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Prattle

A Transient Record of Individual Opinion as Announced by Ambrose Bierce

From the organ of my esteemed friend Mr. Joseph Pulitzer (who is naturally interested in the subject) I learn that the Texan Legislature has been considering a bill that is of some importance to liars. It provides that if a man call another a liar and the latter disclose his sense of the situation by putting a head on the former the State will hold him guiltless of offense. It is not stated if the bill passed; probably not: Texan public opinion naturally view it with alarm as an attempt to introduce alien and doubtful-customs by substitution of the fist for the bowie-knife. It appears, though, that several states of the Union have laws against calling a person a liar. In Virginia, Kentucky and Arkansas, it is a misdemeanor punishable by fine. In Mississippi, South Carolina and West Virginia it is ground for a civil action for damages. Georgia makes it a felony if it is untrue. What I am coming to is this: in none of these states, apparently, and nowhere else, is it either a misdemeanor or a felony to be a liar. That seems rather queer, doesn't it? I wonder why it is so.

Now that I think of it, I seem always to have observed (and possibly the phenomenon has not been overlooked by all others) that the man whom the word "liar" maddens to crime is commonly not maddened to anything in particular by the consciousness of being one.

The philosophy of the matter is that truthfulness, like all the other virtues, takes rank as such because in the long run, and in the greater number of instances, it is expedient. Whatever is, generally speaking, expedient, that is to say, conducive to the welfare of the race, comes to be considered a virtue; whatever, with only the same limitations, does not promote, but obstructs, the welfare of the race is held to be a vice. Morality has, and can have, no other basis than expediency. A virtue is not an end: it is a means to an end—the end is that only conceivable welfare, happiness. To increase the sum of happiness—that is the only worthy ambition, the only creditable motive. Whatever does that is right; whatever decreases the sum of happiness is wrong. An act that does neither the one nor the other has no moral character at all. That an act can be right or wrong without regard to its consequences—that is to say, its effect upon the sum of happiness, is to a sane understanding an unthinkable proposition. It is difficult to imagine a world in which happiness would commonly be promoted by falsehood, but in such a world falsehood would indubitably be considered, and rightly considered, a virtue, and to be called a truth-teller would be resented as an insult – especially by those most irreclaimably addicted to the habit. In such a world as that my enemies and critics would be revered as saints during life, and after death worshiped as gods.

Another fact established by the court is that Eagan and Alger divide the responsibility of entering into a contract for the delivery of refrigerated beef, which, it is now admitted on all hands, was grossly improper.—Esteemed through Republican Contemporary.

Say that again, please, neighbor: I didn't quite catch it. What is it that they divide?

“In any other country,” says an Algerine contemporary, “Gen. Miles would have been shot for insubordination.” In this country he is spared for a slower punishment: the defied authorities are engaged in making the unruly scoundrel president.

If Gen. Otis has forbidden further negotiations between Spain and the Filipinos for ransom of the Spanish prisoners, it is likely that there is more behind the interdiction than mere reluctance to fight a full Filipino treasury. In extruding Spain from the islands we charged ourselves with release of the prisoners if possible; we stand to them *in loco parentis*—for the time being and the purpose to be accomplished they are Americans—with the Spanish accent when they swear at us. But we are unable to free them by force and have no prisoners ourselves to exchange for them. Under these untoward circumstances it is hardly possible that Gen. Otis, or President McKinley, would for a slight military advantage take the action reported. There are few Americans—civilians or soldiers—who would not willingly accept any peril likely to be entailed by ransom of these despairing men whom the fortunes of war have left in a predicament so cruel.

I fancy the matter stands about this way. The Spanish government was unable to pay the ransom demanded, yet afraid to refuse to pay it—afraid of domestic dissension, for the new ministry is not any too strong and the Spanish people have liberation of the prisoners much at heart. It is distinctly to our advantage that the ministry remain in power; we want some responsible authority with which to deal in settlement of the many delicate and perilous questions growing out of the recent war. What is more natural than that in his distress the Spanish premier should turn to us to help him break off negotiations with Aguinaldo, by forbidding their continuance? I don't say that that is certainly the explanation of Gen. Otis' action, but if it have not at the back of it some better motive than a shadowy “military necessity” it is inexpressibly ungenerous and unchivalric.

Mr. Joseph Chamberlain says that the gigantic task of tropical civilization seems to him in a special sense the mission of the Anglo-Saxon race. Mr. Chamberlain is indubitably right to this extent; tropical civilization is a gigantic task—a task so gigantic that God has nowhere been able to accomplish it. True, there was nothing in it for Him, and the tropics are in it for the Anglo-Saxon.

The chief point of difference between the Canadian and the American commissioners was the matter of an Alaskan sea-port for the Dominion. They finally agreed to arbitration, but split on the question of choosing an umpire, and all their negotiations came to naught. This is one more instance of failure proving the absurdity of international arbitration. An agreement to arbitrate a question pushes aside that question and raises a number of others, which in most instances are as delicate and difficult as the original one, and require the same righteousness, courtesy and forbearance. If the Anglo-American Commission had attempted to arrange the details for submitting the choice of an arbitrator to arbitration it would have been in loyal and

logical harmony with the spirit of this modern fad. International arbitration proposes to lay a demon by raising a devil.

I wonder if the author of the introduction to the alleged poem of Poe in last Sunday's "Examiner" had an adequate sense of the supreme importance of the work he had in hand. If that poem is Poe's its discovery and publication are, in my judgment, the most interesting event of the past two years—and I do not fail to remember the "Maine" and all that followed. For be it known to the man of action and affairs laying sturdily about him to undo the work of others—his own to be undone later—that art and literature are the only things of permanent interest in this world. Kings and conquerors rise and fall; great armies move across the stage of history and disappear in the wings; mighty empires are evolved and dissolved; religions, political systems, civilizations flourish, die and, except in so far as great authors may choose to perpetuate their memory, are forgotten and all is as before. But the thought of a great writer passes from civilization to civilization and is never lost, although his known work, his very name, may perish. You cannot unthink a thought of Homer, but the deeds of Agamemnon are long undone, and the only value that he has, the only interest, is that he serves as material for poets. Of Caesar's work only that of the pen survives. If a statue by Phidias, or a manuscript by Catullus, were discovered today the nations of Europe would be bidding against one another for its possession tomorrow—as one day the nations of Africa may bid for a newly discovered manuscript of Poe. Such things are about all that the world really cares for in the end; those who make them are not altogether without justification in regarding themselves as masters in the house of life and all others as their servitors. In the babble and clamor, the pranks and antics, of its countless incapables the tremendous dignity of the profession of letters is overlooked; but when casting a retrospective eye into "the dark backward and abysm of time" to where beyond these voices there is the peace of desolation we note the majority of the few immortals and compare them with the pigmy figures of their contemporary kings, warriors and men of action generally—when across the silent battle-fields and hushed (-) where the dull destinies of nations were determined, nobody cares how, we hear,

like ocean on a western beach.

The surge and thunder of the Odyssey –

then we appreciate literature at its true value; and how little worthwhile seems all else with which Man is pleased to occupy his fussy soul and futile hands!

I am very far from saying that I think the poem mentioned was written by Poe. Before passing judgment on that point I should like more light on the roundabout and somewhat mysterious way in which it came into possession of "The Examiner"—light which leaving the "way" no less roundabout, if that is interesting, would make it far less mysterious. As to internal evidence—evidence inhering in the poem itself—that is strongly in favor of Poe's authorship. If not written by him it was written by his peer in that kind of writing—by one who has so thoroughly mastered the method that there is nowhere a slip or fault. Of all the clever imitations of Poe which it has fallen to my lot to read, this if an imitation is the surest, the noblest, the most essential. The writer, if not Poe, has caught the trick of Poe's method utterly, in both form and manner, the trick of his thought, the trick of his feeling and the trick of that intangible something which eludes nomenclature, description and analysis. But all this is insufficient: I must ask Mr. Millard for more light upon the extraneous circumstances of his astonishing find. He need not

fear any dimming of his glory, for distinctly greater than the feat of hearing “a voice from the grave of Edgar Allen Poe” is the feat of discovering a ventriloquist with that kind of voice.

WASHINGTON, March 11. – The first four of the twenty semi-annual notes recently given by the Central Pacific Railroad Company in settlement of the Government’s claim against the road, amounting to nearly \$12,000,000, were anticipated and paid into the United States Sub-Treasury at New York yesterday.

Mr. Collis P. Huntington, do you remember that on a certain morning, when you sat in the reading room of a Washington hotel, a gentlemen apprised you of my arrival in town as a representative of this paper? Do you recollect that you had the exceeding civility to ask him my price? Possibly, sir, you may not have forgotten that he returned to you later, telling you that he was authorized to say that my price was the amount of your company’s indebtedness to the government, and that as I might be out of town when you were ready to “fix” me, the sum might be handed to my friend, the Treasurer of the United States. Thank you, Mr. Huntington; it is a real pleasure to blackmail a gentleman so “dead-easy” as you.

The supply of Filipinos must be inexhaustible: in every “battle” our troops load the sagging crust of the earth with cones and pyramids of slain (losing sometimes as many as two or three lives themselves) but the war goes merrily on with full ranks all round. Aguinaldo must be a kind of modern Deucalion who creates men by flinging pebbles behind him. None of our soldiers, so far, have been struck by the pebbles.

The “claims” of Mr. S. W. Booth of “The Call” to a seat in the Oakland City Council were handsomely acknowledged in the recent election: he got 373 votes. They were not enough by one or two to elect him but they proved that he ran. His failure is deeply regretted (even by himself) for it is said that every man is good for something, and it may be that City Counciling is what God had in mind when the sluggard was created.

To Certain Correspondents:

A. H. V. - I have no particular use for manuscripts, but plenty of use for my time. Under the circumstances, patience in those who send them might, I think, be rated a virtue.

Ruby. – Owing to lack of space I can print but one stanza of your admirable poem – which is to be framed:

There are men that in the pulpit perch
And say you are damned if you don’t go to church.
If that is the case what has become
Of Franklin, Jefferson and Washington?
There are some Christians that I know,
If they get to Heaven I don’t want to go.

“A Subscriber.” – I do not agree with you that “the debasement of a country depends on those who govern it,” nor do I think that Napoleon thought so, though that is of no consequence. In a republic, at least, the country is basely governed only when the people are base. Aren’t there

about enough of them, don't you think, to have the kind of government they want, administered by the kind of men they want?

L. J. – It is impossible for me to answer, “by mail” or otherwise, questions about my books. Ask the booksellers; they know if they know their business.

M. with a H. – O, yes, I favor anything that will “uplift the workers” without lifting them away from work. That is why I think fairly well of the present regime which has lifted the artificer out of labor, the laborer out of slavery, the slave out of bestiality, the beast out of reptility--everywhere and all the time, promotion. And it has done all this without trying, and without speeching and spittling on the street-corners. As to the dreams of universal prosperity which you sons of hope and poetry are pleased to cherish, I favor, too, anything that will make them come to pass—for example, a new earth, a new race to people it and a new God to govern it.

G. B. – What do I “think” of Mr. Hermann Oelrichs, whose long illustrated poem was printed last Sunday? Well, sir, after a careful and dispassionate reading of the verses I think him a very wealthy man.