

**EMILE ZOLA**



# **ZEST** for **LIFE**



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# ZEST FOR LIFE

ÉMILE ZOLA

*Translated from the French by*  
JEAN STEWART

*Preface by*  
ANGUS WILSON



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## PREFACE

Of all the ideas of the nineteenth century on which we strive to pin responsibilities for the catastrophes of our own day, optimism and materialism are the most decided. It is perfectly clear that in their crudest forms the beliefs in social perfectibility and the explanation of the Universe on mechanistic principles are threadbare. Not a little of the neglect of Emile Zola's genius has been due to his reputation as an optimistic materialist—a peculiarly contemptible combination of all that has now been exploded. Zola, in fact, was neither an optimist nor a materialist in the pejorative sense in which these words are now used. In his very earliest novels, written when he was in his twenties, in *Thérèse Raquin* for example, he held rather crude mechanistic views of human character. At the very end of his life, in the lamentable *Quatre Femmes* he put forward very doctrinaire and absurd Utopian theories of social perfectibility. It would be hard, however, if a great writer had to be judged on the productions of his callow youth and his premature dotage. Zola's materialism was, in fact, not mechanistic at all: it was rather a sort of pantheism, a vitalism which sought man's soul in all the aspects of creation. His was not a profound intellect—the greatest novelists have not been intellectuals. His vitalism would not stand up to any serious philosophical or theological attack. It was, however, the expression of the deep love of life of a man whose imaginative fecundity brimmed over into everything he came upon. It was courageous, creative and humane. It was not in any sense a simple or naive optimism. Few of the great nineteenth century writers were as naively optimistic as it has been convenient for their twentieth century critics to imagine them. Zola—the black romantic—had his full measure of understanding of evil and pain, even though he was not willing to accept the idea of original sin. The author of *Earth* and *The Dram Shop* can hardly be charged with ignoring the darker sides of human life. But, the critics may say, it is perfectly pos-

ZEST FOR LIFE

Émile Zola

In this intimate drama of family life, Zola treats of a profound and important theme—that of human happiness, of the will to live that sustains mankind through misfortune and anguish.

Pauline, an orphan, comes to live with her cousins the Chateaus, an impoverished bourgeois family in a miserable, lonely fishing village on the Normandy coast. At first, with her radiant unselfish nature, she brings peace and happiness into the home. But as the story unfolds, she finds herself exploited and victimized—robbed, little by little, of her fortune and then of her love for her cousin Lazare; her generosity makes her a willing victim, her courage enables her to revive after each crisis. Pauline is no plaster saint, but a sensuous, passionate creature; her conflict gives the story its poignancy and its truth. Lazare is at the opposite pole from Pauline, a gifted intellectual whose basic pessimism corrodes his will and affections.

The climax of this book is reached when Louise, Lazare's wife, gives birth to a child. Zola describes the scene with the vivid and harrowing intensity of which only he is capable, and shows at the same time that in the midst of pain and distress there can always be found new life and new hope.

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