

San Francisco Examiner
January 1, 1899

Prattle

A Transient Record of Individual Opinion

Hobson came and Hobson went and the man-worshippers had their will of him, to the permanent damage, it is feared, of their supple spines. I dare say it is right to do homage to—well, almost anyone upon whose lucky bowl the breeze of opportunity has blown the laurel. I suppose, indeed, it is not only proper, but creditable, to flex the leg and bow the “corrigible neck” before “heroes” of all the various kinds. I do not deny that it is done in the public interest, even; I only wonder how anyone can do it.

But if voluntary prostration before “greatness” is incomprehensible what suitable word is left for the act of assisting at one’s own exaltation? Doubtless a man attending a reception or other show given in his honor—deliberately and in cold blood placing himself at the focal point of convergent streams of admiration for the avowed purpose of letting them beat upon him—can explain and justify his grotesque performance in a dozen ways intelligible to his own understanding and to that of his least self-satisfied adorer. It is no great feat to persuade oneself that one is not pleased by adulation, but only concerned to gratify the adulators. Just why the adulators ought to be gratified the distinguished person accepting their homage probably does not think to ask himself. For my part, I know of but one reason: while worshiping another they are not adoring themselves.

By the way, I observe that Mayor Phelan has a beautiful defense of Hobson in the matter of kissing: it seems the poor fellow kissed only a kinswoman or two and a few children—whom he could not without discourtesy deny. That is very satisfactory. Unfortunately it differs rather radically from the plea set up a few days before by Hobson himself, who defended his practice by pointing out that the late General Lee did the same thing without reproach or dissent. To feel the full impudence of that plea one does not need to have fought McClellan at Seven Pines, nor Grant at Petersburg; the most bigoted loyalist of the civil war will perceive a certain imperfection in the parallel between Lieutenant Hobson and the late General Lee. For one thing, General Lee did not make speeches.

Well, Hobson is away on the wild waters of the womanless deep, where there is nothing better to kiss than the mermaids, and nobody to object but the mermen. Let us remember forever the courage with which he faced his osculatory countrywomen, and forget his failure to close the harbor’s mouth at Santiago and his own everywhere else. Let us rear a monument a mile high on the spot where he began payment for his fame to the first woman that presented her bill, and inscribe it from top to bottom with the wise and beautiful sentiments that he did not utter. And at

its base let all the ragtag-and-bobtail rout of hero-worshippers who have been happy to shine by reflection in his light, and get their names into the newspapers alongside of his, be gently but firmly and in all Christian charity knocked on the head like bees.

Apropos of heroes, the Bishop of London has been addressing the Social and Political Educational league about them, and sums up his thought as follows: "History, if properly read, tends to show that, after all, the great man is the good man." If that means that the good man only is really great there is nothing to say against it; but if it means that men of uncommon intellectual power are more likely to be good than others are, the history that tends to show it may indeed be properly read, but it is certainly not properly written. It has been colored by prejudices and prepossessions, by ignorance of facts or faulty deductions from facts known, or by cold, calculated lying. The appeal to history will be conclusive when history is written by men who are themselves great and good. As matters are, the more of it you read, and with the clearer understanding, the less of it you believe. Persons who "appeal to history" seem seldom to understand that they are flourishing a decision of judges without a mandate, of whose fitness and veracity they have no knowledge but the loosest kind of hearsay evidence. A fruitful source of error in history is the contagion of biography—and biographers are the most hardy and impenitent liars of the entire literary outfit. Nine times in ten the biographer begins his work as an enthusiastic admirer of his subject—otherwise he would hardly undertake the work. That fact in itself strongly discredits his competency as a witness. In the remaining instance he commonly writes himself into that frame of mind in the first hundred pages and all the rest must be taken with allowance. The lives and characters of the notable personages of the world as portrayed in history are about as "like" as a portrait by a fashionable photographer or a famous painter. They are John Doe as he may have wished he was after gathering the advantages of being otherwise. I know of but two historical personages who were at once great and good: Adam, who had not an enemy in the world and Louis the Eleventh of France, who having only such as he had overlooked, forgave all those that he had remembered.

Young Rosser, how goes it?
They say that your father
Is dead as a stone down there.
He had, the Lord knows it,
A good deal of bother
And several sorts of care.

His son an assassin.
Unfairly acquitted.
With further indictments to face.
He'd little, alas, in
The world when he flitted
A-whimpering into space.

You rascal, young Rosser,
How like you the outlook?
Clear out-in the grave go hide.
We'd all cry "Ha-ha," sir,

To see your pug snout look
Steel blue, with a coin either side.

Assemblyman Bliss, known to the police as an associate of vegetables, and strongly suspected of botany, declares that he will introduce a bill making the eschscholtzia the state flower of California. Assemblyman Bliss, permit me to do you homage. I cultivate a fairly satisfactory quality of nonsense myself, but in all the essentials of forthright immortal idiocy you excel me as the ring-eared boning beats the domestic chipwip. State flower, indeed!-how, pray, does the state need a flower? What is a state flower, and what makes it that? And if we are to have a state flower and live up to it will you cruelly deny us the advantages of a state quadruped, a state bird, a state reptile, a state fish and a state mollusk? Will you not honor the senior branch of your own family by conferring official recognition upon the ass? Shall we not confer letters patent of nobility upon the fly-up-the-creek, the horn-toad, the catfish and the clam? I know that a prime lot of sentimentaliters and intolerable—stocky women and pigeon-toed men with long hair—have long “advocated” solemn fooling in behalf of the vegetable whose name is pronounced with a mouthful of mush and not otherwise, but I had supposed its disagreeable protagonists had yielded their necks to the great two-handed sword of the Dissuader from Twaddle, and slept with the rude helmet. This revival proves that Twaddle from everlasting to everlasting, and shows that where ignorance is Bliss ’tis jolly to be wise.

Kansas has thrown up another curio: Governor-elect Stanley declares that he will not sign the death-warrant of a gentleman who had the unhappiness to murder his father. His reason is that he is opposed to the death penalty—wherein he differs from the condemned man, who inflicted it for so trivial an offense as paternity. Capital punishment may or may not be right, but it does seem odd that anyone should for a moment doubt the expediency of hanging a Kansas man.

From a paper read at the convention of the California Council of Education I take the following confession:

Our work is weakest in the section of poetry and fiction and in the sense of what is flitting and beautiful in literary form.

Still, we are making progress. I am told that in some of the highest schools Sir Walter Scott’s poems are read as teaching the geography of Scotland. You see we already know what poetry is for.

It is ascertained beyond a doubt that the plague in India is spread mainly by religious pilgrims and rats. A bounty of half an anna each is now paid for slain rats, but nothing as yet for slain pilgrims. Sanitation in India moves slowly, impeded by prejudices of the people.

For an immediate publication is announced “Strategy and Tactics at Santiago de Cuba.” There were no strategy and tactics at Santiago de Cuba; there was a contest of endurance between Famine and Pestilence.

Eagan and Miles, two soldiers brave,
Now spring into the fray
With dreadful energy! God save

Their enemies to-day!

They charge, they, stamp, they strike, they shout—
The country's all aroar!
Each laying sturdily about
Provides abundant gore.

What fires their military might
To deeds beyond belief?
It is each other that they fight—
The cause of battle—beef.

To Certain Correspondents:

E. B. T.—I'll return the stamp you enclosed if you'll send another to pay postage on it, but I've no time to reply by letter to everyone who invites me to work for him for nothing.

Le Roy Pickering—No, I am not "a very good man, nor a very brave man," but I'll bet my leg that I could write a letter that would be just as coarse and vulgar as yours, yet not a word misspelled.

J. R.—The line that you propose would not "indicate" anything; it is devoid of sense and reminds me of William Greer Harrison, a forgotten poet who wrote somewhere about 1895.

J. R.—I refuse to answer, on the ground that my answer might tend to convict me of preferring your prose to your poetry.

H. S. K.—Excuse me; perhaps it is wise to pronounce it as your countrymen do—if you are American, making it rhyme with "place"; if English, with "sauce," or "saws," or "cross," or "was" (if you know how that is pronounced) or any old thing—whatever way will best serve your personal or political interest.

C. M. M. – Why do I not "denounce that particular kind of sin." Because I am myself addicted to it.

Senor Sagasta signifies his solemn conviction that America is guilty of levity. Si, senor, we take your misfortunes less seriously than you do yourselves. It is true that America is somewhat over-given to joking. It is true, that Spain is not a joker. She is a joke.

Concerning the Nicaragua Canal project the London "Times," pointing out that under the Clayton-Bulwer treaty Great Britain possesses equal rights with the United States, adds:

"But if the freedom of the water-way were secured to ships of all nations, as in the case of the Suez Canal, we do not see what object we should have in standing strictly upon claims which originated when the circumstances were altogether different."

From similar utterances of other English newspapers (which have the national peculiarity of representing enlightened public opinion and further enlightening it) it is obvious that "The Times" expresses the true British feeling in the matter. Some of our own newspapers and politicians are trying to make it appear, first, that Great Britain has no rights in the premises and, second, that she is putting obstacles in the way of ours—demanding a high price for assent to the canal, and so forth. That is characteristic of their species. The smoke of the last gun fired in the Spanish war had hardly blown away when they set about creating a new soul under the rotting

ribs of the discreditable old Anglophobia, six months dead and damned. Doubtless they will soon be in full cry again, and before the close of the present session of Congress the dear old familiar shout, "British gold!" will go ringing through the Capitol like an audible bad odor, and we shall see the printed words spotting all the silliest newspapers of the land. As a hope of escape from this dismal outlook we have the prospect of death.

In an Eastern court a plaintiff is testing the right of a museum to sell presented exhibits. General Michel Henri de Young is watching the case with assiduity and concern: the decision will fix the permanent possession and power to please of the bedstead upon which Napoleon could have slept if he had wanted to, the old boot in whose pristine shine his face is thought to have been reflected and the tumbrel in which he was drawn to the guillotine by Charlotte Corday.

Gomez. – Señor, have they all gone?

Brooke. – Every mother's ugly son of them. After four centuries of oppression Cuba is free!

G. – How charming! Can we ever sufficiently thank our good friends, los Americanos? Surely the dear God will reward them!

B. – Don't mention it, old man: we shall collect the revenues.

G. – Ah, you will assume that labor? It will be what you call no peekneek and the country is so desolated! The sums will be small.

B. – Maybe we shall find a way to increase them – martial law is fruitful in expedients.

G. – There will hardly be time, señor, during the American occupation; the new Government of Cuba Libre will come forth in a night, like a young giant, and relieve you of the cares of state ere you fairly have settled into the seats of the mighty. How enchanting the prospect!

B. – You dance well for so old a chap.

G. – Pardon, señor – my spirits are so exorbitant!

B. – Exuberant. (*Enter an Orderly with a letter bearing a large seal*) Hello! – something from the President.

G. (*Uncovering*) – El Presidente? God o' my soul! And I have the distinguished honor to behold it! Señor, I salute you and retire.

B. – Hold on; let's see what Mac says. (*Reads.*)

"General, you will proceed at once to the sanitary improvement of Havana, according to the plans of the late Colonel Waring. It is thought that this will not require more than ten years."

G. – Ten years! – todos santos!

B. – (*Reading*) – "The Bureau of Military Roads, Railways and Telegraphs estimates that a system of intercommunication necessary to establishment of self-government and public security can be completed in twenty years if due diligence—"

G. – Madre de Dios! Twenty years! And I am seventy-five!

B. (*Reading*) – "It is believed that by fifty years the Island will so far have recovered from the ravages of war (recuperation being rapid in tropical countries) that nothing will be wanting to the prosperity of her gallant people but such general education and final revision of the tariff as will eventually fit them for whatever political condition it may please an all-wise Providence to..." (*Gomez falls in a convulsion*) "...accord them."

Orderly. (*Saluting*) – The colored gentleman has swallowed his teeth, sir.

Extract from a prize story in a popular magazine:

Progressing to the outward extremity of the pier, she made arrangements for her demise by laying the letter on a prominent object, whence it would be sure to be discovered. Then approaching the edge and gluing her eyes to the black and icy waters, she gave way to the gloomiest forebodings. At that moment her ear was arrested by human voices. "I'm sure she directed her course toward this point," said one. "Then I trust that success will crown our efforts to forestall any unadvisable action on her part," said the other. The familiar words thrilled her to the core! A moment later she was locked in the arms of the father that bore her, and so they remained for a considerable period, with tears in each other eyes.

"Ours is a Christian Army"; so he said
A regiment of bangomen who led.
"And ours a Christian Navy," added he
Who sailed a thunder-junk upon the sea.
Better they know than men of peace can do
What is an army and a navy, too.
Pray God there may be sent them by-and-by
The knowledge what a Christian is, and why.
For somewhat lamely the conception runs
Of a brass-buttoned Jesus firing guns.