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The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent.

Said Mr. Andrew Carnegie in an address to a young men's bible class:

"The cry goes up to abolish poverty, but it will indeed be a sad day when poverty is no longer with us. Where will your inventor, your artist, your philanthropist, your reformer, in fact, anybody of note, come from then? They all come from the ranks of the poor. God does not call his great men from the ranks of the rich."

That is not altogether true. The notable men do not all come from the ranks of the poor, though Mr. Carnegie does, and that gives him the right to point out the sweet "uses of adversity," as did Shakespeare and many others. The rich supply their quota of men naturally great, but through lack of a sufficiently sharp incentive many of these give us less than the best that is in them. When God is giving out genius he does not study the assessment rolls.

As to the rest, Mr. Carnegie is quite right. A world without poverty would be a world of incapables. Poverty may be due to one or more of many causes, but in a large, general way it is nature's punishment for incapacity and improvidence. Paraphrasing the poet, we may say that some are born poor, some achieve poverty and some have poverty thrust upon them—"by the wicked rich," quoth the demagogue. Dear, delicious, old demagogue!—whatever should we do if all were too rich to support him, and his voice were heard no more in the land?

I dare say Mr. Carnegie was not unaware, Scot though he is, that his views on poverty lent themselves felicitously to the purposes of the vigilant humorist and invited the ridicule which they would have escaped had he uttered them while he himself was poor; for, in popular appraisal of the value of what is said a detaining factor is the character or condition of the person who says it. When the devil is dead that matter will be ordered otherwise. Frequently a curse to the individual, poverty is a blessing to the race, not only because by effacing the unfit (Heaven rest them!) it aids in survival of the fit; not only because it is a school of fortitude, industry, perseverance, ingenuity and many another virtue, but because it directly begets such warm and elevating sentiments as compassion, generosity, self-denial, thoughtfulness for others—in a word, altruism. It does not beget enough of all this, but think what we should be with none of it! If there were no helplessness there would be no helpfulness. That pity is akin to love is sufficiently familiar to the ear, but how profound a truth it is no one seems to suspect. Why, pity is the sole origin of love. We love our children, not because they are ours, but because they are helpless; they require our tenderness and care, as do our domestic animals and our pets. Man loves woman because she is weak; woman loves man, not because he strong, but because, for all his strength, he is needy; he needs her. Minor affections and good will have a similar origin. Friendship came of mutual protection and assistance. Among the well-to-do hospitality is vestigial; primarily it was compassion for the wayfarer, the homeless, the hungry. If among our "rude forefathers" none had needed food and shelter we should have today no "entertaining," no social pleasures of any kind. Modern life would be barren of all the social graces and sentiments distinguishing it from existence in Kansas. Russell Sage would be the typical American gentleman, and the Bradley-Martins, who were driven from their country for pouring money into the pockets of their industrious countrymen and countrywomen, would be with us, inhospitably popular and meanly safe.

Poverty is one kind of helplessness. It is an appeal to what within us is “the likest God.” In its relief we are made acquainted with ingratitude. Ingratitude, like spanking, or ridicule, or disappointment in love, hurts without harming. It is a bitter tonic, but wholesome and by habit agreeable. Look at Mr. Carnegie himself, “after taking.” Is he the worse for it? No; with each successive dose he grows visibly stronger to endure another. Obviously he has learned to like the stuff—pays out millions a year for it—has paid some ten millions already and seems only to have begun. (True, there is a good deal of dissatisfaction with the form of his benevolence, and he ought, I suppose, to give to the poor of this generation only, and give them nothing but what they can eat up.) This, therefore, is how we demonstrate one of the advantages of poverty: Without poverty there could be no benevolence; without benevolence no ingratitude—whereby human nature would lack its crowning glory and supreme credential.

I go further than Mr. Carnegie: not only do I think poverty necessary to progress and civilization, but I am persuaded that crime, too, is indispensable to the moral and material welfare of the race. In the ever needful effort to limit and suppress it, in the immemorial and incessant war between the good and the evil forces of this world, in the constant vigilance necessary to the security of life and property, in the strenuous task of safeguarding the young, the weak and the unfortunate against the cruelty and rapacity ever lurk to prey upon them—in all these forms and phases of the struggle for existence are generated and developed such higher virtues and capabilities as we have. A country without crime would breed a population without sense. In a few generations of security its people would suffer a great annual mortality by falling over their own feet. They would be devoured by their cows and enslaved by their dogs.

The knowledge of how to go in when it rains would be a lost art. In brief, all that is malign in human nature is as wholesome, as needful, as “educational” as all that is malign in our physical environment. Poverty, crime, vice, folly, storm, fire, earthquake, inundation, cold, wild beasts and snakes—all are teachers in nature’s great training school. Does it follow that we should cease to resist them—should encourage and promote them? Not at all; their best beneficence is found in our struggle to suppress, overcome or evade them. The hope of eventual success is itself a spiritual good of no mean magnitude. Let all the chaplains of our forces encourage and hope and pray for that success. But for my part, if I thought victory imminent or possible I should sneak away into the bush and put up a petition for a serious but indecisive reverse.

Believing himself a victim of religious persecution, polygamist Roberts will not accept the decision of the Gentile House of Representatives, but declares that he will carry his case to the Supreme Court. Very well; that is his undoubted right, but has he intelligently canvassed the situation? Does he think that the justices of that court are Mormons?

One may hold with Senator Beveridge that, having acquired the Philippine islands (by what means I would rather not say), it is our duty to keep them, yet not hold with Senator Beveridge that our right to do so is derived from a divine mandate. It must be comforting and fine to think that way, but some of us are willing that Americans shall forego the spectacular advantage of strutting and swelling as a new Chosen people. An inflated turkey-cock is not the most pleasing type of expansionist.

When an American is heard in loud and hot advocacy of the cause of the Boers—“the sacred cause of liberty,” and the rest of it—ask him some of the following questions:

When did the Boers first come under British rule?

How?

Was it with their own consent?

What were the circumstances of their secession?

Was it because Great Britain abolished negro slavery among them?

After their “great trek” (mention date) upon lands known to them to be claimed, by what nation did they settle?

Upon whom did they afterward call to save them from anarchy, bankruptcy and eventual extermination by the natives?

Did they then voluntarily renounce their independence and return to a former allegiance?

To whom?

Having been rescued at a great expenditure of blood and treasure (whose) did they, or did they not, repudiate their solemn pledges, set up negro slavery again and surprise and slaughter small garrisons of their deliverers?

On what conditions were they given virtually a new independence?

In whom, by solemn treaty, was it then agreed that the government should be vested—in themselves or in the “inhabitants” of the country?

What proportion of the inhabitants of the country six months ago were Boers?

What proportion of the land did the Uitlanders own by purchase from them?

What proportion of the taxation was borne by the Uitlanders?

Had they, as “inhabitants of the country,” any part in its government?

Where and what is the evidence of the British government’s or any British officials’ connivance in the Jameson raid?

In the course of peaceful and orderly negotiations, did either party to the present war suddenly issue an impossible and insulting ultimatum, and almost before the other could reject it, invade and “annex” the other’s territory?

Which party, if either, was the less prepared for war, and therefore, presumably, the less desirous of it?

I do not say that any, or all, the foregoing questions, if answered truthfully, would “fix” the blame for the South African war; I only say that the person who cannot, or will not, answer them, is intellectually or morally incompetent to discuss the matter, or hold any “sympathies” either way. Popular “sympathies” have no basis in worth. They are the feeling of the average man, who, not having been taught to think, cannot be trusted to feel. When one’s heart gets in to one’s head it is the sole tenant. As a distinguished writer has pointed out, we recently sympathized with the modern “Greeks” (a scurvy race) because the ancient Greeks, to whom they are nowise related, produced great works of art. We had this justification—their enemies, the Turks, have another religion than ours, and we had so long vilified them that we had come to believe in our own calumnies. If a nation would preserve the purity of its convictions it should not tell the same set of lies for more than a century at a time. Excessive calumny deceives no one but the calumniator. Nothing is less perilous than moderation in lying; no one is overcome by the strength of his own restraint.

I should like to ask the audible brotherhood of Boerophiles a few questions of another sort, irrelevant to their own convictions, but closely related to their “sympathies”:

What is a Boer?

Are the Boers a pure race, or a mixed?

Are any of them Dutch?

What proportion of them has negro blood?

What proportion can read and write?

They are religious—are they also moral?

Are they kind masters to their slaves, or do they cruelly mistreat them?

Are they, like other isolated peoples, insupportably conceited, believing themselves the salt of the earth and others scum?

Are they the Kalmucks of Africa?

I should not advise the rising young Boerophile to answer these questions off-hand; he is likely to go wrong if he does. The best way would be to wait until some veteran of his faith, newly pitchforked into Congress, with a smell of the woods and templed hills in his hair, proposes a resolution of sympathy with the "embattled farmers". Then ask the questions and let him do the answering. It will be merry to note the star-spangled stammer of that worthy man.

The Rev. Mr. Sheldon, author of a book whose influence is felt hither and yon, has undertaken to conduct for six days a Topeka secular newspaper "as Christ would do it." The main thing is to remove it from Topeka. He will first take it out on the prairie, and then on the man that got up the scheme.

The following anecdote has not the distinction of engaging my belief: Mr. Richard Harding Davis, the illustrious author (who prudently ducks his head in passing beneath the Dewey arch), recently visited Asheville, N. C. One day he was strolling along a road with a friend when an enormous meteorite shot smoking from the skies, "with hideous, ruin and combustion down," and struck the earth somewhere with an impact that shook the entire frame of things and a thunderous explosion which it required the better part of a minute for Mr. Davis to reach. His companion was speechless with terror, but not so the hero of Santiago de Cuba. He simply fashioned his visage to the cut of his contempt, and, looking upwards, said: "Never touched me."

More successfully directed it would have deprived the world of a most charming writer.

Brigadier-General (of volunteers) James H. Wilson, commanding a military department in Cuba, has been revisiting the earth and uttering his mind anent the Tropicans over whom he holds dominion. According to him two-thirds of the Cubans are white, and all are saints excepting those that are angels. In a mixed population like that there must be, one would suppose, elements of discord and contention. If the two classes are nearly equal in numbers they will naturally fight for supremacy as soon as our troops are withdrawn. With a view to preventing "the effusion of blood" (dear, familiar old disaster), it may be as well to occupy the island with mortals for a long time. By the way, which of the two Cuban factions does a good man join who dies in Porto Rico?

It matters very little whether the wealthy Mr. Clark of Montana be given a seat in the United States Senate or not, but investigation of his claim to it has brought out two "definitions" of capital importance. Two witnesses confessed to having said "the thing which is not," but in acknowledging their indiscretion they did not admit that they lied. "A lie," said one, "is a false statement made to one who has a right to know the truth." Said the other: "A statement is not a lie if made with the understanding that it is false,"—he means when both stater and statee so understand it. To a delinquent discernment it might seem that in this latter case the moral character of such a statement is of no consequence, for it is easy to refrain from telling an untruth by which nobody is deceived. But is it easy? Do the masters and apprentices of fiction find it easy to refrain from writing stories that are not true? Could Mr. Kipling stop if he tried? If Mr. Marion Crawford did not turn out his regular two novels a year would he not be sick? For the life of her could Gladys Imogen Jukes stay her red right hand from fabrication of love tales for "the salesladies' delight?" Lives there a man with soul

so dead as to write untrue stories which fool nobody if he could help it? Driven by some imperious necessity of his nature, man must say the thing that is not. Those of us who are not in trade, politics or the professions naturally take to writing fiction and history.

As to the first of these two negative definitions of the verb "to lie" I am in entire agreement with it, having myself many times in speech and print urged that truth is too rare and precious to be wasted on the unworthy. Seasonably and unseasonably I have acclaimed this gospel of moral economy and pounded the pulpit in its propagation. Vox in deserto! None would heed. Now that a co-apostle has formally declared it before a committee of the United States Senate, I am not without a hope that it will prosper in the hearts of men; that its light will crown them like a visible benediction and be as a lamp to their feet; that eventually it may supersede all other and inferior religions, binding the whole race into one holy brotherhood—the Universal Church of Judicious Inveracity.

Count Boni—Say, we've no counts here,
(In democratic ways we're schooled)
They cannot breathe our atmosphere—
You're simply Mr. Anna Gould.
So, Mr. Anna Gould, is't not
A most peculiar circumstance
That curiosity is hot
About your loss in games of chance?
Six hundred thousand dollars gone?
Why, that's a trifle which
You'd Scorn. Yet all this roar is on
Because you are so reeking rich.
This world's a crazy little ball;
We worship Mammon, lip and lung.
If some poor wretch had lost his all
No ear would open to his tongue.
To rank we never, never do
Bow down. But when the fires have cooled
On Sycophancy's altars you
Can still be Mr. Anna Gould.