Catholic Mission of Old Calabar, Southern Nigeria. And if you are going to do it, as they say in the advertising pages, "Do it now!"'

'The publication of an advertisement in a Catholic paper shows that the advertiser not only desires the patronage of Catholics, but pays them the compliment of seeking it through the medium of their own religious journal.' So says an esteemed and wide-awake American contemporary. A word to the wise is sufficient....

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