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Letters from the Time of The Siege and the Commune

Elisée Reclus

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1911

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1911

**Letter to P. Cattelin on the Death of
Communard General Émile-Victor Duval
[No date, after April 4, 1871]**

We were going along the Versailles road five by five, guarded on each side by two cadres of infantrymen and hussars. Before us we saw a group of glimmering cavalrymen. It was Vinoy and his general staff.

The column stopped. We heard violent words. Three of our men, surrounded by a troop of soldiers slowly crossed a culvert that connected a meadow to the road surrounded by hedges and bordered on the east by a hut bearing a sign saying “Duval – Horticulturalist.”

Our three friends lined up 20 steps from the house. They bared their breasts and raised their heads: “Vive la Commune.” The executioners were in front of them. For a moment they were hidden by smoke, and two of our comrades fell face down. The third wavered as if he was going to fall the same way, but straightened himself, swayed, and fell face up.

It was Duval. One of the executioners fell on him and tore the boots from the still-trembling man.

Two hours later, in the triumphal dust of the streets of Versailles, the soldier paraded his loot.

When I left Paris Elie and his wife were in good health, as were Grimard and his young son, born to the sound of cannonballs falling on Paris.

My sisters and their husbands are fine. Paul's last letter was dated January 31. He was in good health, but his thoughts are bitter.

Arrived in Libourne on Sunday after three days of painful voyage I saw that I wouldn't have the time to go to Béarn, so I stayed in the region to make propaganda in Libourne, Castillon, and Sainte-Foy against the capitulationists. There is much to be done. Those who are good and brave are making themselves known; the cowardly and the base appear a hundred times more ignoble. The language of the rich farmers of the canton fills us with disgust. They enthusiastically voted for the legitimist-Bonapartist-Orleanist list, knowing full well that in voting for it they were voting for their own degradation.

Yours,

To Mme Elie Reclus [No date, 1871]

My Dear Noémi,

My trip was long and tiring, though without mishap. Upon arriving in Paris we witnessed the painful spectacle of the immense convoys of our artillery carried off by the Prussians. And from the train some of our soldiers laughed with friends, our enemies, through the doors. What naiveté to believe in that ideal thing called a people.

Tenderly yours,

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Letter to Nadar, founder of the aerostatic observatory
No date (1870)

Monsieur:

I had the honor of being registered on M. Rampont's list as an aspirant aeronaut. I request that you let me know when and where I can meet you and receive your instructions and begin my studies. I believe I can be useful to you. I add to the advantage of being "heavier than air" that of being a geographer and something of a meteorologist. Aside from this, I have determination.

Yours,

To his sister Louise
February 9, 1871

My dear sister;

Amid this immense misfortune it is painful to speak of oneself and one's family. Nevertheless, though we might be made nauseous when we think about existence, we can't allow ourselves to feel defeated and must maintain, if not increase, the strength needed to continue the fight.

I left Paris last Friday with a laissez-passer, thanks to which I was able to travel in my quality as a candidate. Knowing that the post of representative is morally among the most perilous, I thought it my duty to offer myself to the people of the Basses-Pyrénées as candidate. My letters didn't arrive in time, though, and these gentlemen made their choice. It's probably the case that the position of war to the bitter end, which I would have defended, was not to their taste. They'd much prefer a so-called "honorable" defeat.