

*Bjarki* 14 March 1898<sup>1</sup>

Foreign news.

Dreyfus

[English translation by Professor Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, University of Iceland, 2009]

People will remember that Dreyfus, a captain in the French army, was found guilty of treason in 1894 and has since then lived in misery on Devil's Island as a prisoner and an outlaw. They will also remember that the vice-president of the Senate wanted his case to be reinvestigated, and that the evidence seemed to point to Count Esterhazy as the alleged author of the letter which was used to prove Dreyfus' guilt, but in the end the military court found Esterhazy innocent after the government had gotten involved, or so it was speculated.

The guilty verdict was so popular amongst the French nation that those who had other ideas of truth and justice did not want to draw attention to themselves. Rising up against government and country here is not without peril.

One might find it strange that the government and the nation would be in absolute agreement, and one cannot blame any Icelander, who reads only Icelandic books and newspapers, if he does not understand this because they do little to educate its readers about the lives and thoughts of the leading nations of the world. From our own experience we cannot understand this admirable relationship between government and people, because it so happens that our government is not responsible to the nation and therefore it can do whatever it wishes without consulting the nation. It only has to follow the policies of the foreign government [in Denmark], as it answers only to it. Even though the local people may protest, it is of no consequence.

That is why it happens so rarely that our nation and government are in an agreement on anything, either good or bad, and therefore it is very rare that people need to worry about making both sides their enemies. Wars are therefore not very dangerous here.

This is quite different in France. There they have a republic and representative government. There no government can stay in power for long without the assent of the majority of the nation. If the government attempts to do something, whether for good or bad, that the nation or its representatives do not agree with then the government needs to step aside for a new one. Which is why the governments in recent times have often been fairly short lived.

It so happens that a man by the name of Méline is currently the president of the France cabinet. He is a cautious, intelligent, and refined man, and has great oversight over matters there, and would have been a prime choice to be a deacon or community leader in any Icelandic commune if he were in Iceland.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Bjarki* was a weekly provincial newspaper published in the small town of Seyðisfjörður on Iceland's east coast. It was edited by the well-known poet, Þorsteinn Erlingsson, who was one of the earliest proponents of moderate socialism in Iceland,

He has noticed by now that he has governed France wisely, and it would not be done better though someone else would be at the helm. But it is difficult to lead France and Méline has seen many rocks during his time as the captain of the French ship, which was difficult to avoid, and one of them was the Dreyfus Affair and the Devil's Island; and if he would have had a little bit more of a sensitive conscience and a slightly stronger sense of justice, then the boat would have stranded.

But Méline approached everything with caution, both the rock at sea and the steering wheel.

He knows that the military is the apple of the nation's eye, or at least its majority, and that their efforts have given France more pride than anything else. Napoleon the Great created the foundation of this love of the military, and even the cruel acts of Napoleon III have been forgotten because he won some victories on the battlefield. And so intensely does the nation love the military that the terrible and humbling events of 1870 were forgiven long time ago, and the hatred for that is only directed at the Germans. Everything else, between heaven and earth, can be criticized, but the military. If anyone dares disparage that great institution, then he can be sure the public will rip him to shreds. The military is the sun of France, and nothing may cause its light to fade.

The military is, of course, aware of this worship of the nation, and like other gods it does not permit any disrespect to be directed at itself. But the military, most notably its officers, is very needy, and even though it receives two million francs extra every year for spying and other small things, they still are not satisfied. They feel that the Republic gives them too little to them and many officers therefore dream of the days of the Empire when they got everything they wanted. That is why the army supported the late Boulanger when he tried to depose the Republic and to introduce tyranny.

Another party in France also despises the Republic and that is the church, especially the Jesuits. They were also more content under the Emperor. The church taught the masses to obey the government, which God has instituted over them, and that played an important part in the Empire's survival, because the imperial government had seized power illegally, and maintained it by illegal acts, oppression, and evil actions. The Jesuits and the army officers are therefore kind blood-brothers, and within the army there is a number of Jesuits. Following their moral codes or principles, the Jesuits are not particularly picky in choosing their methods, and the generals are not too scrupulous in collecting their pay. They need not fear the nation, because no one is allowed to talk about the evils or dishonesty of the military. But occasionally the highest officers go too far in selling their conscience, honor, or their nation and then they have to provide a "fall guy" to take the blame.

That is how things played out with the spy-letter for which Dreyfus was convicted, where national secrets were sold for money. Few doubt that this letter was written by a very religious man, Esterhazy or someone else. He had, therefore, to be saved. In order to prevent an investigation among the officers, they had to be quick to find someone to take the blame.

And they were so lucky that Dreyfus was among the high ranking officers. He was rich, independent, did not owe anyone money, and on top of that he was a Jew. He was therefore a threat for the other officers. He was therefore the obvious choice to die for the people. The military sold him out, the military convicted him, the government sent him off to the Devil's Island, and the nation thanked god and its good fortune to be liberated.

This all caused some suspicions, especially among the officers who were not part of the scheme, and one was so simpleminded to try to convince the government of the travesty that had been done,

and this was Picquart, who has often been mentioned in the news. He was, of course, sent to Africa, and it has been proved during the resent trial that this was a wise move and he was meant to meet his death.

After this was done to Picquart one cannot blame other smaller fish within the army for being cautious about what they say on the matter.

And when the vice-president of the Senate started tried three years after the sentence to convince people that Dreyfus was tormented and disgraced in spite of his innocence, then Méline had a easy choice to make: to either start an investigation, enter a wild and bloody battle, to be deposed and attacked by the entire nation for dishonesty, atheism, and treason, or to adhere to the will of the nation and to keep his post and receive praise and congratulation from everyone. He chose, of course, the latter, and the matter was covered up and Esterhazy was declared innocent.

At this point the few people who had dared to raise their voices during the trial became increasingly silent. They saw the danger and the disgrace, and wanted to retreat in despair, each into his corner.

---

But the nation which destroyed the murderous halls of the Bastille in 1789 and has broken repeatedly the strongest shackles of slavery and has served as the guiding star for the whole of humanity on its route toward freedom – despite everything, it still had a son, who dared to push this great god, although he saw almost the entire nation bowed before him. This man was the poet Emile Zola. He threw all his accusations without any mercy, even if he knew that he would be the target of the hatred and the persecution of church and government and that he was to meet, with his very few supporters, 40 million people, that is, the whole nation.

But truth and freedom have many friends all over the world and they have sent numerous greetings and letters to Zola. He has only had one of these letters printed, that is, the letter from the Norwegian author Björnsterne Björnson.

It was mailed from Rome, and it reads as follows:

Honorable master.

How much I envy you today! How much I would like to be in your shoes to do the fatherland and the whole humanity such favor as you have done, because I have tried the same: It is more dangerous to remove people's hatred than their love. Hatred is usually linked to people's vanity with stronger bonds than their love. Many reasons, which have taken root both in the hearts of the most noble and the worst instincts of people, cause this tragedy, as thousand years of culture are swept away, but everyone tremble when they hear the screams and see the rage of the half-wild mob.

But this has not scared you! You have led others with the harp and the sword as weapons. Alone against the millions!

France needs this. I come from the north, over Germany and have stayed there for a month. Now I am in Italy; I read newspapers from all over the world and to tell the truth, all nations in Europe look at France now with surprise and apprehension. And should that be surprising? Two things explain this situation clearly.

First is the document indicting Alfred Dreyfus, which has been made public recently and does not meet the standards which one expects from people who have so much responsibility on their shoulders. From the indictment one can see that Dreyfus has been sentenced for having sold the secrets the Germans. One of the proofs mentioned for his crimes is the fact that he had better access to Alsace than other French military officers. But the provincial government in Alsace-Lorraine publicly refused this accusation at once. Twice in the same year, Dreyfus was denied permission to come to Alsace; the third time, the ban was lifted – albeit only for a week – because his father was ill. Has it ever happened before that a spy has been denied entrance into the country he was spying for?

The German Imperial government has also publicly denied the claim that Alfred Dreyfus has ever been in contact with German spies. This part of the accusation is, therefore, blatantly false.

The other point is this. Public reports sent to the newspapers maintain that only a part of the proofs of Dreyfus' guilt are revealed in the indictment. The other part is a secret, which was announced to the judges right before passing their sentence. In other words: Dreyfus was not sentenced legally; he was deprived of his title, branded and transported as a prisoner into exile without a legal sentence, based on rumor conveyed by a few of his colleagues. A government which still – when the aforementioned points have been proven – has not the courage to reexamine Dreyfus' case, is the most unscrupulous government which has ever been in power in any civilized country. And this is the opinion of the whole continent!

Also rest assured that the whole continent admires you for what you have done, although not everyone agrees with everything you have said.

I have, for my part, always been of the opinion that the relation between the novels or the poems and the author himself is the same as between the banknotes and the bank, which has to have enough assets in its funds to back up the value it issues.

Now we see that the fact that your books, which are distributed all over the world, increase people's courage and ennoble their hearts simply because you have courage and manly heart yourself.

With respect, sincerely yours,  
Björnstjerne Björnson.

A few days later Zola responded:

Paris, 28 January '98

My dear and eminent colleague!

Please forgive me for not expressing immediately the sentiment which drove my heart to beat harder in my chest when I read your beautiful and friendly letter. I feel that a strong current carries me along, and I have hardly a minute to spare, not even to shout thanks, thanks to all of those who stand up all over the world to support the truth and justice. But you I have to thank, who are a mighty spirit and strong conscience. Feel assured that I am your grateful brother in the name of truth and justice.

Emile Zola.

Of the case the government started against Zola one can only very cursorily remark that it accused him only of insulting and dishonoring the military. Dreyfus could not be mentioned. Despite the limitless bias of the president of the jury, who refused to have the witnesses examined, it has been

proven that Dreyfus was sentenced on the basis of concealed letters. The trials lasted for 14 days and the people attending fought every day bloody fistfights, which more than once put Zola's life at risk. And of course the whole affair ended, despite the valiant defense of Zola himself and his lawyer, in a guilty verdict which saw Zola receive the harshest sentence possible according to the law, one year in prison, a fine amounting to 3000 francs, and 50 000 francs in legal fees. But the bias of the judge is said to have been so obvious that the case will probably go higher up the courts and the fight will begin anew.