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What Are American Institutions?

Lizzie M. Swank

1887

I AM sending this across the ocean, to seek information I cannot gain in my own native land. I have enquired of leading journals and been quietly ignored; I have asked eminent literary people and received only looks that questioned my sanity and civilised citizenship; I have interrogated workingmen, and they simply become terrified. I have decided to enquire of a “blasted furriner.” I only want to know—“what are “American institutions”? Or rather, what are the characteristics of American institutions which distinguish them from English, Russian, German, or French institutions? So much seems to depend on a proper attitude toward these revered mysteries, that I am anxious to be informed.

“If we would preserve the integrity of our American institutions, we must put a stop to all this anarchistic talk from the labouring classes,” shrieks the great American press. “If we would preserve, etc., etc., we must prevent the foreigners from crowding to our shores,” scream the lesser lights of journalism in grand responsive chorus. “If we would p. t. i. o. o. A. i.,” yells the Citizens’ Association, “we must hang the men who find any fault with

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them.” And then the solos and duets come in from the states: Kansas cries, “Imprison those who marry themselves without a priest, and guard the morals of our people by laws—Sunday laws, prohibitory laws, plenty of laws of all sorts.” Pennsylvania and Ohio sing together, “Arrest the agitators—let no anarchists be heard.” Virginia cries, “Shut up that earnest old woman who is shocking society with unwelcome truths;” and Illinois, bolder than all the rest, disarms her citizens, forbids the discontented to murmur, makes it a crime to tell of the people’s wrongs, passes “conspiracy,” “boycott,” and “strike” bills, forbids the singing of the song that thrills all Europe with its liberty tones, disperses meetings of citizens at her pleasure, and enforces her commands with an army of Pinkerton brutes, regiments of State militia, the most powerful police system in the world, and the dark shadow of the gallows in the background; growling in the meantime continually, “We are preserving the integrity of our American institutions.”

During the great trial and since, somebody is always saying “Spies, Schwab, Engel, Fischer, and Ling, coming from a foreign land, and seeing poverty existed here as elsewhere, and *not understanding our American institutions*, became anarchists and iconoclasts—wanting to destroy society merely because they could not comprehend its organisation”!

I am as American as a person can be who is not a full-blooded, copper-coloured Indian. My forefathers were here before we had any “institutions,” and helped to fight a foreign institution that we might have some of our own. I am as near civilised as my fellow-workers, and have average intelligence, and yet at this date I do not understand our “American institutions.” I once thought I did; I believed the ballot was one of them. I have seen working-men carried to the polls and voted like so many cattle by their employers, when they knew and cared nothing about the two candidates offered them. I have seen a struggling labour party beaten again and again by fraud and trickery; and I have been told that in England and Germany popular suffrage is really a power and the people

make themselves felt through it. So that the privilege of ballot is not peculiar to America surely.

One time I believed equality was one of them. But when I see a nabob drawing an income of seven dollars a minute, living on the greatest luxuries of earth and holding at his beck and call the services of ten thousand men, and know that because of him there are a thousand paupers in the land, I must give up that idea. “Free homes” figured in my imagination as one. But it costs the best years of one man and woman’s life and banishment from all they have held dear to win a home, at best; and usually it costs years of toil and deprivation just to *try*; while the mortgage-holder and usurer gets the “home” in the end.

But to the last I fondly dreamed that free thought, free speech, and free press were certainly American institutions. My experience as a citizen of Chicago has dispelled that illusion. In the whole world outside of Russia there is not a more oppressed, authority-ridden city than Chicago. The police are feared as though they were demons. Meetings are broken up, Anarchists are forbidden to sit or stand in groups of two or three, the “Marseillaise” is forbidden, men can be hung without proof for what somebody else did, and working men have no rights which a capitalist is bound to respect. All this for the “preservation of American institutions.” What are they? Our free school system? They have better schools in other countries for all the children. Our old chattel-slavery institution? That perhaps was peculiar to America. Our land-owning, “big-rent,” speculating institutions? They are common as civilisation itself. Our wage-slavery system? Our “peasantry” works as cheaply and obediently as any in the world. Our “profit” system? Men can roll up bigger fortunes through unlimited profit when once they get the upper hand by vested rights, and this perhaps is particularly American?

Can our English friends inform us what American institutions are?