

LITERATURE.

The Dreyfus Letters *

AMONG celebrated trials that of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, of the French army, before a court-martial on the charge of having criminally betrayed military secrets of the French Government to a foreign officer or agent, was probably the most startling that the world has ever witnessed. Coming just when it did, and in the one republic of the Old World which stood among the first-class powers, the significance of its issue as indicated by what appeared during its progress went directly and powerfully to the conscience of enlightened people everywhere and enforced not only attention but absolute interest. The mere question, whether or not Dreyfus was guilty, became comparatively insignificant save to the extent that it connected itself with the momentous problem of the destiny of civilization. What was to be the effect of this enormous, this unparalleled debauchery of the judicial spirit, this glaring, blatant defiance of justice by a powerful, highly enlightened and influential nation?

The closing years of the nineteenth century were not exactly those which should begin a period of blind and frothy-mouthed worship of the military god. People saw with consternation uniformed bigotry and shoulder-strapped arrogance stand in the quiet, patient and unprejudiced presence of justice and dictate to her the terms of her decision. Dreyfus, the accused, was but a man, one among many millions of not extraordinary men, and there was little in the charge against him, in his personal significance or in the circumstances of his life to make his trial particularly noticeable until it flashed upon the world that he was a sacrificial offering on the altar of infamous conspiracy.

The letters which fill the little book now in hand could have but small interest were they not connected with the facts and the

conditions we have stated. But in view of the trial, condemnation and banishment of Dreyfus and the subsequent revelations and proceedings, there is not a word here printed that falls short of the highest human interest. We need not say that Dreyfus is innocent or guilty in order to find his letters immensely freighted with an almost appalling significance; for each sentence roots itself back in that carnival of infamy called a judicial, fair, impartial trial. The prisoner, no matter if absolutely guilty, in becoming a victim of injustice was instantly robed as a martyr, and in spite of his crime stood as an example of what the most innocent and valuable citizen would be in the hands and regard of the lawful court of a great country.

Captain Dreyfus wrote these letters to his wife from the various prisons in which he was confined between December 5th, 1894, and February 14th, 1898. They are not such letters as would be published by a woman of good taste under ordinary circumstances; but we think that the American publishers are fully justified in saying: "When all the circumstances are taken into consideration, one feels that Mme. Dreyfus took the only course that was open, the one that would most benefit her husband." It may be further said on this point that notwithstanding the intimate and sacredly private nature of the letters there is nothing in them which does not tend to sustain the theory of Dreyfus's innocence; they are as full of indignant and pathetic denial and manly patriotism as if written for all the world to read. Indeed, the spirit of Dreyfus, as interpreted by these short and often perfunctory letters, must strike every reader as remarkable for its moral fortitude and its faithfulness to France under circumstances which might well have driven any citizen to despise the very name of his country.

The genuineness of every line of these letters cannot be doubted; the writer's condition of mind, soul and body speaks unmistakably through them. Of course they con-

* THE LETTERS OF CAPTAIN DREYFUS TO HIS WIFE. Translated by L. G. Moreau. With Portraits. New York: Harper & Brothers. \$1.00.

tain almost endless repetition ; they dwell upon but one thing, the writer's absolute innocence of the heinous crime with which he is charged ; his one longing is for vindication. As fiction such letters would seem maudlin and their writer a mere driveling sentimentalist ; but a sense of their truth gives them a poignant appeal, a power that bites into the soul. As literature they are worthless ; their only practical value as history is the light they reflect upon the most disgraceful episode of modern political and military life. They must be read for what they are, the cry of a soul from the depths of a torment almost unimaginable. To most minds they will declare beyond doubt the perfect innocence of Alfred Dreyfus.