

A Sketch Of My Life

Marie Louise

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I WAS born in the east of France, on the chain of mountains called Yura, which divides French territory from that of Switzerland. To the best of my knowledge my ancestors were born and lived in that locality for several generations. Their massive frames and peculiar features leave no doubt as to their connection with the atmospheric influence of the lofty Yura mountains whose bold and towering peaks dart forth to meet the clouds.

Each province in France has its own idiosyncracies, but none have native characteristics more emphasized than the inhabitants of Lorraine and Franche-Comte, whose territory stretches along the line dividing France from Germany on the north, and Switzerland on the south. These people, like the Germans, are noted for their physical sturdiness as well as their mental balance and depth; the former being enlivened and the latter clarified by the use of generous wines as an ordinary beverage.

The central portion of the east of France has given birth to numerous men of large mental caliber, such as Dr. Louis Pasteur, Jules Grevy, Alphonse de Lamartine, Victor Hugo, P. J. Proudhon, Chas. Fourier, Victor Considerant, Etienne Cabet, J. J. Rousseau, Blaise Pascal, etc. The provinces in the south and center furnish brilliant orators, great warriors and ardent revolutionists of the type of Chas. Barbaroux, Napoleon Bonaparte and Leon Gambetta, while those of the west produce sailors, men of religious and conservative tendencies, of whom Larochejaquelin and Chateaubriant are types.

My ancestors and myself were born Roman Catholics, but when I was four years of age, my father, who had intense observing power and great depth of thought, met a man who had severed his connection with the Roman Catholic church because he found her dogmas at variance with the teachings of the Bible. He soon prevailed upon my father to read the unabridged Bible, and the result was another desertion from the fold of the church. There being no secular school in that part of the country, I was obliged to attend a Catholic one managed by nuns. From these and the parish priest I received very bad treatment, and but for the extreme kindness of the sister under whose direct tuition I was, I would not have been able to stand the ordeal. The memory of that woman is enshrined within my heart with all that is noble and lovely on earth.

Thus, at an early age, I was a heretic and called upon to battle with my surroundings and to batter on the angular corners of tradition and convention. My god-father, who was one of my father's brothers and was childless, once called on us and said to me:

“Marie, I have always contemplated making you my heir, but I cannot do it unless you return to the Roman Catholic church.”

“Money could not induce me to become a Roman Catholic,” I replied.

“Our forefathers were all Roman Catholics,” continued my god-father; “it is our duty to tread in their steps.” (*C’est notre devoir de marcher sur leurs traces.*)

“Had our forefathers been thieves, ought I to be one also?” I gravely questioned.

I was then about eight years old. That I had already suffered and bravely borne my suffering was evidenced in my speech.

The first years of my infancy were passed in the tumultuous agitation and repeated insurrections which shook France between the overthrow of King Louis Philippe in 1848 and the beginning of 1852, when Louis Napoleon strangled the second republic and erected his imperial throne. My father was a republican; was so, I think, from the pressure of environment, for his mind was more directed toward the study of the Bible and the worship of God than toward political movements. I, though so young, was a republican by the force of my nature. When the people shouted, *Vive la republique!*—every tissue of my body seemed to hear it and thrill. I was seven years old when a red flag, the emblem of the republican party called The Mountain (*La Montagne*), was placed in my hands to carry it a long way at the head of a column returning from a political banquet in a forest. I shall never forget the joy I felt when I grasped the pole of the flag and saw its crimson folds wave over my head. My father was one of the many thousands whom Louis Napoleon imprisoned at the *Coup d’Etat* on December 2, 1851, and during the following month. He was arrested at night and when in the morning I found him missing, I divined where he was. Had not I during several preceding nights heard the tramping of horses and the rattling of chains in the street? Going to my window, I had seen gendarmes on horseback leading, or rather dragging along, prisoners who were manacled and sometimes chained to the horses. These prisoners had been arrested in the surrounding villages, in the dead of the night, and were hauled to the prison of the town. I knew that my father’s turn had come. I went straight to the prison gate and asked to see him, but was referred to the military commander, for France was under martial law. That important individual received me brusquely and, with a look full of hatred, refused my request. My heart sank within me, for I adored my father and could not reconcile myself to being parted from him. But to the look of hatred of Napoleon’s officer, I replied with another just as intense and more weighty, for that man was in the decline of life, while I was in the dawning of it, and the insignificant little girl might become a significant woman. Do oppressors realize what there is in trampling on the tender nature of a child? Napoleon went to Sedan in 1870 surrounded by hundreds of thousands whose infantile eyes had gazed on the horrors of the *Coup d’Etat*, and he never returned.

After his release from prison, my father left our native province and went to settle in Paris. The suburb Saint Antoine, famous in the history of Paris for its intelligent laboring population and revolutionary character, was selected for our abode. On my arrival at the capital, that which, above all other things, impressed me most was the houses wrecked and pierced by the bullets of the soldiers on the days of the *Coup d’Etat*.

A few months later, my father fell dangerously ill and was taken to a Protestant hospital connected with an Institution of Charities managed by sisters called *Diaconesses*. I was placed in the apprentice department of the same institution. Mechanical talents were soon discovered in me and, before the age of eleven, I was installed as head of the shirt workrooms, where I instructed the girls (every one older than myself) in the art of producing a perfect shirt, all by hand work.

Having served about a year in that capacity, I was removed to the dressmaking department, where I was intrusted with taking measures, cutting, fitting and superintending the sewing girls. My superiors, who were charmed with my mechanical talents, were still more delighted to find me possessed of knowledge of the Bible and capable of making a good speech at prayer meetings. As was to be expected, they sought to retain me in the

establishment as postulant to the sisterhood. But there was too much about me that did not exactly tally with their teachings, and I candidly informed the director that I could not join the Order. This was another step in heresy, another protest against established powers. I did not fail to reap the fruit of my rebellion, and the words of praise previously bestowed on me were transformed into burning censure. Through my exaggerated timidity and slowness to defend myself, slanderers always got the best of me.

At the age of twelve I left the house of the *Diaconesses* and went home. A man born in FrancheComte used to visit my father and have with him long and animated discussions on the merit of the Bible. He was a university graduate and a Voltairian of the nineteenth century. With the advantage of his education, he overthrew my father at every turn, though he never conquered him. I sat hour after hour, silently listening and eagerly drinking every word of that man's logic, and a few months of that experience made of me what is termed an infidel. One more step in heresy; nay, a leap!

On Sundays, my father compelled me to read the Bible for hours consecutively, but soon discovered my skepticism and assumed toward me an attitude akin to estrangement. At the age of eighteen I graduated. The minister of the church I attended desired me to take charge of the girls' school of his parish. In an interview with him on this subject I inquired: "Shall I be obliged to teach the Bible to my pupils?" To his affirmative answer I rejoined: "Then let us drop the subject; I cannot teach the Bible."

This latter step in heresy blighted all my future prospects. Aside from my infidelity, my father could not forgive me for having thrown away a lucrative position and alienated influential friends. From that time onward, I was left at the mercy of the storm, tossed here and there, sometimes disabled, sometimes nearly shattered by angry, opposing winds. Under the plea that I was not capable of taking care of property, my father undertook to strip me of the property left me by my mother. Loving him dearly, and not suspecting his designs, I was easily led to sign the documents annulling my rights of possession. When I discovered the truth and realized what little chance a woman has to get justice in the courts of France, and of what little consequence she was in all matters, I departed from Paris and settled in London, England.

During my sojourn in that city, joined several progressive societies, French and English; was a member of the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association, also of several sections of the Reform League under the presidency of Mr. Edmond Beales, in 1868. I readily learned how to write English, but during several years was unable to speak that tongue; this I attribute to my native timidity in the presence of strangers. A few months previous to the outbreak of the Franco-German war I came to America. In my spare time I studied physiology, economics, sociology, and was greatly interested in phrenology. From the study of the latter I concluded that man's power of volition was severely limited by propensities, innate or developed, which are indicated by special forms of brain. This gave a swing to my former standard of social ethics. I had been taught that children must be severely chastised and transgressors of the law sternly punished. This could not be wholly reconciled with the idea of limitation in volition. I dropped the theories of severe chastisement and entered a line of thought more in keeping

with the law of love in human relations. Owing probably to superficiality in my new mode of reasoning, I hailed the doctrines of equality and altruism as expounded by State Socialists and remained several years under that fascinating delusion.

Soon engaging in business, I gave to my work all my time and my energies. In a harassing and ceaseless labor I passed several years, dead to all thought, save that of getting money to pay notes matured, and preserving the means for earning an honest and independent livelihood. But adversity cheated me of my hopes, and misfortunes fell upon me fast and swift. I was too good a mechanic in my trade not to disturb the equanimity of my competitors; independent and self-willed, to suit the narrow views of the people around me. Conspiracies against my person and my belongings soon sprang up, and one night my store was burglarized of nearly all its valuable contents. This heavy disaster inevitably generated many others, and, within three years, I was reduced to poverty. Single-handed, how could I fight against my numerous assailants? My enemies chuckled and scoffed and jeered. Never had I suspected that so much of wickedness lodged in the human breast.

I had now reached that point in misfortune when the victim curses society; when criminals are evoked. But in my case the cruel ordeal begot opposite results. Though my reason had received a severe shock, my mind refused to become distorted. I began to question whether those persons who had so injured me were conscious of the depth of their wickedness, and whether motives personal with them did not present their conduct, to their own judgment, in a light very different from that in which it appeared to me—and the verdict of my own conscience was in their favor. I further questioned whether my own position and relation to them were not, in themselves, the provocator of their evil deeds—and I found another verdict against myself.

The measure of evil, then, is dependent on the way we look at it, and this confirms the axiom that we love a man in proportion to the good, and hate him in proportion to the harm, we do him. The conclusions which forced themselves upon me were that injustice, hatred and severity were fatal to the general welfare of society, while equity and benevolence contrived to perfect man and cement social relations. The injunction of Christ, "Love one another; love your enemies," presented itself in all its beauty and usefulness. Our enemies are lovable, for it is not the man that is bad; it is the conditions about him that force him to do evil. What the human creature needs is opportunities to do good and freedom to develop his potential qualities.

Of the philosophy I have just outlined I am a zealous advocate. My writings on Economics, Sociology and History have placed my name on the roll of advanced thinkers and defenders of human liberty. My principles logically involve a supreme regard for life. Partly not to destroy life wantonly, partly not to inflict suffering, and partly for hygienic reasons, I am a vegetarian. Meat eating, I maintain, familiarizes us with cruelty, blunts our sensibilities, excites and develops animalism.

This is a synopsis of the general incidents of my life and their bearing upon my mental unfoldment.

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