

How to Condemn an Innocent Man

Bernard Lazare

1898

In two brochures I defended Captain Dreyfus, condemned to deportation for life for a crime he didn't commit.

I defended him basing myself on facts, and not ideology. I showed that there were no charges raised against he who was accused of a shameful and abject crime, only the attestations of experts open to challenge attributing to him a bordereau that he didn't write, that he couldn't have written. When I first spoke no one would believe me; it was thought that I hid truth in service to a cause. Nevertheless, if that cause had not been defensible, if it hadn't been that of an innocent, I would never have accepted to support it.

The most benevolent said that I raised my voice in favor of Jews, upon whom were made to fall – after the blood of Christ spilled by Pilate – the crime that one of their own had committed. If Captain Dreyfus had been guilty I would certainly not have allowed without protest a race to which I am proud to belong to be held responsible for the misdeed. For all that, I would not in that case have supported an innocence that could not be demonstrated. But as I have already said, I do not plead for a traitor: I want to tear a martyr from the torture he has not deserved.

If I have spoken out it is because my conscience commanded me to take up the defense of a man who nothing accused, who – without having been able to protest – had been torn from his friends and family, who had been thrown into a Bastille, who had been judged under a prison's vaults with the gates closed (though not tightly enough to prevent the truth from one day escaping), who was exposed to the insults of a people led astray by fanaticism and rage, led by a handful of rascals whose rage, deceitfulness and hatred today still do not want to depose their arms before the evidence.

I spoke out because it had been demonstrated to me that right had been neglected and justice violated. I spoke out for the salvation of one man alone, but in the name of salvation for all, so that they render liberty to he who is in the penal colony, but also to safeguard the liberty of every individual.

It has now been proved that I was not wrong and that I never sought to deceive those I addressed myself to. The act of accusation against Captain Dreyfus has just been published and it has provoked the indignation and anger of all those who care for truth and equity. It is one of the most monstrous monuments to the stupidity, baseness, and infamy of man. It must be destroyed so that never again its like can be built.

As its whole charge it contains the bordereau that wasn't written by Captain Dreyfus, the bordereau he has always denied, the bordereau that fourteen experts have refused to attribute to him, the bordereau that is in Esterhazy's handwriting, according to his own confession. The rest is nothing but a heap of miserable insinuations, of lying allegations, of rumors of no value, of unjustified statements, a heap that the accusation itself was forced to reject, retaining as sole proof the bordereau.

It is for this that a man has been separated from the world, that he was crossed off the list of the living. It's for this that he was interned at the antipodes, alone, on a lost rock; for this that every day his name is vomited up, that he has been made the symbol of infamy and treason, that an entire nation is attacked. It is for this that those who take up the defense of the innocent and the martyr are covered in mud, for this that the wretched befoul and insult he who wants to tear his brother from the fate he has not deserved.

I am publishing this act of accusation, and if I give it new publicity it's to show what a tissue of lies it is. I don't hold responsible for these lies the poor individual who composed them, for he is the simple registrar of the will and desires of another. But there is someone who must be slapped with this monstrous writing; he is a wretch who should be stigmatized and a mark placed on his forehead. He is a rogue to whom everyone should refuse to offer their hand. It's the Jeffries, the Laffemas who machinated this abominable drama, who lied, soiled and tortured: it is Monsieur the Commandant du Paty de Clam – excuse me, Colonel du Paty de Clam, for when he completed his work as executioner, they sewed one more stripe on his sleeve.

It is no longer a time for allusions or discrete insinuations; they only serve to assure impunity to the torturer who should be punished. It is M. du Paty de Clam who was the first to designate Captain Dreyfus based solely on the comparison of his handwriting and that of the bordereau; it is he who proceeded to his arrest when at the time he had as his only justification the contradictory testimony of two experts; it is he who held him in secret for seventeen days, hesitating before nothing in order to obtain the confession to a crime he did not commit. He machinated an unworthy comedy by making he who was henceforth his victim appear in an office covered in mirrors in order to surprise an emotion that never came, an emotion he later invented. He entered his cell without warning during the night, armed with a covered lantern in hopes of obtaining from surprise what surprise could not say. He must also have regretted the times when they could apply the torture of the boot, the rack or the strappando. He made up for this as he could, through insults, moral torture and absolute sequestration.

It was necessary for that man to be able to show Captain Dreyfus as a monster ready to do anything, and his poor imagination was only capable of placing anonymous police reports in the dossier, unverified and unverifiable, tissues of low and feeble lies that the judges and the public ministry rejected on the day of the trial as unworthy of attention.

But no one then knew the sentence of the judges, and someone, aided by an unworthy press in an anonymous letter, revealed to *La Libre Parole* that a Jewish officer had betrayed, someone communicated with newspapers those police reports which the tribunal did not want. Who was this if not he who had his acolytes fabricate them, who if not the same wretch: Commander du Paty de Clam.

But this is not all. One day I attempted to lift the stone from this grave he had dug and in which he had hoped to bury a man at the same time as his own infamy. It was then that the most shadowy of machinations began. On all sides it was insinuated that formidable proofs existed against Captain Dreyfus, proofs so terrible, so frightening that if even one was revealed the

blood of a million men would flow. I was able to learn of a dossier, but it was a secret dossier, a formidable dossier that they were forced to take from the lawyer and the accused. It is this dossier that the patriotism merchants sell at so much the line. They threaten with it those who don't want to allow justice not to be done.

There does not exist, there has never existed any other proof against Captain Dreyfus than the bordereau written by Captain Esterhazy. I affirm that in September 1896 the bordereau alone was in the dossier. They claim that since then other pieces have been found at an opportune moment: that is, when my first report appeared. They claim that others were furnished when the word got out of M. Scheurer-Kestner's intervention. Finally, a last piece was communicated by Commandant Esterhazy himself, a few days before he became a suspect. What was that piece? It was a so-called letter from Major Panizzardi, military attaché at the Italian embassy, to M. de Schwartz-Koppen, military attaché at the German Embassy. What did this letter say? "You are leaving for Berlin, I'm leaving for Rome. When we get back we'll take care of Dreyfus."

This is the ridiculous paper stolen by a mysterious person from the War archives in the interest of he who will tomorrow be judged, for which General Billot gave a receipt to Commandant Esterhazy. This the paper for which they doubtless want to impose a trial behind closed doors.

This letter is a forgery by Commandant Esterhazy, and if it is in this famous secret dossier of letters of Captain Dreyfus establishing his guilt, letters incontestably in the handwriting of the bordereau – the bordereau that is in Esterhazy's hand – I accuse Commandant Esterhazy of having fabricated them, I accuse Colonel du Paty de Clam of having been his accomplice and of having composed this false dossier that the attachés of the General Staff promenade around the house of M. Rochefort and that Ministers of Foreign Affairs open for M. Judet, when their communication was refused to M. Scheurer-Kestner.

Norton papers forged by two wretches, this is what we'll find in the secret dossier, if this secret dossier doesn't only exist in the imaginations of those who have spoken of it, if they haven't mystified the ever-mystifiable and ingenuous M. Rochefort, if they haven't mystified the whole country in order to serve low interests, prevent responsibility from being established, and the executioners, tormentors, rascals, and the incompetent from being punished.

Today three questions present themselves, and I will not tire of asking them: Did you condemn Captain Dreyfus on the basis of the facts stated in the act of accusation prepared against him by the *rapporteur* Besson d'Ormescheville? That act accuses solely of having written a bordereau which is in the handwriting of another, and his trial must be revised.

Did you condemn him by exhibiting before the members of the council a pseudo-document hidden from the accused and his lawyer? You have committed an unspeakable monstrosity, and the revision of the Dreyfus trial imposes itself more than ever.

Do you affirm that for the past year peremptory proofs of guilt have been found against Captain Dreyfus? If so, these pieces are false and they were fabricated to meet the needs of a cause. They must be shown, discussed, and the villain from whom they emanate must be punished and the trial of their victim revised.

For this it is not enough that Commandant Esterhazy go before a court martial; they must collar he who machinated the Dreyfus trial, he who on the eve of Castellin's interpellation in November 1896 wrote to Commandant Esterhazy that he was going to be denounced from the tribune as a traitor. This fabricator of anonymous letters, he who signs threatening telegrams with the names of women he once defamed, Souffrain's accomplice must be collared.

A serious inquest into the actions of Colonel du Paty de Clam must be opened. On this day light will be cast on the trial of Captain Dreyfus and that of Commandant Esterhazy.

The General Staff can send M. Pauffin de Saint-Morel to see M. Rochefort, Colonel Henry to the *Echo de Paris*, Colonel du Paty de Clam to the *Éclair*, but it will not escape from the three questions I have posed and their consequences.

What does he hope for? To prevent light from being cast, the truth from bursting out, the guilty from being punished. He cannot do this despite his power, despite those he has regimented, despite the newspapers in his pay, despite his threats and rodomontade.

Against truth other adversaries are needed, and it is in vain that they will close the doors of the tribunal, in vain that they want to prevent the witnesses from speaking, in vain that they unleash the canaille, be it anti-Semitic or “patriotic,” that it have as leader Drumont or a Rochefort.

As long as everything has not been said, there are men who will speak. I will be among them, and nothing can stop me until justice is rendered.

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