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A Translation of Some Works of
Louise Michel, Early French Feminist,
Militant Anarchist, and Socialist Visionary

By

Julianna Kramer

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Honors
in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures

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ABSTRACT

KRAMER, JULIANNA A Translation of Some Works of Louise Michel, Early
French Feminist, Militant Anarchist, and Socialist Visionary.
Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, June 2021.

ADVISOR: Michelle Chilcoat

Louise Michel is regarded as one of the founders of anarchist ideology. Born in 1830, the socialist progressive Louise Michel infused her beliefs of equality and liberty from repressive governments into her lessons as a school teacher. An early feminist, she was among the founding members of the Société pour la Revendication des Droits de la Femme (Society for the Demand of Civil Rights for Women). Michel was a major leader of the Paris Commune, a revolutionary socialist government that controlled the city of Paris for roughly two months in 1871. Heading the Montmartre Women's Vigilance Committee, she took the lead in deploying militant tactics to defend the poor and demand legal and economic equality of the sexes.

After the dissolution of the Paris Commune, Louise Michel was exiled and incarcerated. While in prison, she became a prolific writer, using writing as a revolutionary tool to disseminate socialist ideas to children and adults alike. A short story for children, titled *Les dix sous de Marthe* (*Marthe's Fifty-Cent Piece*), follows a young girl named Marthe and shows the ripple effect generosity, charitable giving, and social consciousness can have within a community. At age six, Marthe had spent much of what her great-aunt had given her as a New Year's Day gift on treats and toys, but out on a walk, Marthe encounters two young boys, impoverished and penniless. With just ten coins left in her possession, she gives them to the young boys. Little did she know that those ten coins would be the catalyst for the two boys to find work at a local shop, eventually becoming successful business owners.

Ten years later, as Marthe's parents are struggling to make ends meet, she considers using her salary as a schoolteacher to repay their debts. What she finds out, however, is that the two individuals her parents are indebted to are those same boys she helped ten years prior. Those boys, now grown, remember Marthe's life changing act of philanthropy, and all three of them come to an agreement that will keep her parents' store open. While simple in its plot, *Marthe's Ten Coins* lays the groundwork for the ideas of mutual aid and selflessness within an otherwise inequitable socio-economic system. Her young readers learn that human compassion and benevolence are critical to the wellbeing, fiscal and otherwise, of others.

In an excerpt from her memoir speaking this time to adults, Louise Michel condemns the social and economic systems that have not only placed her in prison, but caused the destitution of countless women who have no options but to participate in prostitution. Living in the female prisons only exacerbates their already dismal existence. Michel calls these prisons "morgues of the living," blaming the misery of the women around her on greed and exploitation by the bourgeoisie. Her memoir seeks no apologies; her portrayal of unjust suffering compels readers to make change.

The work of a translation is never finished. The intricacies of language, the beauty within expression, are often the biggest obstacles to a translator. Working with texts not only in another language, but in that language of another century, poses a challenge in deciphering a colloquial vernacular that no longer prevails. The work to authentically capture the essence of a literary piece is hard. Strict translations often lose the subtleties of a work, and in that lose its unique voice. Translating is a demanding and evolving process, but its reward is the realization of literature's most profound impact: that people of all different walks of life and languages can share stories, appreciate these narratives, and find joy in connection.

“Marthe’s Fifty-Cent Piece”

Translation of Louise Michel’s “Les dix sous de Marthe.” in *Le livre du jour de l’an: histoires, contes et legends pour les enfants* (Paris: J. Brare, 1872) pp. 28-34.

By Julianna Kramer

So many things to wish for! And so many New Year’s Day stories to tell!

One of the things we can wish for is this: *to live and die in peace with our conscience.*

And one of the stories we can tell is this:

On one particular New Year’s Day, little Marthe had received loads of toys and a prodigious amount of candy. As she was only six, however, she grew tired of her toys and sick of the sweets before the clock had even struck noon.

So Marthe asked her great aunt, who spoiled her terribly, if she might like to take Marthe out for a little walk.

The lovely old woman took hardly any money with her because she did not know how to say no to Marthe when she did have some; and she did not want Marthe to get into the habit of mindless spending.

It was a beautiful day, though extremely cold; Marthe pushed her arms as far as she could into a muff that was almost as big as she was.

The boulevards were filled with boutiques, and Marthe bought so many things right off the bat that her great aunt was quickly down to her last fifty-cent piece.

The little girl had her arms and oversized muff full with dazzling purchases that cost very little and were worth even less.

Knowing the money was almost gone, it dawned on Marthe that there were little children who had spent their New Year's Day without any toys or sweets.

It was awfully dreadful of her to have realized this so late, but then again Marthe was only six years old, and deep down she had a good heart.

Moreover, her great aunt spoiled her too much, unreasonably so.

Just as she was starting too late to think of others, two children, younger than she was, caught her eye. They were so pale and seemed so sad that Marthe's dear great aunt was struck by them as well.

The older of the two, quite properly dressed in black, but in a manner that was too light for the season, had stopped to adjust his younger brother's little woolen scarf. Despite being dressed more warmly, the poor child was shivering and his little neck was purple with cold.

“Where are you going, my young friends?” asked Marthe’s great aunt.

“We are returning, Madame,” replied the eldest, “from a friend of our mother’s who was not at home, so we are going back to our house.”

“That’s right!” added the younger one with that naive confidence of childhood. “We were going to Madame Paul’s to see if she had anything for our mother to work on so we can get some money to buy bread.”

And as the older boy glanced down at the younger one to get him to stop his chattering, that last fifty cent-piece found its way into the little one’s hand. Then Marthe and her great aunt beat a hasty retreat so the older brother would not be able to give the coin back to them.

When they were further away, Marthe began to cry. “Oh auntie!” she said, “How sorry I am to have bought all those little toys! We could have given more to those poor children!”

Ten years later, a sixteen-year-old Marthe, in her first months as a primary school teacher, was subjected to a rude awakening that took her completely by surprise.

Her parents were not succeeding in their business, and a mere debt of five or six hundred francs was about to put them in very dire straits.

Marthe had just started as an assistant mistress at a day school. She would be earning eight hundred francs a year, but since she was only paid monthly, it was impossible to come up right away with the sum to cover what her father owed on unsold merchandise.

If he did not pay the balance by the date it was due, her parents' credit would be destroyed.

If they returned the merchandise without paying for it, they would have to close their shop.

Marthe came up with an idea, which she shared with her great aunt, who, now eighty years old, adored Marthe as much as ever and would have still been spoiling her had Marthe herself not become reasonable.

“My dear auntie,” said the young woman, “I think that we could make an arrangement with my father's creditor. Since I'm making eight hundred francs a year, I could give him fifty francs a month on the day I get paid. Maybe the creditor would accept that offer.”

The lovely old woman approved of the idea and decided to accompany her great niece to the creditor's office.

When they arrived at the Marcel Brothers', both were heartily surprised to see a coin in sculpted relief on their business sign, along with this inscription: To the Fifty Cents on New Year's Day.

The women remembered Marthe's fifty cents and, without daring to share the thought out loud, entered the shop.

The oldest of the Marcel brothers was seated at the desk, cashiering; the youngest served as shop manager. A woman who appeared more unwell than aged filled in for one or the other of her sons, as needed.

Marthe, whose great aunt loved hearing Marthe speak because she idolized her, revealed the reason for their visit very directly, and with kind of energy that clearly communicated her trustworthiness.

Marcel, the oldest, to whom Marthe directed her request, called for his mother and brother to come over.

He had not recognized Marthe who was all grown up now, but he did recognize the sweet old woman who had hardly changed at all in ten years time. "We have the honor," he announced, "to be in the presence of those to whom we owe our good fortune."

And as his mother and brother eagerly moved in to greet the two arrivals, he told about how they had searched for Marthe and the old woman long after they took off that day, because neither he or his brother had been asking for charity.

Just as they had returned home, he in an inconsolable state, the friend whose house they had gone to in vain showed up with some work and a bit of money for their mother.

Thus, they were able to buy bread without touching the little coin that had weighed so heavily on the eldest son's heart.

He was even completely consoled by the pride he took when his mother said to him: "Perhaps in return, you will one day be able to offer your services to others without offending them."

Upon reflecting on it, Félix Marcel asked for the fifty-cent piece to do with as he wished, announcing he would not be back until later that evening. And he took the hand of the little brother he never left behind, appearing resolved to set off and conquer the world.

Their mother and her friend, smiling as they watched him leave because he was a brave child they could trust, took pleasure nonetheless in following him from a distance.

Félix, still holding his little brother's hand, went up to a merchant lady to ask if she would sell all of her one-cent inventory to him for the going price of fifty cents—*because he was going to start his own business!*

The merchant lady let out an unending roar of laughter, but this was exactly the spot where he had looked so long for the woman with the fifty cents, and the merchant had a feeling that this was something important.

Not only did she add additional merchandise to the lot, saying “You can pay me back for this extra when you start to turn a profit,” but she took the two boys under her wing. She arranged a small table for them in front of hers. By evening, all three had become such good friends that they would never wish to be parted. That very day, the boys tripled their investment. The good merchant lady had no children of her own. When the New Year's Day season was over, she asked them to help out in her little boutique, on the pretext that it would help her out a lot, since Félix would never have agreed upon it otherwise.

The business prospered; within ten years, Mother Hortense's Boutique had become a large department store where the two widows and two brothers also lived.

All of this thanks to Marthe's fifty cents!

Félix had come to this point in his story when Mother Hortense returned from running some errands.

I will let you imagine, dear children, how happy Mother Hortense was to meet Marthe and her great aunt.

Félix insisted that the six hundred franc loan to Marthe not be paid back for four years.

Four years later, Marthe's father was again succeeding in his business, the Marcel brothers' store continued to prosper, and everyone agreed they would celebrate the great aunt's birthday by lending one hundred francs each to six orphans who had had to support either their mother or their little brothers and sisters.

That day, the lovely old woman cried tears of joy, and this deed brought happiness to all because she lived for a very long time after that and six new businesses prospered.

« Louise Michel's Memoires, Written by Herself »

A Partial Translation of *Mémoires de Louise Michel, écrits par elle-même*, Tome I.

(Paris: F. Roy, 1886) Partial Translation, pp. 413-426.

Chapter XIV

Prison

Getting back to my story.

Two years ago on July 14th, or rather, around the next morning, I was taken to Clermont maximum security prison.

From one party to the next!

Female prisons are not as harsh as men's are; I was never made to suffer cold or hunger or any of the unpleasant things inflicted upon our men friends.

The title of my book on prisons will be The Book of Hard Labor. All I have left to do is organize the pages; I've written so many!

The first pages will devoted to those poor, courageous *ambulancières*, condemned to death then shipped off to Cayenne's deadly climes, because they treated the wounded at the Commune, which sometimes included Versailles men who had been abandoned. The wounded

belong to neither side, and the Versailles command often found it more advantageous to leave their wounded there--the added distraction making for easier targets for the snipers!

Victor Hugo managed to obtain pardons for those unassuming, brave women, Retif and Marchais; then for Suétens, Papavoine, and Lachaise, condemned to hard labor for the same reasons.

Legal council must have been told these women were monsters, but Versailles would waste no time showing its true face.

Chapters that follow will be about the friends I have made in the prisons I've been in, starting with the French prisons.

At Satory, my fellow prisoners' wives embraced me freely, even though I had informed them of my case, and could be risking their lives.

At Chantiers, that huge morgue for the living, beneath the rags we would hang on the walls at the night, it was the same. My thanks to those brave souls, many, sadly, who have died. The first one to go was Madame Dereure. Already ill, she could not survive the hardships forced upon her; through a fully vanquished Paris, in full face of the victors, the colors of the Commune followed her casket.

Others I never saw again and have no doubt died.

So many prisons! I have said it elsewhere in my story. Oh, yes! So many prisons! From Bastion 37 to New Caledonia via Satory, Chantiers, La Rochelle, Caledonia, Clermont, and Saint-Lazare!...

When my book on prisons comes out, the span of ten years and an entire sea will have already graced the first pages, and will be followed by plenty of other things. The grass will have grown over still more nameless bodies. Humans living lives of neglect, misery, and ignorance are not to blame.

This heartless, illogical expression has long been a favorite: "Start with the gentlemen who commit the murders." I say the murderers are the decrepit old Estates, with some preying, others preyed upon, in an endless, horrific struggle to survive. Nothing but crows cawing and beating their wings above, and the people laid out on the ground below them. You all know the Hugo verses:

Lazarus! Lazarus! Lazarus!

Rise up!

Traps are everywhere; only unfortunate women get caught in them.

Is it their fault if the only place for some of them is on the streets or in the autopsy amphitheater? And others, what if they have taken something worth pennies to save their own

lives or the lives of their children: others toss out millions of dollars and thousands of bodies to suit their passing fancies.

You see, I cannot help but feel bitter when I speak of such things; it all weighs down on women.

Saint-Lazare—that general warehouse dispatching women in all directions, even toward freedom sometimes—is a good place to judge from.

But not based on a stay of just a few days; you have to be there a while to get the real picture.

Only then you can feel the generous hearts beating there, beneath the stifling shame.

Yes, rise up, destitute woman who has fought for so long and weeps in shame. This is not your fault.

Are you the one who gave big, bloated, morally craven, bourgeois men their appetite for fresh flesh? Was it your idea for beautiful girls with no money to sell their own bodies??

And what about women who steal? Ever notice that when you throw women out on the streets, they are sure to go wherever the man calling himself their protector—meaning someone who beats and exploits them—sends them.

Women will go on their own as well. When you're lost, don't you just put one foot in front of the other?

There are also the worker-thieves, seamstresses who make off with fabric remnants. Do those great gentlemen of haute couture ever go looking for them?

Others were there for luring men into establishments of prostitution. Their children were hungry, they had to!

Others cheated on their husbands! Have their husbands never cheated on them?

If marriages were based on the individual's choice of partner rather than matching up financial interests, there would be a lot less of that.

And others (mainly elderly women), starving to death but still wanting to live a while longer, insult an officer so they be sent to prison and have bread.

While I was serving time, I saw one of these old women who had not eaten anything in such a long time that after sipping a little bit of broth, she slumped over as if she was drunk.

A few days later, she died: her stomach had become completely unaccustomed to taking nourishment.

From my cell in Clermont, I could not see anyone, but I could hear bits and pieces of conversation. Here are a few fragments I selected to give you an idea of what sadness from the depths of misery sounds like.

“You get out tomorrow. What luck!”

“Oh heavens no! It’s too cold and I’ll go hungry out there.”

“But your mother has a nice place.”

“She was thrown out because I’m in prison.”

“Where is she?”

“On the street!”

“Where are you going to go?”

“Got word Lady Chiffe wants me back on the beat. I’ll give my mother whatever the prison sends me out with, and get right back to work.

“That means you’ll be back here for sure!”

“How could I not end up back here? There’s no work for girls with expired papers. And no papers for girls with prison number tattoos.”

And here are some more:

“What prison you coming from?”

“Saint-Lazare, of course, since I’m from Paris.”

“What you done?”

“Hell if I know. My pimp stole somebody’s stash and they said I was his accomplice.

“You didn’t know anything about it?”

“You think he would tell me what he’s up to?”

“Maybe he gave you something?”

“Him give me something? All he does is take. I pay him fifteen bucks a day.”

“To do what?”

“Not much, that’s for sure! He’s gotta pay off a buddy who knows what he’s up to.

Otherwise the guy’ll squeal on him.”

“What do you have to do to come up with the fifteen bucks?”

“I used to do the window. Beats being out on the street. Gotta make a living! When I was looking for work, stores turned me away because of my shabby clothes. One day somebody lent me a dress: that was a whole different story. I looked too good and some man solicited me. Ended up with an identity card from the police, and a pimp on top of that.”

“Where’d you do the window?”

“For Madame la Recidivist, you know, the one who gets herself locked up so she can recruit in the prisons to beef up her business.”

“Madame Recidivist! I’d rather stay in here than work for her. She makes a fortune off of our poor hides.”

“So where am I supposed to skip off to? Prison seeds root best on the sidewalk.”

And here are some more:

“Hey there, Miss Pug Nose, you look sad!”

“It’s because I am going to back to the bad luck that got me in here.”

“And what exactly is your bad luck?”

“The father of my children.”

“You married?”

“No.”

“Then why don’t you leave him?”

“Because he is the father of my children! Back in the day, the poor brute made a real effort with the first ones, but men can’t handle pain like women can. Times get hard, they can’t get out of bed.”

So when women get out, where do they find refuge? The shelters built specifically for women released from prison cannot accommodate all of them—it is like offering a cup to contain a waterfall.

Surely the forthright among you can clearly see that Revolution happens by not allowing social ills to replace social ills you are destroying.

While women in prison might horrify you, society is what disgusts me!

The first this to do is clean out the cesspool. When it shows spotless in the clear light of day, there won’t be anymore muck to drag people down.

Young women of voices soft and pure, in here girls your age have voices that are harsh and worn . But you do not live like these women live, you do not drink to numb out, to forget that you are alive.

Saint-Lazare! Young women who have never left your mother's side, listen! There are children in here like you here, sixteen year-old children. But for these girls, their mothers are either dead or cannot afford to look after them.

The poor cannot afford to watch over their little ones, or take time to keep watch over their beloved dead.

In Saint-Lazare, the girls are pale and listless. Idiots say it has to be this way to protect you privileged from attackers who would pounce on you if there were no pretty bumpkins on the streets to sate their hunger for fresh.

That is how they see equality and justice.

A quick look at one of the most terrible human miseries, not meant to be the sad story of one soul that touches the reader's heart, but something that sets off revolt against social crimes.

My cell might be the best place to hear everything that is going on. Each cell looks out onto a kind of courtyard and the voices rise. Just follow along with a few parts of this horrible choir of misery.

Do you hear?: brothel owners trade women like farmers do horses and oxen; but of all herds, human cattle is the most lucrative.

When the clients of a particular city or province find a woman is overstretched or they are tired of her, the proprietor arranges it so the woman owes the prostitution house more than she could ever earn. That makes her a slave, so now they can swap her out for all manner of fraudulent dealings. Cattle have to go in the stable whenever it is more profitable for the traffickers.

Others are lured. They arrive from other provinces without a clue, or they are Parisians who know that ogres with appetites for fresh flesh are on the hunt, but poverty makes them vulnerable. Then pretty trappings used to entice them into the den become the debt they must pay at six times their value.

There is also recruitment: old miserable women who find a way to get themselves locked up for a few months so they can solicit recruits among all the pretty girls who have ended up there. They also get to not worry about going hungry, and when they get out, it will be party time.

And party they will, with killer parties. Their voices will become hoarse, their bodies will fall into tatters. It's a celebration--a celebration of the bourgeoisie's huge appetite.

The ones working the streets, however, are less miserable than the ones in the brothels whose life is so horrible it even shocks people who are no longer shocked by anything.

I will write what I know about that because it is so horrendous and so shameful that people need to know.

But for the time being, the darkest stories concern the batteuses de quart, the ones who walk the streets drumming up business for prostitution houses.

When will we understand that prostitution fosters all crime and that once a hussy, a woman gets high off getting money out of cretins who will become murderers. Everyone must know this! So why does it persist?

If every big shot across Europe who dealt in marketing women and building their business found themselves hanging from a rope, I certainly would not be the one to cut them down.

And what if, when a poor girl who believed she walking into an honest job (there are some) realizes what is really going on and that there is no escape, what if she used her vengeful hands to strangle one of the miserable people holding her captive; or if she set the wretched place on fire. That would be much more effective than waiting for the courts to rule on the matter, especially since the outcome will always be as long as things remain as they are.

Will owls that chop the feet off mice to prevent them from leaving the hole they nest in ever stop doing that?

What if the captive mouse, instead of crying out its plaintive lament to the equally deaf sky and earth, decided to chew through the throat of the owl devouring her, the owls would be the ones to perish. Eventually fear would be instilled in the voracious predator, who, just like any being with a will to live, would switch over to a seed diet rather than perish.

This is the only way for destitute human cattle to go. There is no need for woman to waste time demanding illusory rights (those who promise them do not enjoy them either); she must take her place leading this first stage of the struggle, while simultaneously breaking free from prostitution which only she herself can do.

Once she is fed up with being prey to their appetites and greed, she will know that death is preferable to this kind of life and she will not be so stupid as to die in vain.

This is what I am hearing as I write. It involves a transaction.

“Some guy signaled for me right on Batignolles Boulevard, offered just a dollar. I didn’t want to do it, but I was hungry and my pimp had connections with the police. I had to pay him so I wouldn’t get beaten.

“What did you do with the two bucks you got off that old drunk guy?”

“Gone, one to our pimp, one to a little kid weeping with hunger, she couldn’t get anymore bread on credit. There’s a pack of kids at home dying and she’s saying: I drink all the time, don’t like it when I don’t have a buzz.

“Why didn’t you try to run for it when the police nabbed you?”

“I told you, I had nothing left to drink, might as well be here! Sh...! Might as well die!”

Yes, poor, generous girls, you are right, from the bottom of the pit where you are, dying is preferable to a life that makes you drink to forget you exist.

I do not want to believe that feeding voraciously on these drunken girls is a need in man. But not being soiled by these vile brutalities is what a woman needs, whoever she may be.

But let us look ahead, because this torture will give birth to the new humanity. They are hailing her arrival: Ferré at his execution post in Satory, the nihilists from the heights of the czar’s gallows; German socialists with their heads under the axe. And I am too, by living this life more horrible than death.