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The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent

Admiral Dewey has "pronounced" against fortification of the Nicaragua Canal. "To fortify it," he says, "would simply result in making it a battle-ground in case of war." It might, yes: in certain circumstances it doubtless would. For example, if we should undertake to prevent its use as something worse for us than a battle-ground. An American who would not rather see the Nicaragua Canal a battle-ground than see an enemy pass warships through it to destroy American lives and property, is either a fool or a knave. I think Admiral Dewey would rather see it a battle-ground.

This argument of Admiral Dewey is not new. It has always been urged against fortification of our seaports. At the beginning of the Spanish war, when most of us were frightened half to death by the peril of bombardment, and even officers of the army and navy felt a serious apprehension, it was gravely and diligently pointed out by inland philosophers that in modern warfare unfortified cities are not bombarded. The worthy quacks who administered this mental sedative did not explain, for they did not themselves perceive, that the reason defenceless cities are not "stormed at with shot and shell" is that it is needless: the enemy can work his sweet will upon them without waste of ammunition by the quieter method of landing sailors and marines, or by merely threatening. He can lay such places under contribution, destroy their public works and archives, arrest and deport, or, if he like, put to death their citizens without firing a gun. Does Admiral Dewey suppose we do not already know about the sanitary advantage of non-resistance? Does he believe that we have not observed the virtual immunity from bodily harm of gentlemen amiable enough to yield up their valuables to the highwayman's demand? When he sees a cur with a bone, and a mastiff attacks the cur, and the cur, dropping the bone, lies down and curls up and whines, does he think the instructive spectacle would be new to us? When Admiral Dewey's ships lay in the harbour at Hong Kong, why did he not throw overboard all his guns so that his decks should not become "a battle-ground in case of war"?

"Our fleets," says the distinguished Admiral, "will be a sufficient guarantee for the neutrality and safety of the canal in time of war as well as in peace." They will sufficiently assure its safety if they are more powerful than the fleets of our enemy; to say that they will anyhow is mere bragging, altogether unworthy of a man of sense and courage. As to "guaranteeing" the canal's neutrality, we do not want it neutral. We want that canal as our canal. We want it for our commerce, and we want it as a part of the war-making power of our country. Even if we were willing to accept the principle of its neutrality in war, we ought to be unwilling to have that neutrality guaranteed by European powers; we should take care of all that ourselves. If our fleets are a sufficient defence of the canal's neutrality, well and good; fortifications are needless. But that is not all: an international guarantee also is needless. With that the canal must always be neutral; but without it we can have it neutral if

(and when) we wish it so—what is to prevent? And some day, under the stress of an imperious necessity, we may wish to be otherwise. Why limit our own liberty? Why confine ourselves to a single course when we can have another in reserve? Admiral Dewey's reasoning is infantile. It is not reasoning at all: he merely parrots, thoughtlessly, the pernicious nonsense of an administration caught red-handed at the throat of the country and the idle boasting of men of the sea, who naturally disparage what they know little about—namely, the great art of harbour fortification.

They know little about it, but one would think they would respect it; they have had good reason to. During the Spanish war our ships were beaten in every attack upon harbour defences except one—upon even so ancient and obsolete ones as the Moorish Castles at Santiago de Cuba and San Juan de Puerto Rico. They were beaten by the rude earthworks at Matanzas; and I fancy if the Spanish ships had been out of the way, so that the fort at Cavite could have had a fair fling at them, they might have been beaten there.

If by fortifying the termini of the Nicaragua Canal we should make it “a battle-ground,” why did not the harbour of Santiago become a battle-ground? Was there really no desire to get at Cervera's fleet? Why did not Watson go in and test the tactical advantages of the harbour of Havana? All the Spanish vessels inside could have been sunk by a single monitor. Modern forts with good guns well served are invincible to any number of battleships that can be pushed within reach of them. If our European enemy were ambitious to make a battle-ground of an isthmian canal fortified at the two termini he would have to fetch an army with all its impedimenta, across the Atlantic to disembark upon the neutral soil of Nicaragua or Costa Rica. And while he would be doing that we should ourselves probably not be playing dominos.

It is with no desire to belittle the deeds of our gallant navy that I direct attention to its defeats by land fortifications; but when naval officers affect contempt for such defences, as they commonly do, and when their studied disparagement, by misleading civilian opinion, is perilous to the nation, they may fitly be reminded that they, too, are human. And now that we have touched the matter of their fallibility, I venture to tell them that their recent performances in battle with their own kind upon their own element were by no means so great and glorious as most of us have agreed to represent them. In the two memorable sea fights of the Spanish war our officers and sailors (of whose courage and skill there can be no doubt) were at no time exposed to any danger worth mentioning; that is proved by the losses—one man killed and a half dozen slightly wounded. You may catalogue the Spanish vessels as careful as Homer did the Grecian; you may total their tonnage, enumerate their guns and count their crews, but you cannot get away from the fact that all these things turned out to be harmless; you cannot ignore the significance of that ridiculous list of casualties. Nothing shall convince me, at least, that an enemy unable to inflict damage is a formidable enemy. Cervera had good ships, good guns and doubtless good men. Was he not, then, a formidable and dangerous enemy? No, not in the affair off Santiago, for he was ordered not to fight, but to fly. A ship cannot fight well and run away at the same time. I wish he had been permitted to fight. The slaughter of those poor devils and the undeserved shame of their futile flight lies heavy on my American conscience. Our sailors did right in slaughtering them, and would probably have slaughtered them in any case, but I should like to feel good about it. And when our naval officers talk learnedly and not very modestly about the ability of our fleets to do this and to do that I should like them to be able to speak with an authority superior to that of a civilian spectator at a boat race.

As to Admiral Dewey, I think that “elderly naval man” a very decent fellow and a mighty fortunate one. Probably he is much more than that—most of our officers are; I wish I knew. But in his little difficulty with the harmless, necessary Montojo he did not fight fair, as I’ve a dim recollection of having heretofore explained, perhaps orally—it does not matter. The facts are these: Montojo had a large number of exceedingly handsome ships and the courage to go aboard them. They were wound in sailor-like fashion with an excellent quality of Manila rope, and with fair treatment would not have fallen apart. Now, the very first battle order that Dewey gave (in his excitement the reporter did not catch it all) was this: “When you are ready, Gridley, you may fire at those ropes.” That was a mean trick—a dirty, low-down, Dutch trick.

Not all the poets, obviously, are persuaded of the glory of our conquests in the Orient: To at least one of them the conqueror’s cannon seem to speak with an authority something short of divine. I allude to Mr. Herman Scheffauer, of whom I have repeatedly affirmed his possession of the poetic gift in a notable degree—and any degree is notable. “His voice is heard thro’ rolling drums” in the following poem of protest, which, by its sentiment, will commend itself to those who feel as he, and by other qualities to spirits of a purer fire. It was written for publication on the birthday of Washington.

The Republic
Mene—Tekel—Upharsin.

I.

Years upon years we have labored, lustily, lovingly, long;
Our arms were girt and our thighs were girt, and our arms and thighs were strong.
We builded a beautiful tower high o’er the world’s dreadful plain;
Its base was as deep as the roots of our faith, and these were as deep as the main.
But whether the Tower of Babel made red by the set of our sun,
By fire from Hell or light from Heaven—what word, O Washington?

II.

We shall knock at thy tomb in the darkness; a thunder of tongues shall call
Thee forth to answer, or to ask—even thou who art first in all.
The earthquakes lie curled under foot and the red clouds in vengeance see
Marshaled above us and over the bell whose tongue spake: “Liberty!”—
Nothing but “Liberty, Liberty!”—ere sold into Mammon’s hands
To groan the knell of Freedom to peoples of alien lands.

III.

Lost in a labyrinth madness—in a wilderness lost in vain,
Our sins, led wrong by lies of the priests of Mammon seek light again.
And is our land great by its mileage or great by the hearts of its sons?
And is our land strong by its people’s voice, or only by voice of its guns?
Well we know when pale Freedom lies bleeding and bound to an isle in the West;
Well we know when an Eagle sweeps out of the West upon her heart to feast.

IV.

Years upon years have we labored, lustily, lovingly, long;
But Ruin and Chaos our work must eclipse when Right is eclipsed by wrong.
Where is the prophecy cried by the Seer?—where is the patriot’s prayer?—

The iron-firm hand to stay the stones?—the voice through the night: “Beware!”
Nothing is written, nothing is wrought to warn off, to ward off, the fall,
Save the hand of the Father held forth from the tomb—and these terrible words on the wall.
—Herman Scheffauer.

A bill has been offered in the House of Representatives, the purpose of which is to promote General Shafter. It does not name him, but describes him—with, however, imperfect particularity. Suitably amended it will read thus:

“The President is hereby authorized to select from the retired list of the army a fat officer, not above the rank of Brigadier General nor above intriguing for a higher one, who may have extinguished himself in the war with Spain and the press in command of an army which he never saw in action, and which, as a part of its tactics prudently ignored him, and to appoint, by and with the consent of the Senate, the fat officer so selected to be a Major-General of the United States Army, with the same pay and allowances as are given to gentlemen and soldiers of that rank. And the President is hereby further authorized and directed to appoint the fat officer so selected and promoted to be Perpetual Military Attache at the court of his Antipodean Majesty the King of the Quakers.”

Amiable old Colonel T. W. Higginson, whose “cheerful yesterdays” have been replaced by paretic todays, is solemnly persuaded of the total unworthiness of Captain Mahan, the Penman of the Deep. It is Colonel Higginson’s steadfast conviction that in expressing the view that Filipinos and Boers and that kind of cattle have not a natural, inalienable and God-given right to misgovern themselves and others “Captain Mahan errs to the degree of mendacity—is in fact a hardy and impenitent liar.” Having signified that view of the matter, Higginson adds that “rawhide in the hands of a Boer farmer might teach him a lesson in the right of self-government.”—a beautiful sentiment tactfully expressed in choice Higginsonese. On the whole, I venture to think this venerable “relic of a paleozoic age” might advantageously tie up his tongue until by devout contemplation of his own virtues he shall have satisfied himself as to which of the saints he is.

Colonel Higginson (who is the ranking field officer of the Peace Society) explains that Captain Mahan’s political doctrine “disposes of every man’s right to his own earnings and every mother’s right to her own child”—which is untrue—and that “not a farm in New England, not a set of carpenter’s tools, not a block of telephone stock could be held by its owner * * * unless he used it with propriety.” That also is untrue. What is true is that unless savage barbarous “governments” use their authority and power with propriety, which they never do, none of these things can exist. If, judged by its fruits, civilization is a good thing (and even a Higginson is an improved Sitting Bull), it ought to displace barbarism. That can be brought about in only one way; by civilized countries taking possession of barbarous countries, forcing their own institutions upon the natives and leaving the result to God. That is a right and a duty. If it had been shirked by our forefathers our entire national domain would be still a wilderness sparsely infested by farmless carpenters, toolless and telephone stock-less red Indians, with a bright band of anti-expansionists sympathetically applauding (at a safe distance) the stability of Self-Government in America, the reign of Liberty and the blessings of peace. And, loudest of the lot would be the Higginson, thanking Heaven in one breath for possession of his own scalp, in the next for prospering and safeguarding the children of nature desirous of removing it, with a segment of skull attached, from his own brain.

It may not have occurred to you that all the really nice people you know * * * are anarchists.—Julian Hawthorne.

No, neighbour, it has not occurred to me. Yet I, too, possess a rudimentary, or possibly vestigial, faculty of observation. For illustration, I have observed that a snail is a parallelogram; that smallpox plays the violin with great feeling and expression; that the south wind is a pea-green elephant and that the stars derive their light from the crystallized fragranciness of a flying cow. Now, Mr. Hawthorne, it is your turn again.

I see it stated in this paper that the last act of General Lawton was to recognize the bravery of a young surgeon and recommend him for promotion. Not so; the last thing that Lawton did was to commend the efficiency of Colonel H. H. Sargeant of the Twenty-Ninth Infantry. When shot he was watching a charge executed by that officer's command against the enemy's works. Lawton said: "That is the most beautiful operation I ever saw!" and a moment later was dead. I have a personal satisfaction in relating his commendation of Colonel Sargeant. That officer is the author of two of the greatest books on strategy ever written—"Bonaparte's First Italian Campaign" and the "Campaign of Marengo." In studying them I was so impressed with their author's military insight and judgment that at the beginning of the Spanish war I publicly urged his appointment to the command of a regiment—he was then a lieutenant. Naturally, the proposal was promptly ridiculed by the cave-bats and barn-owls to whose mindlets the man's mastery of the principles of his trade seems to attest his incapacity in their practical application. Colonel Sargeant got his regiment all right, performed distinguished service with it in Cuba (a part of the time in command of an important military district), and when it was disbanded got another. When I am Dictator he will be Commander-in-Chief.

A good deal of more or less sincere sympathy is being wasted on the Nethersole woman and her sort who have been arrested for presenting an immoral play to that delicate sense of decency which distinguishes New York from a box of monkeys. Even before the arrest, when the offenders had as yet experienced no sharper mischance than a daily roasting in the newspapers by confederates of their thrifty manager, a distinguished clergyman appealed for charitable judgment on the poor "slaves of the stage," "compelled" to play the parts allotted to them. That is not so; nobody has to be any worse than he wants to be. An actress may be poorer than she wants to be (I'm told that most of them are—especially the rich ones), or even hungrier than she wants to be; but if she is bad she is bad from choice—because she would rather be bad than experience something more disagreeable to her. To assist in an immoral play ought to be more disagreeable than poverty. To a decent woman it would be, as it would be to a decent man. Let us keep our compassion for those high souls who under temptation and the stress of need accept the painful alternative; not for the feeble fools who yield to the pressure of want, nor for the hardy sinners who love vice for its many sterling virtues. To which class the Nethersole woman belongs I don't know. She seems in fairly good physical condition and looks as if in loyalty to principle she might at a pinch live for a considerable time on champagne and ortolans.

The telegraphy wires sing and sparkle with the awful news that that child of light and leading, Mr. C. P. Huntington, has withdrawn from the Westchester Church in which he was accustomed to worship himself comfortably in a front pew. He has not the happiness to share some of his pastor's views regarding certain thrifty bell-wethers of the flock that consumed an undue proportion of the grass supplied by Providence for all. Let him not despair; he will not long remain

Away on the mountains wild and bare—
Away from the tender Shepherd's care,

for he will suffer no famine of sympathetic pastors willing to lead him like kindly
lights to folds less exacting than the one at Westchester. Mr. Huntington is a good man and a
devout Christian; all that he needs to do in order to go up higher when we have done with
him here below is to behave himself.