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COURBET AND THE RED VIRGIN (APRIL 1871)

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(A short story in the form of a screenplay.)

INTERIOR: COURBET'S ATELIER — DAY

A large room with an open window with a view of tile roofs of Paris and the towers of the church on the Montmartre hill in the distance. Inside, HENRIETTE, a plump, pretty, model in her early twenties, stands on a platform in the familiar pose of "Marianne Leading the People to Victory," her head turned back toward the imaginary masses and her arm extended toward the future; her dingy white chemise is pulled up on one side to reveal a rouged knee, and pulled down on the other to reveal a rouged breast. A bright red Phrygian cap perches atop her mass of curls.

Three NATIONAL GUARDS, in uniform, sit on boxes or stools, sketching her. OSMANE, thirtyish, is much the oldest; the other two are only 16 or 17. Rifles, a mess-kit, easels, a drop-cloth and various unfinished canvases are carelessly scattered on the floor and against the walls.

GUSTAVE COURBET, 51, a big man with a big full beard, wearing a smock with red wine-stains and a floppy beret, strolls distractedly around the room, humming to himself and fingering his jabot, then stops behind one of the young National Guards to peer at his drawing and grunts approvingly.

LOUISE MICHEL appears in the open doorway. She is 40, not pretty but intense-looking. She is wearing a blue tunic and broad-billed kepi identical to the National Guards. Except for her longer hair and the patched gray skirt that extends almost to the ankle of her boots, she might be taken for a slender man. A long rifle—a chassepot—with fixed bayonet is slung by its strap over her shoulder.

MICHEL

Salut, comrades!

The three Guards smile, the younger ones shyly, Osmane broadly. Henriette cocks her head and frowns and shifts position, yanking up her chemise to cover her breast. Courbet looks startled.

MICHEL (CONT.)

Bonjour, mes amis!

CONTINUED

2 YOUNGER GUARDS

(Amiably)

Bonjour.

OSMANE

Bonjour, Citoyenne! And welcome.

MICHEL

Ah, Osmane! You here? Are you going to become an artist now?

OSMANE

(grinning)

Never too old to learn, Citoyenne. The Revolution has liberated my soul!

COURBET

Madame? You are...?

OSMANE

(to Courbet, and
emphasizing first word)

Citoyenne, my cher maître! This is the citoyenne Louise Michel!

Courbet looks puzzled.

2 YOUNGER GUARDS

The Red Virgin, maître! Louise Michel, the Red Virgin. Who faced the Prussians in December, and who rallied the Guard against the Bretons in January!

COURBET

Ah! Citoyenne Michel! Of course. Enchanté! You have come for a portrait?

MICHEL

Monsieur?

COURBET

I am not working with oils just now. Not for the duration of the war, I have decided. Somber charcoal and pen-and-ink for these days of struggle, until the final victory! But perhaps we could make a sketch.

(as though suddenly
getting an idea)

Wait! With Marianne, the Spirit of Liberty. The Spirit of Liberty and the Spirit of the Commune, together! Come!

(excitedly)
Henriette! Resume your pose, only make way for the
citoyenne!

He steps quickly over to Michel and seizes her by an elbow, attempting to guide her to the platform. Michel hesitates and looks at him, uncomprehending.

COURBET (CONT.)
Now if we just slip off this chassepot
(grabs the rifle and tries to
ease it off Michel's
shoulder)
so you can be holding it in your hands...

MICHEL
(resisting, half startled,
half menacing)
Monsieur! Let go, I beg you. I did not come here to
pose. I am here on business, for the Commune!

COURBET
(loudly)
Vive la Commune!

ALL 3 GUARDS
(laughing)
Vive la Commune!

Henriette belches, then covers her mouth and giggles. The two younger Guards giggle too, and look away.

Cannon boom in the distance. Voices outside shout insults — “Ta mère, Versaillais!” etc.

A small brass band plays, faintly at first, a light-hearted music-hall song. The music and tramping feet grow louder, and then fade. Henriette sings, softly then louder and then softly again as the band passes. Her playful lyrics make the younger Guards laugh. Osmane tries to frown disapprovingly, but he also has to laugh. Neither Courbet nor Michel pays any attention to Henriette, but each is studying the other.

MICHEL
Monsieur Courbet. Maître.

COURBET
No!

(laughing)
 Neither monsieur nor maître. Simply citoyen! A simple son of France, citoyen like you!

MICHEL
 (unsmiling)
 Citoyen Courbet, you are a member of the Culture Commission of the Commune.

COURBET
 Why, yes. Why, yes, so I am! Indeed, I have been elected!

(laughing to himself)
 And what are they saying now? Hah! Those fine gentlemen of the Academy, with their pince-nez and their sneers. They scorned my "Stonebreakers," they ridiculed my "Funeral at Ornans." And now, now it is I, Citoyen Gustave Courbet, who rules culture in Paris!

Courbet begins walking agitatedly, swinging his arms. Henriette, without leaving her platform, mimics his stride and his gestures broadly. The two YOUNG GUARDS stifle their laughter. Osmane pretends not to notice her. MICHEL does notice and smiles slightly before turning back to Courbet, who is completely absorbed in his own discourse.

COURBET
 And now, my next work, ...
 (laughs in a crescendo
 from titter to bellow)
 my next work will be a subtraction! A negative sculpture!
 (turning suddenly toward
 Michel)
 And to you, citoyenne, I shall confide the secret!

MICHEL
 The Vendome Column?

COURBET
 But, you know! How?

Henriette, still on her platform, rolls her eyes heavenward and throws her arms back in a gesture of exasperation. The three GUARDS stare at Courbet and frown.

MICHEL

Monsieur, citoyen, all Paris knows. You have been talking about it for months, the destruction of the Vendome column.

The GUARDS all nod.

COURBET

(to Michel)

Talking, yes. But now we are going to do it! An engineer has come up with a plan, they are going to saw through its base, like a tree!

MICHEL

Yes, citoyen. Perhaps they can take all the bronze that's on it and melt it back into cannons. That's what we need now. But I have come for something else.

Henriette, obviously bored at being ignored, steps down from the platform and squirms onto the lap of Osmane, who is at first startled and then smiles with evident pleasure. But instead of cuddling, Henriette adopts a new pose, something like "Nymph on National Guard's Knee," with one arm raised and stretched behind her and her face turned and keeping her eyes on Courbet.

MICHEL (CONT.)

As an elected member of the Commune, and as the leader of its Culture Commission, you have the education of our youth as one of your greatest responsibilities.

COURBET

Eh? Schools you mean? You want me to set up schools, in the middle of a revolution?

MICHEL

Why not? It is certainly more useful than toppling a column that does no harm to anyone. And how much is that costing the Commune? The engineer's salary alone, then the workers and the machinery that you are assembling. All I ask is a few thousand francs, to open an institute and pay the salaries of two teachers to teach these children...

She looks toward the 2 young Guards.

MICHEL (CONT.)

and all the other children, boys and girls who've been building barricades and some, like these, carrying weapons, ready to die for our freedom. To teach them

to read, to know history, to know numbers so they
can make the new society!

COURBET

Huh! You think you're going to teach these scamps
their lessons?

Courbet gestures and looks back toward the Guards. For the first time he notices Henriette stretched languorously across Osmane's lap, holding on by one hand at the back of Osmane's neck. Courbet gapes at the scene.

COURBET (CONT.)

Henriette!

Henriette looks up startled and nearly falls as she releases her grip on Osman's neck. Courbet stares at her furiously, his hands at his hips, his feet wide apart.

MICHEL

(suddenly shy)

You see, maître, I myself was once a school teacher.
And I am a poet. I know what fancies are in a child's
mind, and what frustration it is not to be able to say
or write them.

COURBET

(snapping from his
distraction by Henriette to
look again at Michel)

A poet? A fellow artiste, then! The Red Virgin a
school teacher. And a poet! My! What a strange world
Paris has become!

He studies her with greater interest.

MICHEL

A few thousand francs, monsieur. For the children. A
fraction of what you have assigned to destroy the
Vendome Column. The Mayor of Montmartre,
Monsieur Clémenceau, has promised us a building,
we want to open another in Belleville...

COURBET

I have it! I see now that I was all wrong, it is not "The
Spirit of Liberty and the Spirit of the Commune." The
Spirit of the Commune is Liberty, and much more.
Yes, the children. It is the spirit of youth.

(louder, his face half-
turned toward the Guards)
Gaspar! Charlot! Put down those sketch pads and
pick up your rifles! Up on the dais with you! Osmane,
you stay back. And Henriette, no, there's no place for
you in this.

The two young GUARDS scramble to obey, as though at a military command.

Courbet turns to Michel and bows, then takes her gently by the elbow.

COURBET

And now, my dear school mistress, to your children!

Michel allows herself to be guided up to the dais, where Courbet thoughtfully
arranges her and the two young Guards so that they are kneeling at her feet and
looking up at her.

COURBET

A book. The school mistress needs an open book.

(shouting)

Henriette! Bring me...

HENRIETTE

(stomping her foot)

Non!

She breaks away from Osmane, grabs a cloak, and rushes to and then through
the open door.

COURBET

Henriette!

He hastens after her. Osmane steps to the doorway and looks downward, after
them. He turns to Michel and his two comrades, still posed on the dais. He
shrugs and grins at them, they grin back. He cocks his head and raises a finger to
them to hold still, and picks up a sketchbook.. MICHEL slides the rifle off her
shoulder and places it carefully across the platform, then stands erect, smiles
down at the young Guards, and tenderly places a hand on the shoulder of each.
Osmane begins to sketch.

FADE OUT