

Creating the Wrong Impression of American Justice

THERE IS GRIEF and sorrow, bitterness and resentment abroad in the little quaint fishing village of Clifton on the lower Columbia River, just a few miles east of Astoria. The population of the village is nearly one hundred percent a foreign colony of Austrian and Slavic immigrant people.

For years they, too, like all other alien nationalities living in settlements about the lower river districts, have earned their living by fishing on the waters of the Columbia and selling their catches to the cannery people at Astoria. In little huts and shanties and on houseboats snuggled closely in the little sloughs at Clifton, these people have lived a life of isolation, in a veritable little old country. And few if any Americans have cared or bothered about them. No agency of Americanization has concerned itself about sending an Americanization teacher to them to instruct them in the code of American life, the American language, the American customs and the American laws.

They were a happy lot, those Austrian people at Clifton. The hand of the autocrat and his henchmen did not reach them in their American settlement. What little justice they obtained back there, they had to pay for. The emperor's men had their price for everything. If you had the money you could get by. If not, well, that was your misfortune and the gold-braided official was adamant to any other argument.

Fear of the Official became deeply embedded in the hearts of those people. They learned to look upon him as a monster who toyed with the heartstrings and the happiness of the common people — for money.

The law was on his side. There was only one sure way to obtain what the official's law demanded — bargain for it with MONEY.

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America! It was a glorious land. If you just kept out of the way and committed no crime, the officials left you alone.

Some time ago there came the news to Clifton that aliens, those who were not citizens, could no longer fish in the Columbia River or elsewhere in the waters of the State of Oregon. To get the official "paper," with your name on it, showing that you were a citizen of America, well, that was a dreadfully difficult matter.

In the first place you would have to learn the American language, study the history of America and learn, oh, so much, about the American government. After that you would have to go to Astoria, on a certain day, to appear in court and let a government official and a judge ask you a lot of complicated and tremendously big questions. To be sure, the crowd of curious people would also be there, looking quizzically at you in a way that could only intensify your confusion and actually make you scared — all this, in order to get a paper you had no other use for than as a means to obtain a license to toil with boat and net out there on the waters of the big river in the dark and stormy nights, fighting a battle for life and the livelihood of loved ones, in the face of treacherous tide currents, the breakers and the bar.

What other value could an Austrian of the little

foreign colony at Clifton place on the American citizenship paper?

His education in self-government had been sadly neglected. The affairs of government, what he knew of them in the empire of Franz Joseph, was something the common people had no hand in. Since coming to America he had learned to have respect for the American government, where he only had fear and hatred for the government he knew in the old country.

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How to obtain citizenship papers, in order to earn a livelihood by fishing, became of a sudden a great and burning question in the little fishing hamlet.

The officials in the old country were willing to, well, just fix things up — if they got something for their trouble.

From over the hills, from the greater world beyond the hamlet these aliens had heard many ugly rumors that the people in America also traded justice and rights for MONEY.

Maybe it wasn't true. But, after all, American officials were perhaps, in some respects, like the Austrian officials — willing to be accommodating, for a little money, when no one was looking.

Maybe it would be wrong to "beat around the bush" with Uncle Sam, but the fishing season was coming and the time was too short in which to learn all the things required by the government officials before the salmon would be heading in over the bar.

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A little money had been laid by from the seasons of former years by most of the men in the Clifton fishing colony. If the government official would not be so severe in his questioning, perhaps they could get by, for they had learned enough of the American language to understand simple questions and make themselves understood in a way. If he would just be a little lenient, it would be all right, and for his kindness, surely, it would be worth something. Maybe if they talked to him about it, just like they used to do to the old country officials, they could come to some understanding, if he did not want too much —

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On the ninth of February, news dispatches tell us, that Naturalization Examiner W. R. Thomas, of Seattle, nipped in the bud "what amounted to a conspiracy to bribe" him to give five aliens of Clifton their citizenship papers. A meeting had apparently been arranged for. A representative of the Austrians — one of their countrymen and an American citizen who was to be one of the would-be conspirators' witnesses in court — was to come to a certain room in the Astoria Hotel, on the morning before the Naturalization Court was to convene, and bring the bribe money. It was to represent the first installment of the citizenship applicants' cash consideration to the kindly Official who was to conduct the hearing that day in court and who, by some manner of speech had led them to believe that he considered their suggestion favorably and would, in lieu of a stipulated consideration, "make things a little easy" for them.

Beaming with delight the friend showed up early,