

Dear Friends,

It is one o'clock and I want, while strongly influenced by recent impressions, to write about what I have seen. It's the only way to be true to the facts. The reality is so staggering, so charged with import, that it leaves nothing to the imagination. Facts, whose nature I want to describe, simply must be told.

On the 21st, after a very good dinner and the warmest comradeship, I left my friends at 8 in the evening feeling a deathly gloom. We had sought to distract ourselves from the somber thoughts, which assailed us despite everything, by humming the charming repertoire of Loïsa Puget. Nothing worked and we broke up, some heading for Batignolles to see where the furious cannon barrage deafening us came from, while I returned to my home, rue de Richelieu.

At 2 o'clock bugles and drums awakened me. It was the mustering that I heard. I tried everything to get back to sleep even though to prepare for bed, I had smoked an excellent Havana cigar and taken a glass of sweet orange blossom water. I was far from being clear-headed, I confess, and so you must believe me when I assert that, intuitively, I had a premonition of a significant event. Of what? I was not sure.

At 6 o'clock, I heard a big racket in the neighbourhood. I started my toilet, but did not dress and went back to bed, hoping that a revitalizing sleep would return the calm of which I had been so long deprived.

Impossible! An excited and frightened individual had just told me that the Versaillais¹ are in Paris and there is fighting in the streets of Paris. I had some former experience of street fighting and so I quickly set out. A friend was awaiting me for lunch.

I am in all things very exact and I foresaw the obstacles to be met. Usually I take the shortest route and so I opted for the rue du 4 septembre.

¹ In 1871 the Versaillais were those loyal to the National Assembly which met in Versailles in opposition to the Commune. The Commune of Paris refers to the period from mid March to the end of May in 1871, when, in the wake of the humiliating defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war, a radical socialist and revolutionary government ruled Paris. The army suppressed the Commune in the final days of May, which became known as *la semaine sanglante* or the Bloody Week.

I was about to come out on the side of the Opéra when a helpful chap said to me: “Don’t go any farther. They are building barricades down there and, whether you like it or not, you’ll be digging up paving stones.”

Immediately I turned around. At the corner of boulevard Haussmann, some national guardsmen made me aware that missiles were raining down and indeed I spotted some kids who showed us the debris from them.

I hesitated a moment. Why not admit it? But enough! I am one of those who believe that what is written is written. I pretended to be arrogant and crossed this difficult and dangerous passage with a deliberate step. Run! I mentally shouted to myself and, while keeping close to the wall, brazenly entered the rue de Londres. Another warning: “Attention”, an officer said to me. “Don’t go any further, the place is a madhouse with bullets.” “Just as luck favours the adventurous, *jacta est alea*”, I said to this well-meaning fellow and took refuge in the rue d’Amsterdam. I had to! Not without feeling some shivers, I arrived at the rue St. Lazare. Passing in front of the station I heard this conversation between two fédérés²: “What will we do? There are only two of us and we are not Leonidas! Let’s get out of here!” I encouraged them to do so and once more I shouted to myself: Run!

You all know Lefèvre, right? Who hasn’t dropped into his restaurant at the St. Lazare Station? I recounted my journey and tribulations to him “Stay with us”, he said, and so did his delightful wife and kind daughter. So, I stayed, took part in the family lunch. At the same table sat Doctor Humbert, a man of science and compassion. Running here and there, everywhere there was a skirmish, he had brought back a poor old man, whose neck had been pierced by a bullet. Two brave nurses were carrying him, a courageous woman held his head, waving her handkerchief so that no one shot at them while they were crossing the rue St. Lazare. Alas, the man had breathed his last and Mrs. Lefèvre blessed herself and recited a short prayer.

Soon after, the infantry captured the Station. The battalion had not slept for two days and suffered severely from fatigue. They took only a few glasses of beer. Sentinels were posted

² In 1871 the fédérés were insurgent soldiers of the Commune of Paris.

to watch the street opposite. A man arrived in the rue St. Lazare carrying a rifle. They shouted at him to drop it, but he persisted in keeping it. A shot rang out. He fell!

The colonel ordered shooting only at armed men, who refused to throw down their rifles.

I asked for paper to write all this down and chose a table comfortably situated which served me very well. The waiter seemed to be troubled a bit by the shooting and made me wait. I do not know why I sat at the adjacent table. Zing! A bullet came through which, had I occupied the place taken ten minutes earlier, would have produced a very disagreeable sensation in my back. The waiter showed up at precisely the moment that the piece of lead so illegitimately introduced itself into the café. Lucky guy! He was holding a tray stacked with many cups. Falling and shattering, all served as a breastplate. The dishes, as sacrificial lambs, had saved his life. It is not necessary to tell you that I hurried to look for another, more sheltered place in the same neighbourhood. I have forgotten to tell you that we had lunched in the cellar.

One of us, who shall go nameless to not hurt his feelings, sang to us in a fresh and beautiful voice, "Drink, friends, yes drink this morning, for are we certain to be able to drink again tomorrow?"

I have just written this in the office of Mr. Rossignol, who had graciously offered me his hospitality. I asked a colonel of the 4th by what hell of a road I could reach the rue de Rome. "Two ways", he replied, "rue d'Amsterdam or rue St. Lazare, both are peppered with bullets. Go if you want, but without any guarantees from the government.

My heart, not having any overly strong love of bullets, kept quiet. I ordered a glass of bock beer and waited thinking "May God wish that I continue these lines. I think I run no risk of danger, not even of being arrested by the Commune." I was boldly courageous, the cannons rumbled, the shooting was relentless, I was shielded by a thick wall panel. Lefèvre brought up bottles from his cellar and did not say like the barber, "Tomorrow shaves are free."

4:30. Commandant Béranger returned to the Pépinière barracks and I accompanied him; two or three times in going from one street to the next I had to make gymnast-like movements which, to my great joy, I executed easily. We were now at the barracks, I had not given up my idea from the morning of passing by the rue de Rome. Major consultation.

To the right bullets were whistling by, the same music came from the left. Damn! I had to abandon dining with my friends just as I had had to give up lunching with them. Resigned, I crossed in front of the St. Augustin Church and arrived at rue Laborde at the apartment of one of my friends, the widow of its owner. The good woman offered me dinner and a proper bed. She was shivering with fear and it seemed to her that the presence of a man would protect her from all dangers. Thereby reassured, she did not join all the women of the house in the cellar where they passed the night. As for me, I slept the sleep of the just for eight hours, and the next morning all were astounded to learn that I had not heard the bomb which had landed and knocked down the house across the street. Regardless, I took up my travels and reached the rue de Constantinople. Amazed at the discovery in myself of a quality which I had not noticed before, namely calmness, even if at any moment an unseen missile could interrupt the train of my thoughts. I was already at rue de Constantinople when I was hailed with great insistence by commandant Béranger. He agreed to share an impromptu lunch at my friend's who had already been honoured to receive the colonel and the lieutenant colonel. The quick meal was enlivened by the arrival of Léon Roche who came to inform us of the latest events: the taking of the barricades at Clichy, the advance on Montmartre and Place de la Concorde, etc., etc., the arrest of fédérés hidden in the Chaptal College. Several of them, who had been given an offer to save their lives, caused themselves to be shot because they resisted and put in danger the lives of the soldiers charged with these arrests.

My friend thought that his cupboard was bare and, since caution is the source of security, we made up our minds to go plundering. The butchers, displaying lack of foresight, no longer had the smallest cut of meat. Pathetically we wandered as far as the Laborde market, taking a most involved route because at each turn in the road we were warned, "Watch out, the air is thick with bullets!"

Praise be to God, we still found a cauliflower, some cherries, and a chicken! Our life was spared and like the wise man, carrying everything with us, we swore with genuine sincerity not to burn the roast. We really had to do something to have a diversion from our depressing thoughts. Our friendly guests of the morning had received an order to get moving. How many of them would return? We had seen such a large number of dead bodies. They were French, led astray, guilty it is true, but they were French! An errant bullet

had killed a child; sometimes mothers can be carelessly guilty! It was perhaps by a wise decree from Providence that maybe the father too was lying beside the ditch being dug in the rue de Rome!

At that moment, the lust for knowledge overcame us and we left. I had wanted to write my day-to-day impressions, describe what I saw, what I felt, but that proved impossible. How to think, even how to sit down?... Fever gripped my very being, I had to be outside, always outside. Imagination had been worked up by all that had been witnessed. You felt that the threat from the unknown had to exceed all boundaries of predictable and anticipated horrors. And yet this danger was nearby everywhere. No quartier was safe, no street offered protection, the bombs flew, the bullets whistled from the neighbouring heights. In some houses fédérés invisibly waited in ambush, preferring to be buried under the smoking ruins of the capital of the civilised world. From right, left, from everywhere, rising fumes marked the merciless ravages of kerosene. All our buildings, all our beautiful monuments, shrines to the sciences, to the arts, to letters, repositories of age-old traditions were coated in kerosene. Barrels have been piled up by that special unit called Fuséens³, rotten scum freed from prisons where they were paying for their crimes, who had been ordered to start fires. Women and children have been recruited. Incendiary material had to be inserted through small basement windows, holes in cellars and in the sewers to carry out their task: the total, complete destruction of Paris. Just rubble should remain such that a traveller on finding only ashes could cry: "There stood Paris!" The loss is enormous. It could be so extreme only if these despicable men had planned it. Thank God that most of them were not French.

The army showed itself to be heroic, which proves that in these fateful days it is still capable of undertaking an effective campaign against anyone trying to take advantage of our public calamity and acting brazenly toward us. France is not dead, far from it. It has atoned, has been pardoned. It is becoming stronger through its misfortune. The day is not far off when the eagle, which had been thought beaten to death, will spread its wings, with the tricolour flag in its powerful talons, and will walk on all the places from where attacks come, not to invade, but to civilise. The shells continue to burst, the machineguns rattle, the shooting

³ Artillery soldiers charged with launching rockets.

crackles but is far away. It is thought that these are the last shots fired at a desperate, fierce, random, and unholy resistance.

In these times, I repeat, death hangs everywhere in all its forms and I hold that during these days it seemed to spare me only by a providential wish. I accept the Muslim proverb, "You know what is to happen only when it has come." Over there where all seemed quiet, a bomb arrived, farther on a bullet, coming from I don't know where, died almost under my boot. I talked with a colonel and contented myself with saying to him that certainly it was not sent to my address and that he was becoming dangerous company. I would feel a real and pleasant joy in shaking the hand of his staff officer.

I returned distressed. I had promised to never set another foot in the street. Why have I not kept my word? Making several detours I saw only dead bodies, only prisoners between files of soldiers, some being sent to Versailles, others being led under arms to the field of summary execution. Among them were women, children, unfortunate confused individuals who even after the defeat were seeking to fulfill the mission with which they had been charged by heinous fanatics, namely setting fires!

Alas! Alas! Many deserve neither pardon, nor mercy. But also, many have been led, forced. They will come to repent, they will atone for their mistakes, they will become good citizens. Poor France had been decimated by foreign war in order that the French do not continue such an undertaking, much to the joy of the Prussians. However, where the reaction will stop cannot be predicted. How many denunciations are going to be made! And the fervour of those who denounce wildly, will it be recognized, moderated by justice, which must not errand which errs only too often!

Finally, the army took over everywhere. I do not want to speak of our total disasters. I have not the courage to do so. Besides, the public press has taken on this difficult responsibility.

I shake your hand, I wish that you will never have to witness similar horrors and I will be happy to go visit you soon in that peaceable and sensible Holland, where rheumatism is as frequent and common as the hospitality of the country is gracious and sincere.

To tell you more is too painful for me and would be too difficult to read.

I am stopping myself and repeat that I will always be your friend.

I am content to conclude. Only for the sake of the record am I going to mention the several shells, which with the most shocking abandon have had the effrontery to break into my residence in the rue de Richelieu.

J. Lafitte

Paris. June 2 1871

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Translators Notes

In French, the use of the historical present tense is common. In my view, it does not always work well in English and I have used various past tenses in the translation of the narrative passages in the letter. Moreover, I have not always been faithful to the punctuation used in the source material, namely the use of commas and semicolons to separate principal clauses in the construction of lengthy sentences. I have rather employed at times short sentences truncated by periods. British/Canadian spelling is used throughout.