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PARIS IN 1870: LETTERS OF
MARY CORINNA PUTNAM

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Paris in 1870: Letters of Mary Corinna Putnam

THE writer of these letters, Mary Corinna Putnam, was a young American lady, daughter of George P. Putnam, the New York publisher. At the time when the letters were written, she was studying medicine in Paris—the first woman admitted to the École de Médecine—having already been graduated from the New York College of Pharmacy and from the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia—the first woman graduated from either of those institutions. In 1873 she married Dr. Abraham Jacobi of New York. She died in 1906, after a distinguished career as a physician and a writer on medical topics.

For the opportunity to use these letters we are indebted to Miss Ruth Putnam, a younger sister of the writer. Without proving any facts of history hitherto unknown, they furnish an additional picture of Paris in war-time, sketched from the point of view of a very intelligent young American. It is believed that the American reader of this day, sympathetic—as who is not?—with the present sufferings of France, will find interest in many passages. A striking letter in the same series, intermediate between the first and second of those which follow, was printed anonymously in *Putnam's Magazine* for November, 1870, under the title "The Fourth of September in Paris, by a Young American".

I.

August 14th, 1870.

My dearest mother,

I am rather amused at the tranquility with which you hope that "the war will not interrupt my studies". It will not,—because I have the habit of dominating distractions, and following the example of Archimedes at the siege of Syracuse (?) of continuing to work on the problems in hand though the enemy be at the gates and sacking the city. But if moral distraction *were* sufficient I and my thesis would be nowhere. Do you realize that it is the first time since the wars of Napoleon that all France has been called to arms? And that there is quite as much chance of renewing the programme of 1815 and of seeing the Prussians arrive at Paris, as there is of any thing else, certainly a great deal more chance than that the French will reach Berlin. People try to talk of 1792 and the defense of the frontier, and the bas relief on the Arc de Triomphe, and the famous picture from Versailles, are extensively circulated—But the ominous souvenir of 1815 is much more dwelt upon, and really much more appropriate. If only the second Napoleon

could finish like the first, there would be a dramatic fitness in the thing which would greatly add to one's enjoyment of it. Unfortunately this is by no means certain. The Republican party are by no means prepared as they should be to avail themselves of the crisis and the opportunity, there is really more chance for the Orleanists. The indignation against the government which has precipitated France into so causeless a war, and then shown such complete incapacity to manage it,—this indignation increases every day and has already overthrown the ministry and driven the Emperor into an ignominious oblivion. M. Bernutz, physician at the hospital,¹ observed this morning, "*Il n'y a qu'une seule chose qui puisse amener la paix,—c'est la déchéance de la famille impériale.*" And this will come, if there are new disasters at the frontier, new suffering in the cities, above all, when the unfortunate *garde mobile* is called into action. This *garde mobile* represents all the young men who have not been conscripted, that is who belong to families able to buy them off, and corresponds to the 7th regiment on an immense scale. When the law passed for the organisation of this body (about two years ago), no one ever expected it would be called into action,—the standing army was to suffice for all ordinary wars,—and the *garde mobile* to be an extreme ressource in case of invasion. So the senators who voted for the war with clapping of hands,—and the flock of sheep who represent the "*droit*" at the *corps Legislatif*,—had not the faintest idea that their own sons would be called upon to justify their imbecile bravado. I wish it were always the old men, the epileptiques and the consumptives that were sent to the war, instead of sacrificing precisely the lives which are of the most value to themselves and to the state. However, this is a good lesson,—and the French richly deserve the consternation into which they are thrown. All these bourgeois who for years have been supporting Imperialism because it "supported order", and have allowed wretched peasants and working men to be torn from their homes to be sent to Crimea and Italy and Mexico,—have now a chance to see how it works when their own families and pockets are touched. But the lesson is not yet severe enough for them to act upon it. They will wait until some thousands of the flower of France have been sacrificed to the whim of the imperial master, before they will vigorously protest. Many people admit,—a few proclaim—that did the people of France seize the reins of government in their own hands,—declare the Republic,—and then say to the Prussians, "*Messieurs,—vous avez fait la guerre à notre feu Empereur. Si vous avez encore affaire avec lui, allez l'attraper, cela ne nous regarde pas. Mais dépêchez-vous de vous en aller de notre sol, et nous ne vous chasserons pas. Pourtant,—si vous vouliez faire la guerre à la République, nous sommes prêts.*"—it is whispered that this would be the most effectual way, not only to terminate the war bloodlessly, but with honour. But the majority, even among the bitterest opposition, hold the ground that the Prussians must be chased first, and the account with the Emperor settled afterwards,—which is *insensé*, for if there is a victory, the honour will revert to him, his reputation will be saved and his power re-established, and if there is a defeat, the whole *garde mobile* at Châlons will be thrown to the front,—to be decimated by the disciplined troops of Prussia. For the *garde mobile* have not the slightest military training, and could only stand fire if they are supported, as they are to be by the

¹ Gustave Louis Bernutz (1819–1887), chief physician of the Hôpital de la Charité.

infantry of the Marine. Oh, Humanity, Humanity! *Est il possible que tu marcheras jamais, sauf à des coups de fouet!*—

The disorder is immense. Even the medical students are all called under arms,—and happy are they who can obtain a place in the medical service,—the others are obliged to serve as common soldiers. Nearly all my friends are engaged, but fortunately all that I know personally are in the corps medical. I know of several desertions. It is frightful to notice that every one is indignant with the war, and that all these young men, from whom one expects martial élan, are literally driven like sheep into the army. I have expressed much useless indignation at their submission, but submission to authority is too ingrained in the hearts of Frenchmen for anything but a fever to get it out of them. The day that the first news of defeat arrived, Paris was in a regular panic. I went upon the boulevards in the evening with Eli Reclus,² and it was curious to see the soldiers stationed with arms, ready to fire upon the people. There was much more fear of an insurrection at Paris than of the enemy—and the government, which strips the hospitals even of their internes, does not hesitate to leave 30 or 40 thousand soldiers at the capital, without speaking of the policemen, instead of sending them to the frontier, where there is the most urgent necessity to mass troops.

It is really ridiculous to see how many people, who submit without a murmur to this outrage of the government upon two nationalities, and allow themselves to be robbed, ruined and heart-broken by such an atrocious war, still keep up the old cry, "May Heaven preserve us from the Socialists! They are coming to destroy our property, our sacred property"! It is enough to make one sick. No, France is no country to live in—in America, whatever our innumerable bêtises, there is no class of people, now that slavery is abolished, who live in a state of chronic fear. The war is such an absorbing topic that I cannot write about anything else. . . .

² Michel-Élie Reclus (1827–1904), ethnographer, the oldest of a brilliant and extraordinary family of twelve children of a Protestant minister, with which Miss Putnam was on terms of intimacy. Élie, who had already been an exile from 1851 to 1855, was in 1871 appointed director, under the Commune, of the Bibliothèque Nationale. As such he was later condemned to death; but he had saved the Venus de Milo, and the sentence was commuted to banishment. Élisée, the second brother (1830–1905), the celebrated geographer and anarchist, is mentioned in the next letter. The fourth, Paul, was at this time an externe in the same hospital that Miss Putnam attended. Her description of them, in an earlier letter, written when she first made their acquaintance, may be quoted: "The elder brother [Élie] is very interesting, a calm, reticent, benign kind of man, but one of strong, deep enthusiasm such as you rarely see in Frenchmen, a man who glows with the subject he talks about, but never flames. The third [second, Élisée, "a most ardent abolitionist and admirer of America"] is the very incarnation of flame. Imagine a man about thirty, rather powerfully made, wearing his pantaloons always tucked in his boots, a plush coat, and beautiful brown hair streaming on his shoulders, with a brilliant complexion and intensely restless eyes, extremely exuberant and witty, and dramatic in every thing he says and does, a born poet in fact. He does not please me as much as the other brothers, but he is fascinating as if he had stepped out of a romance. The fourth, the medical student, is hardly more than a boy, but a charming boy."

II.

PARIS, Sept. 15th, 1870.

My dearest mother:

I have today received yours of Aug. 27th after passing a fortnight without any letter. I think one must have been lost, for you say nothing about H.'s return, or his account of his journey, only mention him casually as if you had already gone into the other details.

Before this you will have received at least two, I believe three letters from me, giving you an account of things here, and above all of the proclamation of the Republic. The "Revolution", as far as any could take place at Paris, is now "*un fait accompli*", and peaceably enough,—as you already know. We are now preparing vigorously for the threatened siege. It is wonderful what a difference there is in things since the fall of the Empire. Ten days ago the streets were as quiet, as if no war were raging on the frontiers,—all the opposition journals suppressed,—every one forced to live upon the lying information dealt out stingily from the War Department. Everywhere the silence, inanition, inanimation, characteristic of a Byzantine Empire, for all Empires resemble each other. Now, everything is alive and alert. The streets swarm with bataillons of soldiers,—Marine, mobiles, national guard in uniform and blouses,—drilling conscientiously and making progress every day—marching,—countermarching, to the chant of the Marseillaise and cries of *Vive la République*. The Place de la Concorde really looks like a theatre, so many separate bataillons *de file* in the various corners—and at every turn in a street, one may be stopped by a crowd,—and find the whole avenue illumined by the beautiful glitter of a long line of serried bayonets.

There are said to be 400,000 men in Paris under arms, enough for its effective defense. But poor Strasbourg cannot hold out much longer, and it will be discouraging to commence the siege after the surrender of this brave city. If the Louvre and the Libraries are burned as the great library at Strasbourg has been, it will be atrocious.

*Hélas, ce n'est plus un misérable petit prince, mais la République qui reçoit le baptême de feu!*³ The order for non-combatants to leave Paris, was, of course, so general that any one could neglect it who chose to,—and, of course, I chose to. So far, my studies have gone on exactly as they would have done in any case,—it being the vacation, and my business being to prepare my thesis. I intend to do my best to be all ready with my thesis and my examination exactly as if there were no war.—It is not at all probable that the war will last until December, and if the school opens then I shall have all I need.

My interest is immense in the events that are passing, especially since the Republic, and as far as I myself am concerned, I feel really quite ready to die in its defense, especially if in so doing I could help the Reclus. I probably shall not do so, however, in the first place because I feel that I owe myself as much as possible to you, in the next, because as yet there is no way clear by which I could serve the Republic, either living or dying. I inquired yesterday at the Ambulance Society if there was any place, but they have already 4000 more names than places, so

³ The allusion is to the somewhat theatrical telegram which Napoleon III. sent to the empress after the battle of Saarbrücken, "Louis a reçu son baptême de feu" (referring to the presence of the prince imperial on the field).

I went back and dug at my thesis, and probably shall stay there, unless Elisée Reclus is wounded on the ramparts. No amount of public excitement would ever interfere with my "pioching",⁴ unless I was called upon to do something, and I think in the case of any personal calamity, I should "Pioche" with all the more energy. I have such a terror of pain, physical or mental, that I never could sit down under it and *bear* it. Resignation has always seemed to me an impossible, and tolerably useless virtue. I believe much more in the therapeutical efficacy of counter irritation. . . .

P. S. You know that any day Paris may be shut in so completely that no letters can be sent,—and then you will hear nothing from me during the siege. But you need not worry on that account. The danger is extremely small for a noncombatant, and Paris is provisioned for two months. At the end of that time—if we have not chased the Prussians—we shall be forced to capitulate, but I trust in the former alternative,—every day's delay adds to our chance.

III.

Dec. 26th, 1870.

My dear Father:

I have written several times by the balloons, but the bright idea has just occurred to me that I might send letters with more security by the American Embassy. I think I hear you say, "what an absurdity not to have thought of that before!" But I didn't, so I can only hope that the balloon post has been faithful. I hope you will not attribute this shaky handwriting to famine,—it is cold,—for I am writing at the Embassy, and my hands have been frozen by an hour's walk. We still have plenty to eat, *barring meat*, for which we are on rations. Yesterday,—Christmas, we concocted a suet pudding,—as a distant simulacrum of a plum pudding,—and it was not bad at all, though with a slight flavor of tallow candle. In 1814 the Cossacks stupified the Parisians, by precipitating themselves upon the tallow candles and devouring them as a luxury, but in the invasion of 1870 it may well happen that the dainty Parisian gourmets follow their example. Fighting was renewed on the 21st December, and the French are now fortifying themselves in the positions newly conquered. Everyday we are expecting another affair. The crisis at Paris is being sharpened down to a tolerably fine point, but the national movement has become so general and vigorous, that even if Paris is taken, the war will continue, and I am sure that ultimately we shall succeed. Every day identifies more and more clearly the cause of the French republic with that for which the North fought in the war of Secession. It is no longer a war between two standing armies or two rival princelets, but between two rival principles,—*et il y va du succès de l'idée Républicaine dans le monde entier*. The recent proclamation of Guillaume, and the ridiculous address of the German Parliament in which the King of Prussia is crowned emperor of Germany as a recompense for having decimated the population of the allied states, trench the question more and more clearly. I am continually beset with reproaches concerning the non-intervention of America, and I confess—however, much I approve the policy of non-intervention in European affairs,—I should have been prouder of my country had it extended a helping hand

⁴ Digging.

to a cause which is identical with its own, and to a nationality which insured the triumph of its own independence. Americans are singularly unsympathetic for the French, and take very little pains to inform themselves correctly concerning their affairs. I have just been talking with Colonel Hoffman,⁵ who persists in maintaining an admiration for the Empress,—the Countess of Montijo. . . .

I shall probably write an article on the Siege of Paris, in which I shall insist on certain points that Americans continually lose sight of. The most interesting American peculiarity here at present, is their success with the ambulances. It is wonderful, they hardly lose a case, while in the French hospitals, almost every one dies. Col. Hoffman has given me a card to Dr. Swinburne,⁶ who directs them, and I intend to visit them, and compare the statistiques, possibly for publication. I finish my thesis (about) this week. I shall then inscribe for my 5th examination.

Col. Hoffman says that if you write to me, under cover of an envelope addressed to him at the American Embassy at London, that I can have the answer certainly. If this be so, I am indeed provoked not to have tried sooner, for I am very anxious for news from home. . . .

⁵ Wickham Hoffman of Louisiana, secretary of the American legation.

⁶ Dr. John Swinburne of Albany (1820-1889), surgeon-in-chief of the American ambulance corps in Paris during the siege.

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