

Creaghe's Speech at the Sheffield Police Court

John Creaghe

August 1891

As our readers may be interested in Comrade Creaghe's "trial for libel" at Sheffield, we quote his plucky speech in the police court, which we have taken from the report of the Sheffield Evening Telegraph and Star:

Our Comrade said: "I wish to make a statement about the matter and leave it for you to decide whether you wish to dismiss it here. I think it was absurd that a number of people should have to come together and have to occupy their time and attention on such a trumpery charge as this man Wilson has thought fit to bring against me. However, knowing as I do with what trivialities lawyers and law courts are obliged to occupy themselves, being, as they are supposed to be, engaged in trying to accomplish the impossible, that is to say, to judge other men's conduct and mete out justice - I say supposed to be, for I know that to mete out even-handed justice is not really their intention."

"But if it were so, it would be a thing quite impossible. Still, many believe such is their object, and from what I have seen, and from what I have heard, the best judges of the matter - the working men - the men sitting in the court would do justice if they could. I have it, I say, from the best judges in the matter, because the men of the working classes form the immense majority of those who come before the courts to have their conduct tried, and this is a significant fact, which might make some people think, and leave them to understand what the real object of so-called justice is. But it is impossible for any man, or any crowd of men, to judge another's conduct. They cannot possibly enter into all the circumstances that surround a man, which have surrounded him from his birth, and which make him so very largely what he is."

"They cannot even say weeks or months, or even hours, after an affair has occurred, give a right understanding of the birth of any matter surrounded as it is with insurmountable difficulties. They try to lay down hard and fast rules, leaving out all those considerations I have mentioned without which justice could not be done, and which they also find it impossible to judge of, and therefore abandon all attempts to take into consideration."

"No, the real object of law and authority is to protect private property, and this can be seen in this case, in which I am threatened with the tremendous penalty of two years' imprisonment, not because my accusers have suffered by what I have written, for if a man be pure and unstained as this Wilson says he is nothing that another can say to the contrary would have any other result than bringing out more clearly the truth; and if he were guilty he would only have to grin and bear it."

"But I am accused because any accusation of crime is supposed to injure a man's interests, his hope of making money, his property, which in this case consists in his privilege as one of a limited number, allowed to plead in courts and to tax the public in accordance with that privilege. If one law more than another could be considered a rich man's law this would be one. For look at the penalty, and see how closely it is associated with property, and then look at the penalty for personal injury. Compared with it, why, if I had thrashed him for his insults within an inch of his life, I would have been perfectly justified in doing so."

Mr. Fairburn (Wilson's solicitor): "If you could."

Creaghe: "Silence, sir. I would not have incurred anything like the same punishment, and yet a personal assault on a man is by all mankind. considered to be the worst offence you can do him. The honourable man may overlook much that may be said or written, but a blow or buffet is in most countries in the world only to be wiped out with blood. But in any case, in any way you look at the matter, what injury has been done to this man. I say nothing whatever; for I say, without fear of contradiction, that he belongs to a profession, one of the wretched results of private property, whose business is to lie, and cheat, and steal, and through his profession I have attacked him. Look—"

Mr. Fairburn: "I don't know whether this is relevant with the defence."

The Stipendiary: "Let him go on."

Creaghe: "Look through all present-day literature; look over the literature of former, even the most ancient times and you will find that everywhere it has been conceded by everybody, and mentioned as a truism that a lawyer from the nature of his profession was a thief, and that an attorney was more especially so. As Shelley has said, "right or wrong will vindicate for gold." Yes for gold, and if a man has not got gold than give him no justice, or if your client has more gold than his antagonist make every use of your advantage, and cheat him out of his rights if you can by that means. If he is poor take advantage of his poverty; if he is ignorant take advantage of his ignorance."

"Cheat him and mislead him all you can, keeping always in view the verdict, not by any means the truth, justice, and right. I ask, can any man be successful in such a profession except one who has the talent, the turn of mind, and the unscrupulous want of feeling for others which will enable him to cheat and lie in order to defraud, that is to say, to rob. My accuser tells the public that he has been very successful in his profession. There has been no wrong, then, done to this man by what was published by me in the Anarchist.

He is a successful attorney, and as such he must be a good schemer, and a dealer in what I said "chicanery, fraud, and lies," and there is no doubt that the publication of it will be more in his favour than otherwise, for it lets the public know that he is a clever schemer. But, besides this, he has provoked me. He came here in the interest of his client to prosecute a claim against me, and in the most uncalled-for way he attacked me by calling me thief, pest, and nuisance, and said I ought to be expelled from the country, and he did this in open court, knowing that the words would be published in the papers. He did this unreprieved by the magistrates present."

"He said I was a coward, and that all Anarchists were cowards. But who is the coward, I may ask now, he or I? He attacks me in my absence, that was cowardly; he attacks me hoping to shelter himself behind the privileges of his profession as a lawyer. That was the act of a coward; and then he comes here, still under the shelter as he hopes, of the law, to try and punish me like a big baby running to the shelter of his mamma, and calling for the punishment of the offender, when he himself was the first aggressor. There is something like the squealing of a pig now, I think,

Mr. Wilson. Who now is squealing like a pig, eh, Messrs. Dodson and Fogg-I should say Messrs. Wilson and Fairburn!"

"Anyone who has read Dickens' delightful "Pickwick Papers" will remember those typical attorneys mentioned as Dodson and Fogg, how they worked up evidence in every way to secure a verdict. It is very amusing, I know, to Dodson, and when the indignant honest man retaliates and calls them thieves and scoundrels they take down his words and try to get another chance of robbing him, and one of them begs him to strike him. Oh, he would be only too delighted if I would strike him. This is not a breach of promise case, but anyone who remembers the famous one in Pickwick will have an idea of what the spider's web of the law is in the bands of the Dodsons and Foggs, or I have no hesitation in saying, in those of the Wilsons and Fairburns and the De Littles and Steels."

"What torture for honest, simple-minded man to find these spiders weaving around him their web of chicane, and fraud, and lies; and information here, and order there, and payment here, worried this way, worried that way; and, oh, the waste of ink and paper, and worst of all, the waste of human energy and human existence in the hurried, useless, degrading business of the law. Oh, your Dodsons and Foggs, your Wilsons and Fairburns, know little of what kind of fly they get in their net when they chance on an Anarchist. If he has not a wasp or a bee, he at any rate has, a horny black beetle, who laughs at their laws, expecting no such things as justice from law, for we know that the two are quite incompatible."

"We know that law was not meant to carry out justice, but to perpetuate injustice. We are prepared, then, for their stratagems, their lies, and schemes, and we suffer nothing in the process as others do, who foolishly expect justice, and meet with nothing, but these hateful schemes, these frauds and lies. Sir, this accusation is nothing but a farce, nothing but a piece of malice, trumped up for revenge-the revenge of an ill-tempered man who, failing in a case displays his ill-temper in a disgraceful way in open court-insults and abuses an absent man openly and publicly, as everyone knows, and then, when retaliation naturally follows, in a cowardly, mean, and contemptible manner, strives in a most despicable way to shelter himself behind the law, and from that shelter to strike at his opponent to stab him in the back. I have done."

Creaghe was then committed to the Assizes, bail being allowed.

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