SOME NOTES ON THE ZOLA CASE.

They have had in France for many years the saying that in Paris ridicule kills. The phrase is true enough when an absurdity is apparent to everybody and ridicule is general; but, under such conditions, laughter is fatal anywhere and everywhere. The ridicule which has been heaped on the procedure in the Dreyfus-Zola case by a whole wondering and indignant world outside French borders has had small effect in Paris; but nothing more grotesque has ever happened than may be seen and studied in a score of incidents in that extraordinary business. A writer of farce who dared to copy its records would find his work hissed from the stage. To begin with: Dreyfus was arrested on expert evidence, when the only expert consulted declined to give an opinion against him. To go on: Colonel Besson d'Ormescheville reports a proof of guilt which makes the reader think himself mad or dreaming. Dreyfus proffers his keys on his arrest. "Search my house," he says in effect. "Search it freely. You will find nothing." The house is searched and nothing is found. This proves, says d'Ormescheville, that Dreyfus had bestowed all incriminating evidence in the hands of trustworthy accomplices. It sounds incredible, but it is in the official reports. Neither Gilbert nor Mark Twain could beat it. To go on again: M. Bertillon, who never in his life professed to be an expert in handwriting, was asked for an expert opinion, and gave judgment against the prisoner on the ground that his writing was so dissimilar from that of the bordereau that the hand must be disguised. That once more sets the brain whirling, but it is solemnly offered, and solemnly accepted, and solemnly set down in the official reports. It is wholly incredible, but it is perfectly true. To go still further: it is alleged that Dreyfus is a ruined gambler, and the proof advanced is that he-
went once to the Cercle de la Presse as a visitor, and it is admitted that visitors are not allowed to play there. To continue yet: the Minister of War informs the Press of Paris that the prisoner was found guilty on a secret document. Ten weeks later he informs the Press that he was found guilty on the bordereau and the bordereau alone. At the trial M. Zola's counsel naturally wanted to ask questions about this discrepancy. The President of the Court ruled that the questions could not be asked because they were not germane to the case. And so on, and so on, and so on. And all this happens, not in the land of comic opera, but in a city where ridicule kills. Millions of people acquiesce in it all, and assert with passion that it is all just and reasonable, and that any Frenchman who doubts its justice and reason is a traitor and an enemy to his country.

A man who is presumably innocent (since not one scrap of evidence on which he could legitimately be fined a shilling and costs has been produced against him) is condemned to lifelong banishment. The Minister for the Colonies declares that since the agitation for his release began, he has ordered him to be chained. It is not denied that he has access to a loaded revolver, and that he has been made free to use it, but has been warned that suicide will be accepted as a confession of his guilt. A most unhappy lady in the Rue Châteaudun is a thousand times worse than widowed, and her children are a thousand times worse than fatherless. A great writer stands to lose (and will lose) a year's liberty and a sum of more than ten thousand pounds as the result of a trial in which every principle of jurisprudence has been outraged. If it were not for these things the drama which has so recently enacted itself in Paris would shake the lungs with laughter. As it is, it weighs upon the heart. The farce grows fiercely tragic.

It is not M. Zola who is to be pitied in this matter, for he has won something better than the money he has lost, and something better, even, than the liberty he has sacrificed. I ventured in the last interview I had with him to tell him so. "No, no," he said, "je ne suis pas à plaindre!" But I shall never forget the anguished gesture, or the poignant suffering expressed in face and voice when he said, "But, my God! this poor France—blinded, strangled!" I have seen and heard nothing in my life which touched me more, for in the course of my stay in Paris I had learned enough of the great pessimist to know that his whole heart and soul were in the cause he had adopted, not so much for the sake of the prisoner or his wife and children as for the sake of France. I confess that I had not looked in him for the passion of patriotism which revealed itself. The sentiment was enforced upon the mind, and would not be denied. This France, the sores of which he has so relentlessly displayed, whose wounds he has probed so deeply, the causes of whose defeat he
has so pitilessly analysed, is, not the less, his one idol. He knows no other modern language than his own because he has cared to know no other. France absorbs him. He dreams of her as of some great angelic sufferer, whom only a cruel surgery can cure. A three weeks' knowledge of the actual man, under circumstances which have led him to open his heart with entire freedom, have compelled me to a revision of the judgment I had formed upon his whole literary career. I still think his methods mistaken. I still think his work baneful. But I shall never again do him the injustice to doubt the loftiness and essential purity of his desire.

The reading of the long-expected Zola manifesto was in many respects a moving episode. It occurred when the trial had been in progress a fortnight, and when it had been made clear that the defendants were to have no "show" at all. General after general had been allowed to go into the witness-box, not to give evidence or to undergo any sort of examination, but to deliver eloquent exhortations on the duty of the jury to return a verdict in favour of the army. That astounding melodramatist Du Paty de Clam had come and spoken and gone again, for all the world like an automatic waxwork; his brother astonishment, Commandant Esterhazy, had turned his back on the defending counsel with a "rien à dire à ces gens là!" which would have provided him with an imprisonment for contempt of court if any other tribunal in the world had heard it; the defendants had been gagged, and throttled, and bludgeoned for twelve whole days; and Maître Van Cassel, for the prosecution, had just crowned the whole insane travesty by the declaration that the defence had proved its own bad faith by its silence. The court was thronged. M. Delegorgue, the presiding judge, his two colleagues, and the Advocate-General, in their scarlet and black and white, gave the only note of colour beyond the crowd of priest-like barristers in black. The air was heavy and the light faint. Maître Labori asked for leave for the chief defendant to address the jury. The leave was accorded, and Zola rose, standing for a moment in a pitiable agitation. He is, without any exception, the most superb conversationalist to whom I have ever listened. But he has never accustomed himself to face a public audience, and even with his written speech before him he was ineffective as an orator. He mastered himself by a visible effort, advanced a step or two, and began to read, the papers he held shaking from first to last as if they had been fluttered by a current of hot air. In his anxiety to be heard throughout the hall he pitched his voice too high, and the effect was painfully harsh and dissonant. He cracked once into a shrill falsetto, and the crowd at the back of the court broke into a roar of insulting laughter. This was the disaster which inspired him. He turned in the direction of the laugh, and faced the crowd which raised it in a dignified silence. He was stung
out of his natural shyness, and in the silence which ensued he spoke with far greater effect than before, though the quivering of the papers never ceased to show the extreme tension of his nerves. But, none the less, I lamented the rhetoric of his closing sentences, as thousands of his well-wishers lamented the rhetoric of his original indictment in the famous "I accuse." It is difficult for an Englishman to criticise the rhetoric of a Frenchman, and a great writer may fairly claim to know better than a foreign critic how to appeal to his own countrymen. But the invocation to his own fame pained, somehow, and pained rather sadly. "If Dreyfus be not innocent, let my name perish. If he be not innocent, let my works perish. By all I have done for the literature of my country, by all I am and hope for, I swear that he is innocent." This is not the ipsissima verba, but it is a fair translation of the meaning. The crowd laughed, and the laughter was as spontaneous and sincere as it was savage. He had already spoken, simply and in words exquisitely chosen, of his love for France. There also he was mocked and jeered. The manifestations came wholly from the back of the court. The black throng of advocates, and the jury, listened throughout in a chilling silence. It had got abroad before the speech was begun that it was to be reckless and unguarded, and expectation had been on tiptoe. It seemed a disappointment to the crowd that he had elected to be so moderate.

So far as mere oratory had been concerned, this, the one day on which oratory had been looked for, had proved a failure. Maître Van Cassel, who opened the ball, had turned out to be by no means an inspiring person. He has the common box of tricks belonging to the professional advocate of the third class, and sank his voice to a melodramatic whisper on "Gentlemen of the jury," and thence climbed a sort of oratorial flight of stairs, where he was louder on each succeeding step than he had been on the last. When he had reached the limit of his vocal power he fell downstairs, and began again on "Mais, messieurs les jurés," and so climbed up to the old sonorous height, and fell downstairs once more. The performance was as perfunctory and unconvincing as anything I have ever seen, and apart from the Himalayan-cum-Alpine insolence of its accusation of silence against the defence it was quite commonplace.

But when Zola was down, Labori arose, and a change came. Zola had described him to me days before; had spoken of his "giant energies," and of "the voice to rally a regiment in retreat." Picture a man some six feet two in height, rather more than proportionately developed in chest and shoulders, blonde bearded, blue eyed, with a gesture so intense, continuous, and vivid that you might often imagine him for a minute at a time to be fencing for his life—add Salvini's voice, and the impetuous torrent of Gavazzi's speech—and you have-
Labori. Those great voices when they are used often, and used severely, acquire a quality which is strangely effective. Speaking of Labori quite recently elsewhere, I have described this quality as a sort of noble hoarseness, resembling somewhat the rasp of the bow on the strings of a ‘cello. It takes a grip upon the ear. You have to listen. There is no escape into inattention.

An English audience would demand a greater repression than Labori exercises. Its colder taste would resent the flamboyant gesture, the exuberance of passion, the whole rage of energy. But taking his oratory fairly and dispassionately, and judging it—as it ought to be judged—by the speaker’s national standard, I should reckon him without a rival. Literally, and without exaggeration, one may call the man stupendous. In the first twenty minutes of the speech I told myself “no man can live through more than half an hour of this.” He spoke for two hours that afternoon, and for two days and a half thereafter, and showed no sign of fatigue, and made no attempt to spare himself from start to finish. He was as hoarse as a crow the day after the return of the verdict, but that, he told me laughingly, was the result of a cold, and not in any way attributable to fatigue. We had an interesting talk on forms of oratory, and I asked if it were not possible to spare himself a little. He laughed like a great genial schoolboy. “No,” he said, “it is my way. I cannot help it. When I am in earnest it must come out of me in that fashion. There is no other possible.” He understands English excellently, but speaks it with some hesitation, and so by mutual consent we set ourselves at perfect conversational ease, he talking in his own tongue, and I in mine. He has a very winning manner, with something boylike in its candour and simplicity. He is only seven and thirty, but he looks still younger, and with such powers and such a constitution as he has he should have a great career before him.

I have already—in part—recorded an interview I had with Commandant Esterhazy, but the record was made under restrictions which I now take to be removed. It is only honest to say that when M. Esterhazy consented to meet me, he knew that he came to meet a man who was much prejudiced against him. He came, as it were, into the enemy’s camp, under a flag of truce, to deliver his own story to a hostile world. He displayed a certain courage in coming at all, but he offered to answer any questions which might be put to him. Of course, he could not fail to know that whatever he said would be regarded with profound suspicion, however fairly it might be presented to the public. This fact may have tended to mark his manner, and it would be disingenuous not to admit so much. But allowing for it to the full, the impression conveyed was extremely unfavourable. In spite of a swagger of words, the like of which I
have never met outside the speeches of Captain Bobadil, I should take him to be a man of daring courage. "Je suis soldat," he said, "et brave soldat, et même, très brave soldat." Not many men of courage would make that statement in that way, but I believed him. He added, that he understood war where it was carried on with sword and rifle, but that he did not understand the warfare in which he found himself engaged, where a man's reputation could be assassinated with a sheet of paper. There I confess that I did not believe him. He admitted the authenticity of all the compromising letters to Madame Boulancy, with the solitary exception of the one in which there is an expression of a desire on his part to invade France at the head of a regiment of Uhlan. That, he said, was a forgery. He acknowledged the damnatory likeness of the handwriting of the bordereau to his own, but that also was a forgery. "They traced my hand," he said, lifting his dark, slow-burning eyes to mine for a single instant. He conveyed to me very strongly the idea of a resolute man who is on the outlook for an ambush. It is only just to make a further admission here. If M. Esterhazy has been the victim of a hideous plot, as he avers, such an aspect might, very conceivably, have grown upon him. An innocent man, finding himself entangled in such meshes of suspicion as have entangled him, might well develop a manner of suspicion, might well grow furtive in glance, and braggart in demeanour. I went straight from Zola's house to meet M. Esterhazy. I could not resist the temptation to tell the novelist on what errand I was bound, and I did not resist the temptation later on to tell M. Esterhazy in what terms Zola had described him to me. I should not have yielded unless I had been asked to yield, for the opinion was not wholly commendatory. It was to the effect that M. Esterhazy was a bandit, a thorough-going bandit, but a brave bandit, and that he knew how to defend himself like a lion. The object of this criticism accepted it with a complete tranquillity. Perhaps it was milder than he had expected, coming as it did from a man who had already denounced him with so little measure.

Perhaps the most boisterous joke in the farce, at the birth of which I personally assisted, transacted itself outside that Palace of Injustice in which the Zola case was refused the semblance of a hearing. I stood within the courtyard railings at six o'clock on the second day of the trial looking at the crowd which surged up and down outside. A big man accosted a little man within two yards of me. "Thou carryest," he said, with apparent placidity—"Thou carryest a nose too long for my taste. Thou art Israelite, ne c'est pas?" The little man shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands, and answered, "But yes, sir, I am Jew." The big man hit him on the too long nose, and in a second he was down amongst the feet of the crowd. His face was trodden.
upon, and after a minute, or half a minute, of a murderous scuffle, a score or more of the Civil Guard rescued him, and hustled him, bloody and muddy and ragged, into safety. It would be untrue to say that this scene afforded a fair specimen of the temper of the crowd, but there were many such episodes whilst the case went on, and it is beyond a doubt that the patriotic verdict of the jury saved Paris from many others, if not from something much more serious. If, by any chance, the jury had returned a verdict in Zola's favour we should have seen "the red fool-fury of the Seine" again.

But I must not yet be wholly beguiled from M. Esterhazy. The two gentlemen to whom I was indebted for an introduction to him were firmly convinced that he had been shamefully traduced, and they both most heartily believed that his character had been entirely re-established by the Court-Martial recently held to inquire into his conduct. "Here," said one of them, "is an officer, and a man of honour, poor, defenceless except for his own unbreakable courage, in the last stage of consumption. This is the man whom the entire Jewry of Europe is combining to ride down, even after he has been honourably acquitted by his peers!" That is one view of the case, certainly, and there are millions who hold it. But there is another side to the case on Devil's Island, and there is another in the Rue Châteaudun, and in a week or two there will be yet another in the prison of Ste. Pelagie. A gentleman who admits that whilst holding his grade as officer he has written letters expressive of the fiercest hate for the country in whose army he serves, has not great reason to be surprised if men suspect his loyalty. A gentleman who expresses a fervent desire to go out and shoot down 'as if they were so many rabbits' — the people who for years administered generously to his needs, has no great right to wonder if men doubt his claims to good citizenship or common gratitude. And a gentleman who writes a hand which is an absolute replica of that in which a treasonous document is written may be profoundly unlucky in that respect, but he cannot be surprised if inquiring people should ask if his admitted sentiments of treason are put in action there. On the whole I prefer to pity Dreyfus and his wife, and Zola.

In the whole amazing jumble of the farce-tragedy there has been nothing much stranger to an English eye than the impunity with which all sorts of men have bullied the jury empanelled to try the case. M. George Drumont, "honorary president of the Anti-Semitic League," writes to the public Press to say that if Zola is acquitted he and his friends will come down into the streets and take the administration of justice on the Jews into their own hands. Nobody in authority seems to think this in any degree out of the common. Nobody in authority raises a voice of rebuke. Nobody lays M. George Drumont by the heels for a bullying defiance of justice and an open
degradation of her claims. One or two papers publish every day in big type the names and addresses of the jurymen, and instruct them as to the way in which it is imperative that they should vote. Nobody in authority takes any notice of this either. The men of the jury are warned, over and over again, in widely circulated journals, that their trade or professional connection is lost for good and all unless Zola is condemned. For three weeks this contempt of court is as flagrant as an open sewer. Authority does not even scent its handkerchief.

It is so again with the witnesses summoned. I have, within the hour, received a communication from a man of letters who is as widely and deservedly esteemed as any living Englishman. He writes: "One cannot but feel that the innocence of Dreyfus was not at all advanced in the courts at the trial, and that no proofs were brought forward which would justify Zola in his attacks on the Court-Martial." It is unhappily quite true, every word of it, but it is no less true that the proofs were there, that they were offered, and that they were refused or stifled. One witness had a boy at school and the boy hoped to gain a bursary. The witness was authoritatively informed that if she appeared the bursary would not be given. Zola himself told me the night before the trial, "There is a new epidemic. Our witnesses are falling ill on every side." Before the case was a week old we had a dozen instances of sudden indisposition. The young lady—"la jeune fille," so carefully emphasised by M. Labori—"la jeune fille," of fifty-five, who was one of the first to announce the new epidemic—was challenged. "Let us," said M. Labori, "send a doctor to inquire into this indisposition of a lady who was well two or three hours ago." Two Paris journals howled at this. Where was the chivalry of France, they wanted to know, when it was possible for such an act of infamy to be proposed? I made personal inquiries, and I learned that the lady stayed away because she had been intimidated, and believed herself to be in danger of her life. Had she been assured of protection she would have appeared and spoken. No protection was given to any witness on the unpopular side, and it is a matter of history that those who had the courage to appear on that side, and who were within official reach of the Government, have been degraded. Madame Boulancy, the recipient and custodian of the Esterhazy letters, was willing to appear, but a visitor whom she was afraid to receive, and with whom she spoke from behind a door on which she kept the chain, threatened her with assassination. Madame Boulancy, very naturally, did not give evidence. Every man impeached by Zola as being responsible for the verdict of the Court-Martial took refuge behind the "chose jugée," and was upheld by the Court in the refusal to answer a single question, but they were allowed to harangue the jury for hours in ex parte declarations which were dangerous to the defence. Before the cause was opened Zola told me
precisely what would happen. "We know everything," he said with strong emphasis, "everything." But he knew already that he would not be allowed to prove anything of moment. The event justified his certainty.

The evidence of Madame Dreyfus would have been of incalculable value to the defence. Except that she would have exposed the intolerable methods of M. du Paty de Clam, she could have touched on no official question, because she is ignorant of them all, but the Court refused to hear her. Captain Lebrun Renault could have proved the pretended confession of Dreyfus to himself to be a fabrication, or he could have proved it to be true. The point was vital. The authorities refused to allow him to appear. The defence had twenty witnesses to swear that in their presence Captain Lebrun Renault had repudiated the whole story. Not one was heard.

I cannot tell if what I am about to say will shed any real light upon the case, but the statement came from a very high quarter and came to me direct. I am at liberty to use it, but I am not at liberty to divulge my informant's name. The story is to the effect that there was never any treason in the case, in the true sense, at all. France—so said my informant, was seeking diplomatic relations with Russia—in plain English, was asking for an alliance in arms. Russia was not wholly satisfied as to the condition of the French army, and made certain inquiries about it, in a purely friendly sense, but was, of course, compelled to make them secretly. The information desired was furnished by an officer of the French army. My informant knew that officer's name, but was not permitted to divulge it. Captain Dreyfus was certainly not the man. Captain Dreyfus had no association with the matter and no knowledge of it. I am not in a position to vouch for this story. My only voucher could be the name of the gentleman who told it, and that I am pledged to withhold. I can only say that he occupies a position in which it would be very possible for him to know the truth.

In one of my letters to the Daily News I described Paris as being in a sort of fever of epigram, and I accounted for this on the ground that men had talked so much about the one absorbing matter in hand that they had found time to polish not only their own pearls but those of their neighbours, and were ready to produce the string on which they were threaded at a moment's notice. One gentleman with whom I talked brought his epigram in his pocket. He took out a pocket-book and drew from it a small oblong piece of whitish canvas. "This," he said, "is the strongest material of its kind. We have a special use for it in our workshops. This fragment by accident has fallen into a bath of acid and has lain there for some time. In its normal condition I would defy the strongest man in the world to tear it across the thread. Now observe." He picked it to pieces with thumb and
finger. "That," he went on, "is the French army of to-day. The acid has been supplied by International Socialism. We should have been at the bottom of the Dreyfus affair two years ago if we had not been afraid of Germany, and we are afraid of Germany because International Socialism has largely superseded patriotism in our army, and our generals believe that their troops would refuse to fight." "But surely," I urged, "Socialism and the revolt against militarism are as strong in Germany as in France." "Ah yes," he answered. "We may guess about the other side, but we know about our own." I laughed to remember that he had half a dozen samples of the same material in his pocket-book, and I have no doubt that they have all been used.

Another gentleman, a diplomat this time, made quite a little speech to me, which had been kneaded into excellent consistency by much repetition. Emerson, describing a private English dinner, says that stories were told so well there that it was evident that they had often been told before. "The gold-crowned despot of my nursery republic"—I translate as faithfully as I can from memory—"has a habit of lying on his back and saying to his nurse, 'Now I am going to be naughty.' He keeps his promise with an admirable fidelity, until authority arrives with a slipper. Then being asked what is the matter, he smiles and says, 'Not anything.' It is a pity that France has no authority with a slipper."

These things are trivial, and are only cited as a characteristic of a time which created a worldwide interest whilst it endured. The case is over now, and if it is to have a sequel we must wait for it. The day after the trial Zola confessed himself at an impasse. It is as if he had thrown a torch into a well, meaning to light up its recesses, and had seen it extinguished by the close air at the bottom. He may yet lower a fire big enough to clear the atmosphere. But even if he should succeed in doing that, it is impossible to see how he could secure a revision of the case of Captain Dreyfus. For he is fighting the Army, and it has been abundantly proved of late that the Army is the only power in France.

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