

*New York Tribune*  
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*Navy Suffers in Loss of Gibbons*

***Richard Harding Davis Declares the Captain Forced to Retire by the Plucking Board Should Be Restored to Active Service.***

Before this article was written I had sent a letter to ex-President Roosevelt, asking him to let me tell what I believed he probably thought of Captain John H. Gibbons, who two weeks ago was retired from the navy by the "plucking board."

Colonel Roosevelt's answer arrived after this article had been sent out, but his letter requires no context.

This shows us Captain Gibbons as Theodore Roosevelt, when President of the United States, knew him.

Eager and generous, it shows us, also, something of the man who wrote it, who, deep in his own affairs, which are the affairs of many millions of people, found time to answer a signal of distress from a shipmate in trouble. This is Colonel Roosevelt's letter:

Oyster Bay, Long Island.

Dear Davis:

While I was President, and therefore Commander in Chief of the Navy, Captain Gibbons served under my personal eye, and I am able to speak from first hand knowledge of his conduct and efficiency. I saw him in command of the Dolphin; I saw him in non-command positions on other ships; I saw him in the Navy Department at Washington, and I consulted him about questions of equipment, direction and general naval policy in naval matters. In every position he showed himself to be a man of marked efficiency – one of the most useful men in the Navy, one of the men who, as President, I should, in the event of war, have been delighted to see in a position of responsibility and command, because I was well assured that in such a position he would bear himself fearlessly, efficiently and honorably.

From the standpoint of the country I regret very greatly that there is any danger of our losing his services.

I am, faithfully yours,

Theodore Roosevelt.

*Efficient Men Retired.*

Fifteen years ago promotion in the navy was so slow that officers did not attain high rank at an age when they best were fitted to wield it. So Congress enacted that each year, unless forty officers, by resignation or death, left the navy, as many as would make up that number of vacancies must be forcibly retired. The duty of eliminating them was given to a board of Rear Admirals, known as the Board on Selection for Retirement, or more familiarly as the "plucking board." The idea was to get rid of the deadwood. But last year, and this, the "plucking board" has shown that either it has cut down the deadwood and to obtain its annual sacrifice must lop off living boughs, or that it does not know deadwood from green.

Last year it eliminated Captain Templeton Potts, a most efficient and capable officer, against whom nothing could be urged, except lack of sea service. To this Captain Potts has replied that he repeatedly asked for duty at sea, but was ordered by the Navy Department to serve on different boards on shore. Accordingly, for no other reason apparently than he obeyed the orders of his superiors, the "plucking board" dismissed him from the navy.

This year the "plucking board" has eliminated officers of such value to the service that hereafter undoubtedly the "plucking board" itself will be eliminated.

When he announced the names of those ordered out, Secretary Daniels said that since he had taken charge of the Navy Department it was the most unpleasant duty he had been called upon to perform. In the list of those he retired, he said, he recognized some of the most efficient officers in the service.

"There should be some method by which officers will be able to reach higher grades," said the Secretary of the Navy, "while they are yet young enough to be of real service. But the present method is too cruel. The retirements to-day are tragedies. I think this is the last "plucking board" the Navy Department will call together.

### *Should be Restored.*

For the appreciative and sympathetic attitude of Secretary Daniels in this matter those, who consider the "plucking board" a menace and who believe, for the good of the navy, it should go, are grateful.

But removing a judge from the bench because he has condemned innocent men is not enough. If the innocent men still remain in prison, punishing the judge will not help them. If the "plucking board" has cast into outer darkness efficient officers, men the navy wants, men for years trained and drilled in her service, who are her loyal and devoted servants, not only should the "plucking board" be "plucked," but the men who have been so unjustly humiliated should be restored to duty – not only in justice to them, but for the "good of the service." The navy cannot afford to lose them. She cannot at the age of their greatest usefulness throw them on the scrap heap.

Just as each year the value of a battleship decreases, the value of the man who commands a battleship grows; his blow is heavier, his experience is more widely gathered, his ability and judgment have been put through severe tests; each day, considering him merely as a machine, he has increased in power, output and efficiency. His growth in discipline, loyalty, in devotion to his country, may be taken for granted.

Of those officers "plucked" this year, except by reputation I know but one. He is Captain John H. Gibbons, until a few days ago in command of the battleship Utah. And to illustrate the kind of man the "plucking board" sees fit to "recall," I would like to remind the readers of The Tribune of his record.

Thirty-five years of his life have been given to the navy; eighteen and a half years of that time has been spent at sea. This is sea service proportionately equal to or even greater than that of the five rear admirals who condemned him. In all the wars in which our country has engaged since Gibbons joined the navy he has taken an active part. He saw service in Cuban waters at the battle of Manzanillo and the bombardment of Morro Castle; in the Philippines, where he commanded the gunboat General Alva, and after a fight rescued from the Filipinos a party of American soldiers and hundreds of Spanish prisoners; in China during the Boxer revolution, and in Vera Cruz, where on shore he commanded the fighting forces of the Florida, Arkansas, San Francisco, Chester, and of his dreadnought, the Utah.

For two years he was our naval attaché in London. He was good enough for both Mr. Taft and Colonel Roosevelt. Under each he commanded the Dolphin, the navy vessel assigned to the use of the President.

#### *At Head of Academy.*

For three years he held a position which is one of the most responsible in the service, that of the superintendent of the Naval Academy, the man who trains and teaches our future admirals and who sets them an example. For his services at that post, by both Secretary Meyer and Secretary Daniels, Gibbons was most heartily praised, and also by the president of the Board of Visitors to the Naval Academy, Herbert L. Satterlee, an ex Assistant Secretary of the Navy.

When Gibbons was in command of the Detroit she won the gunnery trophy; when he was in command of the Charleston she won the gunnery trophy. As long as the hurricane at Apia Gibbons, then a junior lieutenant, was commended for leading his men up the shrouds of the storm-driven Vandalia and forming a life sail, thus helping to save the lives of the crew and the life of the ship.

When the navy was policing Vera Cruz Gibbons was on shore in command of three thousand bluejackets. But when he returned to the Utah, during the two months before he was ordered to home waters, he did not visit the plazas nor loiter under the portales. With the exception of one evening, when he dined at the Diligencias, if you wanted to find Gibbons you could find him only on his ship.

Three weeks ago, when the Utah came North, I had the privilege of returning with her and of sharing the captain's mess. As a junior officer on different warships and as our attaché in London, for seventeen years I have known Gibbons, but I had never before seen him in command of a dreadnought. And what I saw him in that capacity led me to write this.

At a safe distance I have followed the sea for twenty years, and when I say I know few captains smarter than Gibbons, more efficient, more intelligent, physically more alert and fit, in habits as temperate, in mind and thought as kind, sane and conservative. I echo only what all the officers in his wardroom said of their captain. And they see him at first hand; their lives as well as those of eleven hundred bluejackets and property worth \$14,000,000 are or were in his keeping. They ought to know; and what they think of him ought to count.

During the passage home Captain Gibbons did his own inspection, his own navigating. In dungarees he crawled through manholes and down oily ladders; in thick or fair weather he spent his time upon the bridge. His mind was always on his job. When, at dinner the marine would spoil my best story by announcing that somewhere on the horizon a suspicious looking oysterboat had appeared, or that the officer of the deck wanted to make it 8 o'clock, Gibbons would give that fact as grave consideration as though the orderly had told him a hurricane was

approaching under forced draft, or that the German navy was in our course and cleared for action.

When last I saw Captain Gibbons as I left the Utah at Tompkinsville, the fog and rain were dripping from his oilskins. The entire night he had spent upon the bridge, and the following morning, without a pilot, he docked his ship at the Brooklyn navy yard. Twenty-four hours later he opened a telegram and found he was dismissed from the navy.

As he went down the gangway in the clothes of a civilian his shipmates, still in uniform, saw him leave them with eyes that were blurred with angry tears. For them the scene was the essence of injustice and ingratitude. For them it was both a mockery and a menace. What hope did it hold out for their future? They saw a man in the prime of life, who had held with honor three of the highest posts in their profession, thrown out as you would throw out a drunken cook. What incentive for unceasing vigilance, study and risk of life did it leave with them? What lesson did it teach to 800 midshipmen at Annapolis to whom Gibbons, their commanding officer and their friend, had been the living promise of what after thirty years they might hope to attain?

Secretary Daniels is determined the "plucking board" must go. That is good, but it is not enough. It has robbed the navy of a man the navy needs, and the people of a good and faithful servant. An act of Congress, with the recommendation of the President, can return Captain Gibbons to his ship and to the service. He is a man "who never sought an honor or shirked a duty." His country cannot afford to lose him. It cannot afford to wrong him.