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Arrest in Columbus, Ohio

Lucy E. Parsons

March 1887

Believing that your paper is published in the interest of truth, I ask for space in its columns to state briefly the facts relating to my incarceration in the Columbus prison. The venal capitalistic press has heralded the information all over the country that I was arrested for insulting the Mayor of Columbus. I never insulted the Mayor. My arrest was simply the carrying out of a conspiracy to suppress free speech. The Mayor is reported in the press as saying "he did not propose to have me preach Anarchy in Columbus, which must inevitably lead to bloodshed," and the Mayor said "the meeting is declared off."

In this connection, at this stage, it will be observed that there is no pretense that the hall had been rented under false pretenses. This evidently was an afterthought. As to my preaching "murder and incendiaries" I have this to say: that since the 13th day of last October I have lectured in sixteen States of this Union, as far East as the Atlantic seaboard and as far West as Omaha, and from Milwaukee to Louisville and Baltimore in the South, and during this time, in the course of some fifty-odd lectures, I have addressed near onto 200,000 persons, embracing people in every walk of life, yet in this vast concourse of people there is not one who can truthfully say that I ever uttered

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one word that could be construed into inciting to the commission of murder or that would bring the tinge to the cheek of the most fastidious.

In my lectures I have simply stated facts as they exist, and it will be a sad day for the American people when they supinely witness the dearest rights known to man stolen from them—rights which the founders of this Government said should not be abridged, not even by act of Congress, viz.: the right to peaceably assemble (stolen from them by the crafty use of the word Anarchy)—for, the precedent once established, the way is easy to dump every popular movement under this head, and thus effectually stifle the people's voice.

But to my subject. On Sunday, March 6, I received a letter stating that a hall had been secured for me to lecture at Columbus, Ohio, and all necessary arrangements made. Acting upon this information, I left Cincinnati on Tuesday, March 8, for Columbus, arriving there at 7 o'clock p.m. Next day, in company with two friends, I walked around the city seeing places of interest. So, remembering I was in the capital of the State of Ohio, I expressed a desire to my friends to visit the halls of legislation.

While we were in the Senate chamber a gentleman entered and informed us that he had heard I would not be permitted to speak in the hall rented for that purpose. At this announcement, as might be imagined, we were much surprised. I suggested to the friends with me that we go and ascertain if there was any foundation for the rumor. So accordingly we went from the State House building to the hall. The janitor stated that he had arranged the chairs in the hall and was putting things in order, but at noon he had received orders to permit no one but members of the State militia in the hall that evening. Upon receiving this information I suggested that we call upon the gentleman from whom the hall had been rented. We repaired to his office. On observing our entrance he became quite angry, and stated that he had rented the hall to the trades association

and not to anarchists. The gentleman accompanying us denied that he had represented himself as engaging it for the trades association. I then produced the receipt and showed it to him, and called his attention to the fact that the receipt read that the hall had been rented for March 8 to "association," and that no specified association had been mentioned. He said he didn't care, he was not going to have the anarchists speaking in that hall, etc.; that we could have the money we had paid, but he would see to it that we didn't get the hall. I said:

"Do you mean to say after you have rented me the hall you are going to prevent my using it?"

He said that was just what he meant. Then I said:

"If you understand anarchy to mean violence and disorder, you, sir, are the only anarchist I know of in Columbus just now."

We then left his office and went to the Mayor's office, one block away. As we left, the agent ran upstairs (his office was in the basement) and ordered a policeman, who seemed to be stationed there, to arrest the gentleman, myself and Mrs Lyndall. The policeman rushed up to the man and slapped him on the shoulder, as if to place him under arrest. I said:

"Don't arrest that man. He has done nothing. Besides, we are on our way to the Mayor's office."

The policeman went on with us, and by this time we had arrived at the Mayor's office; Police Court had just adjourned. I was told by one of the officers in the corridor to go into the Mayor's private office; he would be a minute. Maj. Coit, the agent from whom the hall had been rented, had reached the Mayor's office by this time, and had a few moments' private talk with the Mayor. Then the Mayor and about twenty-five police and detectives crowded into the room where myself and Mrs Lyndall were seated.

As soon as the Mayor entered, Mrs Lyndall introduced him to me. I could at once see he was much the worse for drink. I was calm as I ever was in my life, and as politely as I knew how to, I began to address him thus:

“You are the Mayor? Well, sir, I have rented a hall in which to speak tonight, but have been told that I will not be permitted to speak in it. Now, sir, I come to you, as the highest peace officer in this city, to request you to see to it that order is maintained —”

Just at this juncture, and before I could finish my sentence, he broke in, and with a flourish of his hand, said:

“I don’t want to hear anything from you. There will be no meeting in that hall tonight.”

My answer to this unexpected rejoinder was this, and only this, the venal press to the contrary notwithstanding:

“Sir, I come to you, not as a dictator, but as a servant of the people,” but before I could utter another word he said to the pack of sleuth-hounds (detectives) standing around him:

“Take her down.”

I did not know what he meant, but it seems they did, for one weighing about 200 pounds and near six feet tall jumped at and seized me by the arm and called upon another one to take me by the other arm, and as to the way they handled me, my arms bear their fingerprints to this day, and can be seen by any one. I have shown them to my friends, who were moved to tears at the evidences of their brutality, as shown by the black spots on both of my arms. They jerked my shawl off my shoulders and threw it at Mrs Lyndall, and said to her:

“Here, take this!” This was witnessed by at least fifty people in the corridor, not one of whom can truthfully say I was using any language unbecoming a lady. At this juncture, the suddenness of the onslaught and the termination of my interview with the Mayor was so different from what I anticipated, that I think I was more dazed than anything else. But what I do remember saying to those two hulks—who had torn my shawl from my shoulders and thrown it at Mrs Lyndall, as above stated, that they might the better grip my arms as in a vice, and as they dragged me downstairs—was this: “You scoundrels! Does it take two of you to carry one little woman?”

who am on trial, but free speech—and ask themselves where are their boasted liberties drifting when a petty tyrant of a Mayor can, with impunity, “declare a meeting off” and lock the speaker up on a trumped-up charge. As to the vile libel about my using “obscene language,” the thousands of my friends who know me in this and other cities, can bear witness that no language is ever used by me unbecoming a lady.

Whenever a gang of these put in an appearance—gangs numbering never less than three up to ten—the door leading into the passageway containing the dungeon in which I was confined—that great bolt in the other door flew back and they walked in and would leer at me as though I were a wild beast belonging to a menagerie. And they would laugh at me and asked “how much I liked it”; how was my “health.” Now this did not happen once, twice, thrice, but there was a continuous throng all the time I was there.

Next day following the one on which I was incarcerated, I was brought into Court, and here I found, in the same individual, complainant, prosecuting attorney, chief witness—all occupying the judicial bench to mete out “impartial” justice to me. This was no less a personage than his Honor, Mayor Walcott, of Columbus, and the kind of “justice” I received from him was that I was ordered sent to jail without a hearing, on \$300 bond, the charge being simply that of “disorderly conduct,” which was a trumped-up charge to get me behind the bars, and thus preclude the possibility of my speaking in Columbus that night—in other words a foul conspiracy to crush free speech. But suppose the charge of “disorderly conduct” was true? This very Mayor dismisses from his Court every day in the week the worst characters on a small fine.

I remained in jail all night, was well treated by the Sheriff, with the exception that he had a good many “friends” whom he, too, brought up to see me. My attorneys sued out a writ of habeas corpus and brought me before a Judge who refused to grant it, but who reduced my bail from \$300 to \$100, to stand trial the middle of April on a charge of “disorderly conduct.”

I know my communication is rather lengthy, but it is as brief as I could possibly make it and give the bare, plain facts in this remarkable case of “impartial justice.” Let the people of America read and ponder—those of them who believe the laws are administered alike for rich and poor—and in reading I hope they will lose sight of me and see the simple fact that it is not I

By this time I had been hurried downstairs and the charge of “disorderly conduct” placed opposite my name. And the reader can well imagine that this occurred in ten times less time than it takes to tell it. In fact, it was all over in three minutes.

The place I was put in for the first four hours of my incarceration, I understand from the Columbus papers, is known as the “ranch.” The “ranch” I will describe. This “ranch” consists of a long, narrow passageway (about four feet wide and twenty feet long) upon which open heavy iron doors, leading from small, dark, filthy, ill-smelling, dungeonlike cells; in fact, they are dungeons. Well, on my being thrust into the narrow passageway above described, and the iron bolt clicked into its place, denoting that I was buried for the time being from the world, the sights I beheld and what I passed through for the next twenty-one hours can never be erased from my memory, though it were possible for me to live a thousand years. I saw lying upon an indescribably filthy semblance of a quilt a young woman, not particularly bad-looking so far as facial expression went. Then sitting about the filthy, hard stone floor were four other females; there was no chair or anything else to sit upon. Standing near the barred window was another rather good-looking young woman, I should say about twenty years old. As soon as the door closed they all began to ply me with questions which ran thus:

“What are you run in for?”

“Disorderly conduct,” I answered.

“Is this your first time?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Oh, well, it won’t go very hard with you then, if it is the first time.”

“How hard do you think it will go with me?” I asked.

“Oh, if it’s the first time, \$5 and costs, and if you can show you never was in before, it won’t be that much.”

“Well, do you think I can get out on bail tonight?” I asked.

“Yes, if you have got about \$10 to put up, and if you ain’t got that much I see you have got a watch. Put that up. But don’t let ’em around here know that you’ve got much money. If you do they will soak you.”

The conversation ran on in this strain for a while, until I obtained all the information I wished; then I turned it off by asking them what they got to eat and when they got it. The answer was:

“Bread and water and salt for breakfast, nothing for dinner, and bread and water and salt for supper.”

“And is that all you have?”

“Yes,” they replied.

“And this is what you have, and you are put in here for punishment. Are you any better off when you go out?”

They all answered in chorus: “Ha! We are a sight worse. It only makes a girl worse to treat them like we are treated.”

I then began to look into the filthy, dark, little dungeons, and was about to enter one when they cried out:

“Don’t go in there! You’ll get full of bedbugs.”

“Well, where do you sleep?” I asked.

“Out here on the floor,” they answered.

“What, upon this hard, stone floor? Where are your bed-clothes?”

“We don’t have any,” was the reply.

“What, do you sleep on nothing?”

Some of them began to wish the man would come on around with the bread and salt, as they were getting hungry. I noticed, while engaged in conversation with some, that others were going to the door and talking through a little hole not much larger than a silver dollar, using the vilest language I had ever heard escape from the lips of human beings. About this time a man came to the door and opened it, and asked if we were hungry. I asked the girls if they would like a sandwich. They thanked me, and I sent out for seven—the number present—six besides myself.

Afterwards a guard came to the door and I asked him if there was not some way for me to get out, as I didn’t want to stay in that place all night. He said he thought so. I asked him how much would be required. He said \$10 was what was usually required, and if I had that amount and would leave it with the desk officer he thought I could get out. I told him I not only had \$10, but a \$50 watch also, and to go and tell the parties in control I would leave both. I never saw him after.

I had now been in this den (which must be seen to be appreciated) about three hours. During all this time it seemed that all the vile, base, low men in Columbus had been admitted, and peeked in and carried on with the creatures in that den—soldiers from the Barracks included—and the language they used must be heard to be believed. About 10 o’clock p.m., a guard came to the door and ordered me to take my things and follow him.

My “things” consisted of my shawl, which had been snatched from me in the afternoon, and which Mrs Lyndall had returned to me at my request. I was conducted into a narrow cell, or rather dungeon, about five feet long and four feet wide. In this insufferably hot hole I was kept locked until 4 o’clock next day, without one thing to sleep on except some oaken slats which were held together by iron bolts and suspended by iron chains. Mrs Lyndall, when she called the next morning, asked the guard why I was not permitted to come out in the passageway and exercise and have fresh air. The reply was that orders had been given that I was to be kept locked in. None of my friends were permitted to see me all the time I was incarcerated, although some thirty or forty called—none but Mrs Lyndall, who was permitted to bring my meals. But every loafing detective and ward bummer in the city, every disreputable male brute who wished to come and lean against the iron grating of the dark, hot, little sweat box I was locked in could do so.