

# REMINISCENCES OF DREYFUS

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THE death of Captain Dreyfus, the victim of a monstrous iniquity, carries the mind of the writer back to his student days in the Sorbonne.

How Paris seethed with disaffection and division during the second Dreyfus trial! The fact that such famous literary lights as Anatole France and Emile Zola, noted among "Forty Immortals" (French Academy), had sided with Lieutenant Picquart when he declared the *bordereau* against Dreyfus a forgery, literally fired the heather of hate afresh. *A bas les juives* and *Vive l'armée* rang through the air, as opposing groups met and clashed here and there throughout the city and its environs. This acute variation was most pronounced among the Sorbonne students—some ten thousand of them. Prejudice and passion ruled the great body of student opinion, whose slogan was "The army right or wrong," and "Death to Jewish traitors". The rest of these students, fewer in number, were eager for the right to prevail—for justice to be done, as demanded by the writings of Zola and Anatole France. Their slogans were for Picquart and his few army associates—the very very few who dared to support this intrepid and irreproachable hero, that had discovered and exposed the dastardly device by which an innocent Hebrew army officer was damned.

When the tension had reached a feverish pitch, I fared forth to experience Paris, *agité par la passion*. Warned by a wise Parisienne, I dressed in French fashion, cap-à-pied, that I might not be taken for a spy. It was one night, one of the very few, when Anatole France had agreed to address a vast public assembly in favour of the accused Dreyfus, who was still in durance vile on that white man's grave, Devil's Island, off the coast of French Guiana.

As I wended my way towards *rue Rotrou* where the meeting was to be held, I met with groups of well dressed university students, marching, singing, shouting. Clashes were not infrequent. Many groups were on the way to hear the great *litterateur*, but en route they deviated to the vast prison where Picquart was incarcerated.

Outside the walls some sang vituperative snatches from lampoons, or shouted *A bas Picquart, A bas les juives, Vive l'armée*. Others, quite as vociferously, gave voice to squibs concerning army forgers, with cries of *Vive Picquart, Vive Zola, A bas les traitres*.

Leaving these excited mobs, I pushed on to *rue Rotrou*. Arrived there, I found a huge concourse of citizens, striving in a quadrangle just off the *rue* to gain entrance to hear the great author. But the lofty glass doors were shut. Already the place was choked with humanity—so at least we outsiders were told. But we didn't believe it, so we kept on swaying and crowding, till suddenly the doors gave way and in we went, I along with the vanguard. It was true, however; the place was jammed. And then I heard a deep, deliberate, rotund voice. As I listened, I was greatly reminded of Sir Oracle dressed in an opinion of wisdom, gravity and profound conceit. When this orator gave utterance to splendid periods of denunciation, he might have been the Sun god himself, so great was the awe of his hearers.

But the air was so stifling, I could not endure it for long. Finding my way out, I was launched once more into a no less crowded quadrangle. And here was a sight. Speakers of every shade of opinion—Anarchists, Socialists, Republicans, Communists—were addressing crowds from the steps of the building. Presently the meeting within was dismissed, and the press carried us out into the street. We found it closed at both ends by cordons of police. One could, if he so desired, journey outward, but with no return option. However, I had no desire to leave; there was too much action within the barriers of this short *rue*. On all sides were little companies of students and workers in hot argumentation. Everywhere I turned there was altercation:—high stomached were they both, and full of ire.

Suddenly I saw a tall, very fashionably attired student excitedly raise his cane and crack an apprentice over the head. Quicker than a flash there was a general fight. Fists flew, so did feet. It was a fast and furious *melée*, a regular Gallic bout. Then the police rushed in and scattered the struggling combatants.

But there was no dampening the ardor of the students. They reformed, linked up arms and swung along the roadway, singing and shouting at the top of their voices. Passing through the cordons, they pushed on to the Grand Boulevards. There others joined them, and in a great procession they marched to the offices of *La Libre Parole*, whose proprietor and editor, a member of the Chamber of Deputies, was the most notorious Jew-baiter in France. There they booed and bawled derisively, demanding that the

editor, Monsieur Drumont, come forth to hear what they thought of him and all his works. But monsieur was too wise to show his face.

This hostile demonstration continued till the participants were weary. Long after midnight they marched off, heading for their "digs" in the old Latin Quarter across the Seine. I followed in their wake, meditating on the fiery passion and emotion of these temperamental Frenchmen, so sudden and quick in a quarrel, particularly in all that touches national pride.