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Lettre de Charlotte Croft à Émile Zola du 24 février 1898

Auteur(s) : Croft, Charlotte

Les folios

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Dovedale, Blockley Worcestershire
Feb 24.

Dear Sir

Although a woman of 73
years and in delicate health
I have daily followed all that
concerns you and poor Dreyfus
in the long unfair trial,
not feeling able to express my
feelings and opinions as I would
I enclose these in print
from a Birmingham paper
of today in reply and of which
I enclose.

With deepest consideration
and respect believe me

Yours very truly

Charlotte Frost

(widow)

IF M. EMILE ZOLA, the eminent French novelist, had committed a murder or some such monstrous crime, an emotional French jury would have reluctantly found him guilty with the usual extenuating circumstances, and a lachrymose Judge would have sentenced him to the mildest term of imprisonment which the law allowed. But ZOLA has had the audacity to hold an opinion of his own on a State matter, and has had the courage to give his reasons for impugning a judicial decision rendered against a man who was tried in secret and delivered over to a living death without being afforded a single chance of proving his innocence. Wherefore, M. ZOLA for his atrocious deed was yesterday found guilty without extenuating circumstances, the verdict almost establishing a record in this way. The Judge who throughout the fifteen days' trial has so ably conducted the case for the prosecution, and with so much skill and ready resource prevented the defence from being heard, promptly imposed upon the culprit as heavy a sentence as, we presume, could be visited upon a man for a purely technical offence. ZOLA had cast a slur upon the Army by declaring that various officers had their own reasons for getting DREYFUS convicted of treason by means of a secret document, and for keeping him in barbarous and inhuman isolation from his fellow-men whether he were a traitor or not. In order to avenge the sullied honour of the Army the Judge sentenced ZOLA to a year's imprisonment and to pay a fine of three thousand francs. Some such result was a foregone conclusion. The Judge practically began the Court with the verdict of guilty in his pocket, and the severity of the sentence simply depended upon the tenacity with which the accused adhered to his statements. It is a great triumph for ZOLA that his punishment is of so unexpectedly vindictive and unrighteous a character. It is the crowning proof that he has made his adversaries afraid, and that he has shown himself unflinching and resolute in his task. To say that the sentence is a scandal is only to say that it is a fit sequel to the trial. Yet it is an abuse of words to declare that any trial has taken place. For fifteen days the amazing and indecent spectacle has been exhibited of an eminent man of letters being baited by Judge and mob; of the Judge currying favour with the crowd, and obviously acting under the orders of a panic-stricken and apprehensive Ministry; of partisans on the one side being encouraged to do their worst against the prisoner, and of counsel on the other side being prevented from advocating the cause of the man in the dock. French justice will stink in the nostrils after this nauseous, unseemly, and degrading exhibition of its bias, intolerance, impotence, and offensiveness.

There is a favourite joke in stage-burlesques of a meek judge commencing a trial with the words—"Bring in your verdict; it will save time." Such a flavour of outrageous burlesque has permeated the so-called trial of ZOLA that one is irresistibly reminded of the suggestion, and probably there are many who entertain the belief that the verdict in ZOLA's case was arrived at before the formal accusation was read. The Judge never concealed his prejudice, or disguised his intention of influencing the jury against the man in the dock. If ZOLA had slurred and maligned the Army, the officers impugned should have stated their reasons for believing DREYFUS to be guilty, and the authorities should have proved that the lonely prisoner on the Devil's Island had a fair trial. In short, to arrive at a just conclusion in regard to ZOLA's criminality it was essential that a considerable part of the DREYFUS case should be traversed

on the Devil's Island had a fair trial. In short, to arrive at a just conclusion in regard to ZOLA's criminality it was essential that a considerable part of the DREYFUS case should be traversed afresh. This the Judge forbade—except so far as facts told against DREYFUS. The military officers were allowed to give what evidence they liked, and to make speeches of inordinate length. The Judge beamed approval of their orations, and the audience (with a full complement of *claqueurs*) frantically cheered. But neither ZOLA nor his counsel was allowed to reply, and when either of them mentioned the name of DREYFUS the Judge sternly throttled the word in the speaker's throat, while the audience furiously howled or made the Court hideous with derisive cachinnation. The same vulgar demonstrations took place outside the Court as within, and day after day the cause of justice has been aided by the triumphant reception of the plaintiffs by a street mob, and by the execration of the defendant and his friends. History has a tendency to repeat itself in revolutionary France, and the trial of ZOLA before a venal Judge and in the presence of a turbulent and infatuated populace seems like the repetition of that scene of a hundred years ago when DANTON faced his accusers and so powerfully and eloquently pleaded his cause that the Committee of Public Safety hurriedly passed a decree that his mouth should be shut. It is true that the mouth of ZOLA has not been shut. He and his counsel have, however, been gagged every time they seemed about to score a point; and when, in the last days, they were allowed to deliver their defence, only deaf ears were turned to them. In fact, what is happening in France to-day is perilously like that which happened in the feverish, furious times of ROBESPIERRE and MARAT, and the country notorious for its ungovernable passions seems to be passing through a season of madness which may end in any crisis. What form the implacable hostility to the Jews will next assume can scarcely be foretold. Acting on a wild and reckless impulse, the fanatics may begin a crusade as bloody as the war which sacrificed upon the scaffold the ancient *régime*. France is in that state when the appeals of logic are useless and the dictates of reason unheeded. The stability of the nation itself is of less regard at the present moment than the blind following of the whim of the hour. The Ministry is apparently weak and vacillating, and ready to yield to popular clamour. The Army is idolised; and even ESTERHAZY, who but a short time ago was writing that he would like to see the Uhlans in Paris driving the French soldiers before them with horsewhips, is kissed on both cheeks when he walks along the street. These who worship idols always require victims, and the Dreyfusites and the Jews are the chosen sacrifices. Craven and corrupt judiciaries are willing to aid in the work of Jew-baiting, and DREYFUS has been condemned for life on evidence of the most dubious and suspicious nature, and ZOLA is to spend a year in prison for advocating his claims to a better trial. France has not been seen in a more wanton mood or in a more humiliating state since the tumbrils carried their victims to the guillotine amid the acclamations of the *sans culottes*. The era of repentance is no doubt deferred until greater excesses have occurred and a deeper humiliation rendered possible.

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