

THE LETTERS OF DREYFUS.

THE SOB ITSELF, OF HUMAN BORN-BOW.

Last Chapter of the Dreyfus Affair—The Letters of Alfred Dreyfus to His Wife—One of the Most Tragic Dramas in History—Sole's Opinion.

Emile Zola may be somewhat prejudiced when it comes to criticizing the letters of Alfred Dreyfus, but it is certain that the letters in many respects bear witness to the truth of his statement. This is how Zola described them: "They are admirable. I do not know of any pages of a higher conception or more eloquent. They have attained the sublime in sorrow, and afterwards will endure like an imperishable monument when our own writings, perhaps, shall have passed into oblivion. For they are the sob itself of all human suffering. The man who wrote these letters cannot be guilty. Read them, read them some evening, with your family gathered around your hearthstone. You will be dissolved in tears."

The Dreyfus affair hitherto has been like a novel without a hero—that is, the hero disappeared in the opening chapter, and it has taken ever since to develop the plot and work up a climax which is almost without parallel for dramatic quality. Enter the hero, meet out justice to the villain, and the world is satisfied. These little plays with Destiny, the greatest and most artistic stage-manager the world has ever seen, never fail of their effect, and there is more joy in the world over the happy ending of this great historic play, the Dreyfus affair, than could be derived from the best novel or short story in the world, because the degradation of this innocent man was a thing which came home with startling power to all peoples. The hero of the tragic story was lost sight of after the first chapter, it was known where he was, and that was almost all. The some of the story as told hitherto by the newspapers was laid almost altogether in France. Of the scenes laid in 'le du Diabie, and of the feelings which ruled in the heart of a man, torn from his family and his honor, the newspapers have not been in a position to speak. It had been left entirely to our imagination to piece out that part of the story until the publication of 'The Letters of Dreyfus' led to his wife and she completed the sad and history of the 'Affaire Dreyfus.'

The translation of these letters, which Harper and Brothers are about to publish under the title of 'The Letters of Dreyfus to His Wife,' gives us for the first time the story that for pathos, tragedy, despair, and true Spartan heroism is unsurpassed in the annals of either history or fiction. The arrest, which took place on the 18th of October, 1894, came upon Dreyfus like a bolt out of a clear sky. For almost two months the liberty of writing even to his wife was forbidden, but on December 5th the longest for permission was obtained and thereafter letters passed between husband and wife daily, and sometimes almost hourly, until he was removed to Devil's Island. The letters published in this volume cover the period from December 5, 1894, to March 5, 1899, without saying that the entire correspondence should be read to appreciate their pathos and the hopeless tragedy of the writer's lot. The extracts which this article contains will give some conception of their general character. They also give for the first time an intimate insight into the heroic soul of the author. It will be, perhaps best to begin with the second letter of the series, dated December 6, 1894, when Dreyfus as yet had hardly realized the danger that menaced him. "I am waiting with impatience for a letter from you. You are my hope; you are my consolation; you are not for you life would be a burden. At the bare thought that they could accuse me of a crime so monstrous, my whole being trembles; my body revolts against it. To have worked all my life for one thing alone, to avenge my country, to struggle for her against the infamous ravisher who has snatched from us our dear Alsace, and then to be accused of treason against that country—no, my love, my mind refuses to comprehend it. Do you remember my telling you how I was in Malhouse, ten years ago, in September, I heard a German band under our windows celebrating the anniversary of Sedan? My grief was such as I wept; I bit the sheets of my bed with rage, and I swore an oath to consecrate all my strength, all my intelligence, to the service of my country against those who thus offered insult to the grief of Alsace."

"I shall go mad, I will not speak of it, for my reason. Moreover, my life here is tenfold but one aim: to find the wretch who has betrayed his country; to find the traitor for whom no punishment could be too severe. Oh, dear France, thou that I love with all my soul, with all my heart thou to whom I have consecrated all my strength, all my intelligence, how could one accuse me of a crime so horrible! I will not write upon this subject, my darling; for spasms take me by the throat. No man has ever borne the martyrdom that I endure. No physical suffering can be compared to the mental agony that I feel when my thoughts turn to this accusation. If I had not my honor to defend, I assure you that I should prefer death; at least, death would be forgetfulness. Write me soon. My love to all."

"ALFRED."

From the letter written on the day preceding his trial it is seen that he was still, after two months' imprisonment, sanguine and hopeful, with never a doubt about his ultimate acquittal. It is in striking contrast to the letter written after the trial, when the worst had happened and the nightmare had come true. We subjoin both letters:

To-morrow I shall appear before my judges, my brow high, my soul tranquil. The trial I have undergone, terrible as it has been, has purified my soul. I shall return to you better than I was before. I want to consecrate to you, to my children, to our dear families, all the time I have yet to live. "As I have told you, I have passed through awful crises. I have had moments of furious, actual madness at the thought of being accused of a crime so monstrous. "I am ready to appear before the soldiers as a soldier who has nothing for which to reproach himself. They will see it in fact; they will read my soul; they will be convinced that I am innocent; as all will who know me."

The letter written after his trial reads as follows: "I suffer much, but I pity you still more than myself. I know how much you love me. Your heart must bleed. On my side, my adored one, my thought has always been of you night and day. "I am innocent, to have lived a life without a stain, and to see one's self condemned for the most monstrous crime that a soldier can commit! What could be more terrible? It seems to me at times that I am the victim of an awful nightmare. "It is for you that I have resisted until to-day; it is for you alone, my adored one, that I have borne my long agony. Will my strength hold out to the end? I cannot tell. No one but you can give me courage. It is only from your love that I can draw it. "Above all else, no matter what may become of me, search for the truth; move earth and heaven to discover it; sink in the effort, if need be, all our fortune, to rehabilitate my name, which now is dragged through the mud. No matter what may be the cost, we must wash out the unmerited stain."

The following is taken from a letter to the same strain written a few days later: "I do not sleep, and it is to you that I return. Am I then marked by a fatal seal, that I must drink this cup of bitterness? At this moment I am calm. My soul is strong, and it rises in the silence of the night. How happy we were, my darling! Life smiled on us; fortune, love, adorable children, a united family—everything. Then came the thunderbolt, fearful, terrible. But I pray for you, pl-ything for the children, for their New Year's Day; tell them that their father sends them. It must not be that their poor souls, just entering upon life, should suffer through our pain. "Oh, my darling, had I not you how gladly would I die! Your love holds me back, it is your love only that makes me strong enough to bear the hatred of a nation. "And the people are right to hate me; they have been told that I am a traitor. Ah, traitor, the horrible word! It breaks my heart. "I... traitor! Is it possible that they could accuse me and condemn me for a crime so monstrous! "Cry aloud my innocences; cry it with all the strength of your lungs; cry it upon the house-tops, till the very walls fall. "And hunt out the guilty one. It is he whom we must find. "I embrace you as I love you."

"ALFRED."

After his fate was sealed and he had been removed to Devil's Island, his determination that the truth shall be brought to light is stronger than ever. From the first of the letters written from Devil's Island we select the following, which is in itself sufficient evidence of the bold and undaunted resolution with which he faced his fate. "I made for your sake the greatest sacrifice a man can make in resigning myself to live after my tragic fate was decided. I did this because you had inculcated in me the conviction that truth must always come to light. In your turn, my darling, do all that is humanly possible to discover the truth. A wife and a mother yourself, try to move the hearts of wives and mothers, so that they may give up to you the key of this dreadful mystery. I must have my honor if you want me to live. I must have it for our dear children. Do not reason with your heart; that does no good. I have been convicted. Nothing can be changed in our tragic situation until the decision shall have been reversed. Reflect, then, and pursue the solution of this enigma. That will be worth more than coming here to share my horrible life. It will be the best, the only means of saying my life. Say to yourself that it is a question of life and death for me, as well as for our children."

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ALFRED'S HEART IS SAD. "You remember those lines of Shakespeare in 'Othello.' I found them again not long since among my English books, I send them to you translated. "Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been stolen, But he that filches from me my good name, Robs me of that which does not catch his thief. And makes me poor indeed. "Ah, yes! he has rendered me 'vraiment pauvre,' the wretch who has stolen my honor! He has made me more miserable than the meanest of human creatures. But to each one his hour. Courage then, dear Lucie; preserve the unseparable will that you have shown until now."

ALFRED'S HEART IS SAD. "And his own view of the tragedy in which he was the silent hero. "You see, darling, a man of honor cannot live without his honor; it does no good to tell himself that he is innocent; he eats his heart out. In solitude, the hours are long, and my mind cannot comprehend all that has come upon me. Never could a romantic, however rich his imagination, have written a story more tragic. Some day when my story is told it will be incredible. But what we must tell ourselves now is that I must be vindicated. My name must shine anew, with all the lustre it should never have lost. I should rather see my children dead than to think that the name they bear is a dishonored one."

ALFRED'S HEART IS SAD. "This thought is repeated again and again. It is the firm resolve that his honor must be saved that prevents him taking his life. Throughout he expresses the solicitude of a loving husband and father. He must live to save his honor and for the sake of his wife and children. And now, from present indignities, the worst of all will have a happy ending, for it is practically certain that the decision will be reversed, and that Captain Alfred Dreyfus will realize the dream which he has expressed so beautifully in the following letter: "The body may give way under such a burden of grief, but the soul should remain firm and valiant, to protest against a lot that we have not deserved. When my honor is given back to me, then only, my good darling, we shall have the right to withdraw from the field. We will live for each other, far from the noise of the world; we will take refuge in our mutual affection, in our love, grown still stronger in these tragic events. We will sustain each other, that we may bind up the wounds of our hearts; we will live in the children, to whom we will consecrate the remainder of our lives. We will try to make them good simple beings, strong in body and mind. We will elevate their souls so that they may always find in them a refuge from the realities of life. "May this day come soon, for we have all paid our tribute of sufferings upon this earth! Courage, then, my darling; be strong and valiant; carry on your work without weakness, with dignity, but with the conviction of your rights. I am going to lie down, to close my eyes and think of you. Good night and a thousand kisses."

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