

THE AMERICAN QUESTION

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The American Question by William W. Story

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WILLIAM W. STORY

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QUESTION**

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BY

WILLIAM W. STORY.

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THE AMERICAN QUESTION.

LETTER I.

THE Americans feel aggrieved at the attitude of England towards their country in the day of her trial. They had expected from her sympathy and encouragement; but for the most part the tone of her criticism has been derisive, supercilious, and patronising; and, instead of encouragement, she has uttered diatribes against the war as "internecine," "suicidal," "revolting," "disgusting," "wanton," "wicked," and "inhuman." Failure has been prophesied from the first. The Americans have been discouraged from endeavouring to heal the wounds inflicted on their country by treason. No general voice of cheer has called out, urging them to "unthread the eye of rude rebellion." They are earnestly adjured to compromise with it, to conciliate it, to bow down before it; they are told that it is impossible to subdue it. They have homilies on the horrors of war, as if the sword of England had never been unsheathed. They hear that, "bad as the institution (of slavery) is, civil war is worse;"* that emancipation is an absurdity and an impossibility; that it is vain to hope to subjugate and hold the South by force; that the American "Union is a wreck;" and the "United States of North America have ceased to be."† And all this comes from a people whose whole history has been a struggle for freedom, popular rights, national existence, and extension of empire, through a series of civil and foreign wars—whose sword is yet dripping with the blood of

* *Saturday Review.*

† *Times.*

treason and rebellion shed in India: one of whose greatest acts was West-Indian Emancipation; and who conquered, and has held by force, not only a vast empire in the East, but the whole Celtic portion of her own island.

Such is the general tone of feeling, and such the general tenor of advice, offered by England to America. The press, with a few honourable exceptions, has steadily maligned and misrepresented the Federal Government; showing a determined bias in favour of the Southern rebellion; and even at the outset prejudging the whole case, and predetermining the issue of the conflict in favour of slavery. It has given constant comfort to the South; exaggerated its successes; praised its leaders; admired its State papers and proclamations; contrasted the gentlemen of the Confederate States with the sweaty mechanics and "mud-sills" of the North; smoothed over the horrors of slavery; dwelt upon the grievance of the Tariff, and recognised the right to revolt against the Federal Government. On the other hand, it has coldly criticised the successes of the Federal army; ridiculed the State papers and policy of the North; declared that "a traveller would find himself more at liberty in Venice than in New York;" scouted the assertion that slavery is at the root of this revolt as a pretence; assailed the Government for endeavouring to force upon the South an oppressive policy of taxation; and declared its sole object to be subjugation for the sake of empire. It has predicted that the "sinews of war" would fail; that the Northern people had only faith in the almighty dollar; and, in the expectation that a foreign loan would be required, exerted all its powers to destroy the credit of the Federal Government. One paper stigmatises this war as "the most groundless and wanton civil conflict of which history gives us any account."* Another declares it to be a "civil war of unprecedented wickedness."† Another characterises the Federal Government as "a blustering despotism," and says that "Mr. Seward has revoked all the liberties of America, and inaugurated a reign of terror;" and adds, "Here is an end of the great experiment." The *Chronicle* and the *Herald* threaten war; one because cotton is

* *Times*, Oct. 12, 1861.

† *Saturday Review*, Sept. 15, 1861.

shut up by the blockade, the other because an English ship, which violated the blockade, was condemned by the Admiralty Court in New York, after a fair and honourable trial.* The *Times* says that "we, in common with every nation of Europe, have regarded this unnatural struggle with horror and loathing;" "that an English soldier of note who drew his sword in such a quarrel, would expose himself most justly to the censure and reprobation of his fellow-countrymen." "To whom but the citizens of America," it cries, "and the mere *condottieri*, who are attracted like the crow and the kite by the smell of blood and the sight of carnage, can the wars of the Union be otherwise than revolting and disgusting?" "It is one thing for the princes of the royal house of France to bear their part in gallant actions under such men as Turenne, Condé, Luxembourg, and Saxe; it is another thing to study in the ignorant and bloody school of civil war under rude partisans, inexperienced generals, officers taken from the counter, the desk, the shambles, or worse places." "Should they fall, it will be in an ignoble quarrel, in which they have no concern."† While giving expression to such sentiments and such language as this, these papers declare the press of America to be vulgar, insolent, and mendacious. In the face of these taunts, denunciations, and abuse, they profess surprise that the Americans are indignant, and assert that nothing could be more calm, just, and conciliating than their own bearing.

We are not ashamed to confess that we feel this conduct deeply. We desired the good opinion of England. We thought we were sure of her sympathy, and we are disappointed and hurt.

If such has been the attitude of the press, that of the Government, though cautious and respectful, has not been satisfactory. It rushed with indecent haste to recognise the Southern Confederacy. Before time had been allowed to the Federal Government to send a Minister to England with information of the real facts, before it was possible that any accurate knowledge of its real views and intentions could be obtained,

* *Herald*, Oct. 21.

† *Chronicle*, Oct. 15.

the English Government proclaimed in the House of Commons, through Lord John Russell, that while preserving neutrality, they should give the rebellious States all the rights of belligerents. But what are the rights of belligerents? They are, all the rights that any people or nation engaged in a just war can claim of a neutral power. To proffer to traitors and rebels those rights was directly to aid their cause, by giving it the moral encouragement of a great power. That the attempt of the Confederate States violently to withdraw from the Federal Union, contrary to its laws and their own oaths of allegiance, taking by force its arsenals and forts, and organising armed attacks against its property and citizens, without even the form of submitting the question to the people of those States, was pure rebellion and treason, cannot, I suppose, be questioned by any sane man for a moment. When the South shall have succeeded in their attempt and secured their independence, they will cease to be rebels and traitors.

It is only success that excuses treason and makes revolution right. But at the very outset to acknowledge that rebels are entitled to the same rights as the Government against which they are in armed revolt, especially when England was bound to that Government by treaties of commerce and amity, was, to say the least, unusual. Why the exception should be made in favour of the Southern States of America, whose whole grievance against the Federal Government was, that the Republican party then coming into power was averse to the extension of slavery, it is difficult to perceive. Such was not the course of England when Hungary raised the banner of revolt in defence of its ancient rights, when the Sonderbund strove in arms for independence, nor when the Italian States drove out their oppressors to the cry of freedom. Whatever were the private sympathies of England, they were expressed by no public act of its Government. Yet suppose, upon the outbreak of the rebellion in India by a conquered people, America had hurried to declare that she considered the Indians entitled to all the rights of belligerents; and that, deplorable as she thought the war of subjugation, her sympathies were equally divided between Nana Sahib and the English Government;—suppose she had made