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Prattle

A Transient Record of Individual Opinions

I respectfully submit that we are making something too much of this “hero” business. It looks as if it would end, as it logically might, in declaring ourselves a nation of heroes, every individual an astonishing example of courage and devotion. Why should we not perpetuate the memory of this war by revising our titles of courtesy, and instead of the mean and meaningless Mister, Master, Missis (or Missus) and Miss call ourselves Hero Smith, Heroling Jones, Heroine Brown and Heroinette Robinson? Conveniently abbreviated these titles would be, respectively, Mr., Hlg., Hne. And Hnt. This system would distinguish us from the other branches of the English-bragging race, the visiting card of an American proclaiming at once his nationality and his own opinion of it. It would tend to uniformity and simplicity, for even our “Judges” and “Colonels” ought gladly to surrender their present titles for the more glorious ones proposed. The “Generals” might perhaps hold out, especially those who earned their high distinction as attorneys-general, general agents and dealers in general merchandise; but eventually all these being gathered to their reputed fathers the title of “General” as a civilian honor would be “heard to cease.”

The wake of this great social reform would of course be strewn with wrecks of “ancient and honorable orders,” “fraternities” and the like. A man who could be a Hero without payment of dues would hardly care to give money and time (to say nothing of toasting in a blanket and sitting in a hot chair) to be a Knight of Paradise, a Noble of the Mystic Hoodoo, a Saint of the Expurgated Calendar, or a Janissary of Janissation. With the passing of the fraternities the income of many a zealous “organizer” would vanish, but perhaps they would deign to accept some light employment in the field of crime. Whatever the advantages or disadvantages of the suggested system, it would at least serve to mark the memory of a famous war in which we had the astonishing mischance to lose some off our soldiers, yet did not sue for peace.

There never was a war in which both or all the tribes engaged did not believe that their fighters showed themselves wonderfully courageous—never one in which the non-combatants did not beslobber the soldiery with silly adulation for qualities which are the common heritage of mankind and particularly conspicuous in the wild cocksparrow and the domestic sow. Every nation has the conceit to believe, and most of its individuals have the indecency to affirm, an indubitable primacy in valor and devotion. There is nothing in it; one people is about as brave as another, their different degrees of military efficiency depending chiefly on organization and discipline—in which, by the way, our volunteers are horribly deficient. If the soldiers of two contending armies were as brave as they say they are many of the regiments would be destroyed

to the last man; for in actual collision the command to retreat is seldom given and never heard. What is to prevent a man from fighting till he dies? Not courage.

In the war with Spain the men of our navy have shown themselves remarkably efficient in the handling of ships and the service of guns. Their courage has not been much in evidence, for their antagonists were too contemptible to test it. There is no reason to doubt that our sailors would have shown the customary gallantry in danger if the danger had confronted them; but neither is there any sense in extravagantly lauding them for a quality whose possession by them is a mere inference from the observed fact that it is common to sailors generally. In that better and wetter world to which every good man-o'-warsman goes when he dies, the fighting will be more even and the glory not so cheap.

The army had a better opportunity. At Manila it fought about as well as it would have been expected to do against the same resistance if the action had not been a sham battle with a prearranged result. In that case the resistance would have been more stubborn, demanding and doubtless eliciting a higher heroism in the attack. A good deal of stuff is published about "the hail of bullets," and all that, but the meager list of dead shows the affair to have been a mere skirmish. In war dead men tell tales, and there is no going behind the tales they tell. The list of wounded can be, and in volunteer regiments habitually is, swelled by every bruise and scratch that can be counted, but the death-roll cannot be "stuffed." There was friction at Manila, but a veteran of the civil war would not call it serious fighting. He would if he were running for office.

Even about Santiago, though hardship and privation were the rule and were right nobly endured, the fighting was not very fierce, as again the death-roll attests. A loss of a half-dozen or a dozen men killed in a full regiment is light, even if incurred in a single engagement; our skeleton regiments in the latter half of the civil war expected to lose two or three times that number in every pitched battle. At Pickett's Mill, during the Atlanta campaign, Hazen's war-wasted brigade of about fifteen hundred men lost one-half its number in a twenty-minute fight, and of that half more than one hundred were killed outright. There was no ambush, no surprise, no surrounding and cutting off; our men simply walked up to the enemy's works, stood up and fought until a half of them were down, then gave it up and went to supper. Yet the reader has probably never before heard of Pickett's Mill. Suppose a thing like that had occurred at Santiago! What if the horrors of the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania had been repeated at Siboney!

I do not know why such things did not occur in Cuba, but I am glad they did not. I am glad and unspeakably thankful that about Santiago our troops won fights which by every law of the military art ought to have gone against them, and finally, despite an incompetent leadership, captured from superior incompetence an army that could easily have destroyed them. Upon that point I shall venture to quote from a personal letter. My correspondent, who writes from Santiago, is an officer of distinction in the regular army, a colonel in command of a regiment, and one whose name, if I cared to mention it, would carry peculiar weight in the mind of every student of the art of war. He concludes his letter thus:

If I would sit down and talk with you about this campaign I am sure it would be of great interest to me, perhaps of some interest to you. In some respects it is one of the most remarkable campaigns ever fought. The courage of the regulars won it, despite some of the greatest blunders

that one could imagine. Had the Spaniards shown any military genius whatever all our forces would have been driven into the ocean. Think what would have become of us if the Spanish troops had been commanded by a Massena!

In that case the inconsiderate Spanish historian would have had the happiness to write that the incident of the Gadarene swine had been repeated at Aguadores. The regular army of the United States is not driven into the ocean by making faces at it, but if it contains one corporal whose retrospective eye does not discern Toral's neglected opportunity to wipe it off the face of the earth that incompetent non-commissioned officer should be gently but firmly, and more in sorrow than in anger, reduced to the ranks.

I observe with pain that the esteemed New York "Sun," which once dominated the literary situation as infallible preceptor and impeccable exemplar of good English, is fallen from its high estate and weltering in its shame. Commenting on a report that Congressman Bailey of Texas had leased a Kentuckian stock farm "for breeding purposes," it recently said:

That foe of expansion and evening clothes expects to make his permanent home in the heart of the Democratic party, and is liable to be disappointed in consequence. But if he ever does raise trotters we hope that they will get several thousand miles nearer the lead than he does.

This is very sad. A severer taste would have given us, not "that foe of expansion," but "that foe to expansion." A writer with an exact knowledge of the use of words would have said, not "liable to be disappointed," but "liable to disappointment." The "to" following "liable" should be always a preposition, never a part of a verb in the infinitive mood. As to "raising" trotters, the printed rumor upon which he was commenting might have taught this erring writer a better word, for it says that the stock farm is to be used for "breeding" purposes, not "raising" purposes. The circumstance that to untutored understandings the verb "to raise" has a multitude of meanings—that it signifies "to grow," "to rear," "to bring up," "to breed" and so forth—is irrelevant; as I understand the matter the "Sun" does not shine for brumous intelligences only, but for spirits of light and fire as well. But whether the interests of the living are to be considered or not, our respected contemporary owes a duty to the late Charles A. Dana, and has no right to make him unhappy in heaven.

A number of curious correspondents will be content with nothing less than an avowal of my choice for Governor. They will have to remain in the shadows; the man of my choice is not a candidate, and it will serve no purpose to mention his name. The man of my choice for any office never is a candidate; his name is never put before a convention, nor even "prominently mentioned" in the newspapers. As to the men who are actually "running" for the office of governor of this state, I am unable to understand how any self-respecting person can hesitate for a moment to prefer Mr. Maguire. With some of his most tenderly cherished political convictions I am not in sympathy. For example, I do not believe in the free coinage of silver at the ratio of sixteen to one, nor at any fixed ratio; and I do not believe what he believes of the single-tax doctrine, thought willing that it be accorded a trial in some other state than the one that I live in, preferably Kansas. If Mr. Maguire as governor of California would have the power materially to promote his will regarding either of these matters his election would, in my judgment, be an evil

only less than the election of Gage. But governors have nothing to do with these things and congressmen have. To make Maguire governor is the only way to keep him out of Congress.

That is not the reason for favoring Mr. Maguire. In the nomination of Mr. Gage I was insulted, as was every elector in the state—as is every elector anywhere when asked to assist in putting into power one of whom he knows nothing except that the men who managed a convention want him there. The putting before a state or national convention the name of a man unfamiliar with public life and unknown to the people is never done with an honest purpose. It is always the outcome of an intrigue—a selfish conspiracy among a few men who promise themselves an advantage by it—a conspiracy to which the man himself may or may not be a party. It does not greatly matter if he is or not; by acceptance he aids and abets it. Nor is his personal character a relevant consideration; if he is not base enough to betray his makers he will not be strong enough to serve the right. That the nomination of Mr. Gage was dictated by the Railroad gang I am not prepared to say; but as a man of some sense, fairly familiar with the devious ways of politics, I do not need other evidence than . . . influence equally selfish in character and secret in method. It is a bad man indeed whom a really self-respecting voter would not support for governor against one of whom nobody knows anything more than that his hair is long and his history short—a man without a past.

The Lafayette monument fund contributed by children in the public schools of the country is growing so rapidly that the treasurer cannot keep the count. It looks as if Lafayette would have a great monument, which is appropriate, for he is the monumental humbug of American history. In all our school “histories” he is represented as an unselfish lover of liberty who proffered his life and fortune for the cause of American independence, performing prodigious services and all that. The real Lafayette was a thrifty young adventurer—a soldier of fortune who drive a hard bargain with the colonial government and exacted his pay to the uttermost penny while his betters went unpaid. It was thought expedient to employ him, for that clever schemer, George Washington, had a knack at theatrical effects, and the youngster’s high lineage and aristocratic connections gave “character” to the rebellion. As a soldier he slept late and knocked off work pretty early in the day and would have been fairly well paid with board and clothes. This entire Lafayette fiction goes to prove the truth of Zangwill’s remark that nothing of history is true but the names and dates. It emphasizes the inexpediency of permitting contributions to be solicited in the public schools for any purpose whatever, for the purpose is pretty sure to have its root among the false reverences that fertilize the field of imposture. I believe the school children are now being “worked” to purchase a battleship—a swindle to which the president has given his heedless approval. I trust that God will not sink the thing, but run it upon a rock, where its salt-crustured plates and rusty ribs may long remain to remind the thoughtful of the tender relation between the pupils’ pocket and the slender hand.

In the Century magazine Mr. Frederick A. Ober complains that a previous paper of his was given the title of The Island of Porto Rico “when in point of fact it should be Puerto Rico.” He adds austerely: “There is no such word as ‘porto’ in any language with which I am acquainted—at least not in the English or Spanish.” Mr. Ober’s knowledge is not coterminous with correct speech: There are a few legitimate words not covered by it. In both Portuguese and Spanish “Puerto” is “porto.” As our new West Indian possession was not named by Spaniards we are not bound to call it what they do, and in neither America nor England is it so called. It is

candidly admitted that Mr. Ober is an exceedingly solemn ass, but we cannot accept his gravity as proof of anything in particular, and especially not of anything that is contested by the superior gravity of the West Indian clans.

O, Sinner A, to me unknown
Be such a conscience as your own!
To ease it you to Sinner B
Confess the sins of Sinner C.

Extract from a popular novel:

She glued her eyes to his in a reproachful glance, then rose and proceeded away. He did not at once follow, but after the lapse of five minutes he drew himself up to his full stature and strode in the same direction. Alas, he was too late!—the poison had already done its fatal work and when they met she was already dead. Speechless with remorse he cast himself upon the ground and expressed his emotions otherwise.

To Certain Correspondents:

“Citizen”—You are a stranger to me; how can you expect me to decide in your favor a question of veracity between you and Dr. Jordan? When your truthfulness has been attested to me by divine revelation sadness will ensure at Palo Alto.

“Peleg” and Others.—I am not the editor of this paper; I do not even own it, and am in no way responsible for nor concerned about its opinions, its manners or its morals. I’ll try to stand them if it can stand mine. If you have not my patience you’d better go to the office and protest into the big speaking-tube labeled “Complains—Liver and Other.” It leads up to the roof and opens into the smokestack.

J.L.C.—You are waiting a long time for an answer, but poetry is a thing that will keep. My opinion of yours is that it is lambically pentametrical. Now what are you going to do about it?