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AN EPISTLE FROM THE FIRST  
PRESIDENCY.To the Officers and Members of the  
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-  
day Saints:

BRETHREN AND SISTERS.—As the time for holding our Semi-annual Conference has again come around, and we are still prevented from addressing the Saints in public, we deem it proper to take this method of communicating with you, that you may know the counsel we have to give, and that we are not neglectful of the duties which devolve upon us as the First Presidency of the Church.

As all the Saints doubtless understand, there has been no cessation since we last wrote, in the work of persecution. It rages, if anything, more fiercely than ever. Under cover of what is called the Edmunds law, the most outrageous acts of oppression are being perpetrated against the Latter-day Saints. The avowal has been openly made that this law was expressly designed for the destruction of a principle of our religion, and in this spirit all the prosecutions have been conducted. Thus far no criminal, however guilty, who has not been a "Mormon," has been punished under it. Acts of the most sickening depravity have been committed by non-"Mormons" within easy reach of its arm but have scarcely had a passing notice. While it is also worthy of note that, up to the present writing, out of all who have been accused and brought before the District court, only one "Mormon" has been acquitted. The man acquitted, we understand, was charged with being the husband of a woman, on the ground that he had camped in his wagon in a ten acre lot in which her residence stood and had carried some chickens for her to market!

One of the most remarkable features connected with the administration of this law is the extraordinary rulings which are made in its enforcement. The Judge who presides in the Second Judicial District, in the recent trial of a case of unlawful cohabitation, gave instructions to the jury, at the request of the defense. Several accused persons would have been cleared in the Third Judicial District, had the juries which rendered verdicts in their cases, been similarly instructed. They are as follows:

1. Prior to the act of March 22d, 1882, cohabitation with more than one woman was not unlawful.

2. If you find from the evidence that the defendant, since the passage of the Edmunds act, March 22d, 1882, and within the dates named in the indictment, has not held out to the world, introduced, or announced more than one of the women named in the indictment as his wife, you should acquit the defendant.

3. It is not necessary that the parties to a polygamous marriage, or who have lived in the practice of cohabiting with two or more women, should divorce themselves, in order to entitle them to the presumption of innocence of cohabitation after the passage of the law.

4. As all children of polygamous marriages, begotten before March 22nd, 1882, are legitimated, and no cohabitation before that date was unlawful, no criminalizing inference can be drawn by the jury from the defendant's later acknowledgments of his paternity of such children by the women mentioned in the indictment, nor from later recognition of such women as their mothers, and as women whom he had before said date, taken into the polygamous relation with him.

5. The law presumes innocence, and therefore, that all persons who were cohabiting when the Edmunds act took effect, contrary to the provisions of that act, then ceased to do so.

6. The law presumes all persons charged with a criminal offense to be innocent until the presumption is overcome by proof; therefore it presumes that all persons who were living with more than one woman as wives prior to March 22d, 1882, have since that date ceased to so live and cohabit.

7. If you find from the evidence that defendant had children by the women named in the indictment prior to March 22d, 1882, then the defendant had a right to visit his children, and support them and make arrangements as to their welfare. He had a right also to assist their mothers in their support, and for such a purpose could visit the house where they and their mothers live. He could furnish them a home, he could visit the mother, the same as if they had been divorced, or as if no such previous relations had existed between them, but he should not associate with her as a husband associates with his wife.

Do we say too much if we state that here are those now undergoing punishment in the penitentiary in the society of thieves and murderers, who would be as free as the prosecuting officers themselves, had the law been construed by the legal canons applied to other laws, and according to the instructions given above?

The practice in these attacks upon us has not been to presume the accused innocent until proved guilty; but

view him as undoubtedly guilty because accused; and the rulings of the Court in several instances have been made to secure conviction where the evidence was open to question. The extraordinary ruling concerning "holding out," is one in point; notwithstanding the Edmunds law specifies that the penalty for unlawful cohabitation, shall not be more than six months' imprisonment, and three hundred dollars' fine, the notorious ruling from the same bench concerning the number of indictments which can be found against a person accused of unlawful cohabitation, states that he not only can be indicted once for the whole period since the passage of the law, but an indictment can be found for every week of that time; so that, if found guilty in this manner, a man's punishment would aggregate an imprisonment of 92 years and fines to the amount of \$55,200.

Still more extraordinary is the ruling of another Judge, who, not to be outdone in his zeal, says, that an indictment can be found for this charge against a man for every day, or other distinct interval of time since the enactment of the law! As about 1292 days have passed since then, a man found guilty can be incarcerated in prison for 646 years and made pay fines to the amount of \$387,600. Comment upon this absurdity is unnecessary.

Before the Edmunds bill became law, and while on its passage, it was claimed that its provisions were of general application and in the interests of morality, and not, as we asserted, a measure directly aimed at religious liberty and for purposes of persecution. But time has fully revealed its true character. Stripped of all disguise it stands out now in all its hideousness. The most shocking immorality flourishes in its presence and thrives under the very eyes of its administrators. All forms of vice, if not directly encouraged by those who are charged with the duty of administering the Edmunds law, are at least viewed by them with indifference. They appear to have no care as to the most flagrant sexual crimes, if they are only committed by non-"Mormons," or outside of the pale of matrimony. "Mormons" also, under the present administration of the law, may do what they please with women, be guilty of the foulest injustice to them and their offspring, if they will only disown them as wives. The war is openly and undisguisedly made upon our religion. To induce men to repudiate that, to violate its precepts and to break its solemn covenants, every encouragement is given. The man who agrees to discard his wife or wives, and to trample upon the most sacred obligations which human beings can enter into, escapes imprisonment and is applauded; while the man who will not make this compact of dishonor, who will not admit that his past life has been a fraud and a lie, who will not say to the world, "I intended to deceive my God, my brethren and my wives by making covenants I did not expect to keep," is, besides being punished to the full extent of the law, compelled to endure the reproaches, taunts and insults of a brutal judge.

Notwithstanding all these cruelties are practiced against us, we do not feel that, as Latter-day Saints, we should mourn because of them. We should mourn because of our weaknesses, follies and sins, and repent of them. But to be persecuted, and to be discriminated against, to be separated from the rest of the world, to be imprisoned and abused are not causes of sorrow to true Saints; they are causes of rejoicing. If, in the great hereafter, we expect to be admitted to the society of the Son of God, our Redeemer, to the society of Prophets and Apostles, and holy men and women, ought we not to be willing to endure the tribulations which they received so joyfully? Where is the Prophet or Apostle who did not endure persecution, whose liberty and life were not in almost constant jeopardy? They did not have an Edmunds law, perhaps, enforced against them; but they had laws which emanated from the same source. With few exceptions they were all punished, deprived of liberty and of life, in the sacred name of law. Even the holiest Being that ever trod the earth, the great Redeemer of mankind himself, was crucified between two thieves to satisfy Jewish law.

There has probably never been a time in the history of mankind when those whom we now revere as martyrs and whose sacrifices adorn and glorify our humanity and lift it nearer to God, could not, by being recreant to the truth entrusted to them, have escaped the fate which made them so admirable to the generations which followed them. The Savior himself had it in his power to compromise with his enemies and escape the cruel and ignominious death inflicted upon him. Abraham might have bowed to the gods of his idolatrous father and needed no angel to rescue him from his impending doom. Daniel and his three brethren, also, might have submitted to the decree and law of the ruling powers under which they lived and escaped the fiery furnace and the den of lions. Their refusals to obey the decree and law doubtless appeared to those who had not the knowledge of God which they possessed, as acts of wicked obstinacy that should be summarily punished. But had they, to escape the threatened penalty, obeyed these edicts, posterity would have lost the benefit of their example, and the great God would not have been glorified before their contemporaries as He was by their acts. Instead of their names being, as now, radiant with light and resplendent with heroism, they would, had they reached us, been covered with

odium and been mentioned in the same category with the Jews concerning whom the Prophet Jeremiah said: "They bend their tongues, like their bow for lies; but they are not valiant for the truth upon the earth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they know not me, saith the Lord."

Well-meaning friends of ours have said that our refusal to renounce the principle of celestial marriage invites destruction. They warn us and implore us to yield. They appeal to every human interest and adjure us to bow to a law, which is admitted on all hands to have been framed expressly for the destruction of the principle which we are called upon to reject. They say it is madness to resist the will of so overwhelming a majority. They say they see the gathering clouds, that they hear the premonitory mutterings of the resistless tempest which is about to break in destructive fury upon our heads, and they call upon us to avert its wrath by timely submission. But they perceive not the hand of that Being who controls all storms, whose voice the tempest obeys, at whose fiat thrones and empires are thrown down—the Almighty God, Lord of heaven and earth, who has made promises to us and who has never failed to fulfill all His words.

We did not reveal celestial marriage. We cannot withdraw or renounce it. God revealed it, and He has promised to maintain it and to bless those who obey it. Whatever fate, then, may threaten us, there is but one course for men of God to take, that is, to keep inviolate the holy covenants they have made in the presence of God and angels. For the remainder, whether it be life or death, freedom or imprisonment, prosperity or adversity, we must trust in God. We may say, however, if any man or woman expects to enter into the celestial kingdom of our God without making sacrifices and without being tested to the very uttermost, they have not understood the Gospel. If there is a weak spot in our nature, or if there is a fibre that can be made to quiver or to shrink, we may rest assured that it will be tested. Our own weaknesses will be brought fully to light, and in seeking for help, the strength of our God will also be made manifest to us. The Latter-day Saints have been taught this from the beginning. Such scenes as we now witness in these mountains and hear about in lands where the Elders are preaching the Gospel ought not to be a surprise to us. The Prophets and Apostles and Elders of this dispensation would be false Prophets and Apostles and Elders if these events did not take place; for they have predicted them and warned the people unceasingly concerning them.

Speaking concerning law, the Lord, in a revelation given through the Prophet Joseph, August 6th, 1833, says:

4. And now, verily I say unto you concerning the laws of the land, it is my will that any people should observe to do all things whatsoever I command them;

5. And that law of the land which is constitutional, supporting that principle of freedom in maintaining rights and privileges, belongs to all mankind, and is justifiable before me;

6. Therefore, I, the Lord, justify you, and your brethren of my church, in befriending that law which is the constitutional law of the land;

7. And as pertaining to law of man, whatsoever is more or less than these cometh of evil.

8. I, the Lord God, make you free, therefore ye are free indeed; and the law also maketh you free;

9. Nevertheless, when the wicked rule the people mourn.

10. Wherefore, honest men and wise men should be sought for diligently, and good men and wise men ye should observe to uphold; otherwise whatsoever is less than these cometh of evil.

11. And I give unto you a commandment, that ye shall forsake all evil and cleave unto all good, that ye shall live by every word which proceedeth forth out of the mouth of God;

12. For he will give unto the faithful line upon line, precept upon precept; and I will try you and prove you herewith;

13. And whoso layeth down his life in my cause, for my name's sake, shall find it again, even life eternal;

14. Therefore be not afraid of your enemies, for I have decreed in my heart, saith the Lord, that I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant even unto death, that you may be found worthy;

15. For if ye will not abide in my covenant, ye are not worthy of me.

Fifty-two years have passed since this was given to the Church, and we are now witnessing its fulfillment. The Saints are required to do whatsoever the Lord commands them, to live by every word which proceedeth forth out of the mouth of God. They are also instructed to befriend every constitutional law of the land; for such laws support the principle of freedom; they maintain rights and privileges. This, as a people, we have striven to do from the beginning of our organization. We have ever been a law-abiding people. Times without number we have suffered the most grievous wrongs without resenting them. We have ever thought it better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.

Such was the case when we suffered expatriation from the State of Missouri. We were robbed and pillaged, despoiled and persecuted, yet we had no idea of retaliating on account of these wrongs upon the government and its institutions, which to us are sacred. The same loyal spirit animated us when we were beset by blood-thirsty mobs in Illinois, one of which murdered Joseph Smith, our Prophet, and Hyrum Smith, the Patriarch, while they were under the pledged protection of the State, given through the governor. On the same occasion one of signers of this address was also brought to the gate of death, by being

shot by the same band of assassins. When driven from the homes we had established in Illinois, we had no disposition to hold the nation at large nor the government of our beloved country responsible for those inhuman deeds, nor to allow the spirit of vengeance to rankle in our hearts. We took the first opportunity to exhibit the spirit of true patriotism. While undergoing great hardship on account of being subjected to a compulsory exodus, when called upon by the government to furnish a body of men to take part in the war with Mexico, 500 of the flower of our camp responded with alacrity, and in accordance with the call of our country, traversed the great American desert, penetrated to Mexico, and completed an arduous and hazardous campaign, and journey to California.

You have no doubt read, through the papers, an account of the terrible affair which recently occurred at Rock Springs, in Wyoming Territory. We could not help feeling a little anxiety lest some of our people should have been connected with that bloody riot, and immediately requested Brother Cluff, President of Summit Stake, to inquire into the matter. So far as we have obtained information to the present, however, we find that not more than one has been in any way mixed up with that matter, and he a person of doubtful standing. We are pleased to learn of this, because we cannot associate with any deeds so revolting and inhuman, and we take this opportunity to express our opinion on this subject to the Saints. A great number of secret societies are being formed with which we cannot affiliate. Such organizations are generally inimical to law, to good order, and in many instances subversive of the rights of man. We cannot amalgamate with them. They are very distinctly spoken against in the Book of Mormon, as among the calamities which should afflict the people.

We are expressly commanded, and it becomes our duty, to uphold and sustain every law of the land which is constitutional; we have always had a strong desire to obey such laws, and to place ourselves in harmony with all the institutions of the country.

We repeat that we desire that all men should be aware of the fact that we have been the upholders of the Constitution and laws enacted in pursuance of that sacred instrument. We still entertain the same patriotic disposition, and propose to continue acting in conformity with it to the last. Neither have we any desire to come in active conflict even with statutes that we deem opposed to the Constitution both in letter and spirit. Whatever opposition has been offered in that line has been only of such a character as is justified by the usages and customs of this and all other civilized countries, and such as the laws and institutions of this nation provide. Nor have we the least desire to shun the consequences of our acts in their relationship to the laws to which we refer, providing there were any assurance that our cases would be submitted to a fair and just adjudication. Events of the past few months give no ground for hope that such treatment would be accorded. It must be conceded, however, that, as stated elsewhere, connected with this disposition to have our conduct passed upon as provided by law administered in the genius of justice, there never can be any hope of our yielding up, under any circumstances, a principle of conscientious or religious conviction. Were we to make such a surrender our conduct in that respect would not be in harmony with the guaranties of the Constitution, which we are in duty bound to uphold.

In order to place our people at a disadvantage, and to crush out their religious system, the Constitution has been violated in a number of ways. It does not require any depth of legal learning to understand what is meant by a religious test, which is forbidden by the "supreme law of the land." Yet laws have been passed applicable to a wide section of this northwestern country, disfranchising and inflicting total political disability upon our people, without regard to their acts. The offense for which this restriction has been prescribed is simply religious belief, and the means of application is a religious test. It is consequently unconstitutional upon its face. This and other laws—notably the Edmunds act—inflict disabilities upon those of our people who are not in any way associated, by their acts, with polygamy. Thus probably about nine-tenths of our community are punished for alleged offenses for which they are in no way responsible, and in which they have taken no part. Surely no person who is unbiased, that gives this subject even the most casual attention can characterize such treatment as other than flagrantly unjust.

It has been estimated that out of a community of about 200,000 people, more or less, from 10,000 to 12,000 are identified with polygamy. When the Edmunds act was passed this small minority who were deprived by it of the right to vote or hold office, voluntarily, without the application of coercion, withdrew from those privileges, notwithstanding the high estimate they placed upon them. It may well be asked wherein is the justice of placing the bulk of the people at a disadvantage as well, seeing they have done nothing to furnish an excuse for such treatment? Granting that the small minority connected with polygamy are criminals before the law, what justification is there, on that account, for punishing, as the Edmunds and other acts do, the overwhelming

majority? If such doings were perpetrated in any other connection they would be unsparingly denounced as oppressive and tyrannical in the most extreme degree. If one portion of a community are designated as criminal, to hold the other and much the greater portion responsible for such a condition is not only unjust, but decidedly absurd.

Statements upon this subject have been made to the Chief Executive of the nation, in the form of a protest and petition for redress of grievances. Knowing that misrepresentations have taken the place of impartial scrutiny of the question with which the Latter-day Saints are associated, the consequences being a general misapprehension of the community and their affairs, we presumed that Mr. Cleveland was not acquainted with the real situation. An opportunity was thus sought to acquaint him with the facts. The very reasonable desire was expressed in this connection that a commission of inquiry be appointed, that the truth might appear and be given to the nation. Was it too much to expect that this action, supported by a representation of 200,000 people, would meet with some favorable response, which thus far has not, however, been made? Yet it would be unfair to attribute the delay of the President either to indifference or a disposition to refuse to accord justice to a people whose liberties are being trampled upon to an extent that is almost past human endurance. It is still hoped that he will take some consistent and humane action in the premises. In alluding to the delay in granting a response to the representations made to the President, we must not forget the extensive and arduous character of the duties devolving upon him, as the head of the administration of a great government. We mention this that you may not be disposed to be too censorious in regard to the actions of men in high places who have the power to redress our grievances. And even when we feel that we are wronged, it is proper for us to follow the example of our Lord and Master, and say: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

Referring once more to the situation in a more local sense, we are not oblivious to the anomalous position in which the Federal judicial officers are placed in dealing with a subject which appears to occupy a large share of popular attention. While it is impossible for them to escape pronounced exceptions being taken to their official course, on account of its harshness, undue rigor, an unjust discrimination in administering the laws, they are entitled to some consideration, justified by well understood circumstances. The Latter-day Saints are the objects of popular obloquy. Their institutions appear to be greatly disliked. The officers are doubtless influenced by the general clamor for the application of heroic treatment to the Saints. They themselves have doubtless been influenced to some degree by personal prejudices, and their official conduct, by these conditions, is thrown out of balance. While their course cannot be sustained in the light of fair play, some allowance should be made on account of the liability of the human mind to be warped by influences in conflict with the principles which should universally obtain in courts of law and presumed justice. Neither would it be justifiable on the part of the Saints to entertain toward them, on account of their departures from their proper line of duty any rancorous or vengeful feeling. A spirit of that character is not in unity with the genius of the Gospel of peace. All men are in the hands of a just God, whose mighty, penetrating power is capable of analyzing all the motives which prompt human action, and He can and will deal with us and them and all men according to the principles of eternal justice.

Upwards of forty years ago the Lord revealed to His Church the principle of celestial marriage. The idea of marrying more wives than one was as naturally abhorrent to the leading men and women of the Church at that day as it could be to any people. They shrank with dread from the bare thought of entering into such relationships. But the command of God was before them in language which no faithful soul dare disobey.

"For, behold, I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned; for no one can reject this covenant, and be permitted to enter into my glory."

And as pertaining to the new and everlasting covenant, it was instituted for the fullness of my glory; and he that receiveth a fullness thereof, must and shall abide the law, or he shall be damned, saith the Lord God."

Damnation was the awful penalty affixed to a refusal to obey this law. It became an acknowledged doctrine of the Church; it was indissolubly interwoven in the minds of its members with their hopes of eternal salvation and exaltation in the presence of God. For nearly twenty years this continued to be our faith and practice. Then a law was enacted against it. Another twenty years elapsed, and the Edmunds law was passed. Nearly forty years had thus elapsed from the first revelation of this doctrine, during which period thousands had lived and died, firmly believing and solemnly testifying that it was divine. At great sacrifice they had obeyed it, and based their hopes of eternal felicity upon the promises which the revelation contained. They never dreamed that they had not a constitutional right to obey God, especially when in obeying Him