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The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent

It is to be hoped that the writers who in next week's numbers of "The Examiner," I understand, are to discuss "Three Years of McKinley" will not overlook the fact that they have been very prosperous years, nor fail to point out that McKinley has had nothing to do with that. The popular notion that the weather, the crops and the Christian's prospect of seeing the rest of us damned are affected by the political complexion of the "party in power" is natural, but erroneous. Outside of Kansas this engaging belief is not now held by the best and wisest observers. It has still a footing in the White House and drags out an ailing existence among the Old Guard Republicans who make day hideous on Capitol Hill, but in minds partly enlightened, it is a vanishing faith. Like many another ancient superstition it is hallowed by the assent and devotion of great minds. Even so illustrious a thinker as George the Third, sometime King of England, held it, and when he was himself "the party in power" used to signify his honest pride in the abundant harvest. Well, Heaven rest him; there have been worse men than he. Some of them, still unchanged, will today, while knowing better, solemnly ascribe the country's prosperity to three years of McKinley.

Everyone has, I suppose, some special and particular reason for supporting or opposing the administration, or rather for liking or disliking the person at the head of it. That is, everyone has, besides his other reasons, some one reason to which he attaches a special and particular importance, as Madame De Remusat hated Napoleon because—well, Madame De Remusat has not told us why she hated Napoleon; that is how we know. I do not myself greatly dislike Mr. McKinley. I dare say the poor man is trying to do about as well as he knows how. The trouble with him is the abominable company that he keeps. When Grant was president he surrounded himself with the worst advisers that ever lurked about the White House. There was a reason for that. Grant was a good soldier and a good judge of soldiers, but he knew nothing of public life, of politics, of political history or history of any kind. His general education was not high, nor his manners very good. He was conscious of all that, and not particularly comfortable in the society of cultivated and intellectual men. In camp it did not greatly matter: in military life one may keep to one's self if one wishes to, and does not have to consult anybody nor have familiar converse with men of inferior rank but of superior knowledge and refinement. In high civil stations it is very different. So with a few exceptions (even a president is not omnipotent) Grant's advisers, both in and out of the Cabinet, were persons with whom he felt at ease and with whom the country's interests did not. When they grew insupportably pernicious he dismissed them, appointing others of the same sort. Altogether his Cabinet officers numbered, I think, more than thirty. The author of the tale of Ali Baba, it will be remembered, mentions forty.

The relevancy of all this may require exposition; I wanted to point the contrast between Grant and McKinley. When Grant had it borne in upon him that he had made a fool

selection he tried to set matters right by making another. Result: Variety—which is the spice of life. There are as many kinds of rouges and incapables as there are kinds of rogues and incapacity. Mere chance is itself a kind of rudimentary progress, abundantly recognised as such in our political institutions and habits. What else is attested by the sacred principle of “rotation in office” for which we pay so dearly? But Mr. McKinley has dismissed only one member of his Cabinet in three years. At this rate he will have removed only two men and two-thirds of a man (Alger) during his entire term of service—for, I no more doubt, his reelection than I doubt the famine in India, the bubonic plague in Hawaii, or the she colonels here at home. By defeat of McKinley the devout Pessimist would feel that his beautiful faith had received a staggering blow. If this Administration be not duplicated there is no Adversary of Souls, and every saint now in Heaven can demand retrial on the grounds of newly discovered evidence.

We are hearing “a whole lot” about “the lion of South Africa”—quite a plenty, I should say. Well, Cronje is a “lion”; let it go at that. (The lion is the most cowardly and cruel of all cats, but we’ll pass that.) But what is the matter with General White, of Ladysmith; Colonel Kekewich, of Kimberley; Colonel Baden Powell, of Mafeking—soldiers whose resistance to beleaguering forces is measured, not by days, but by months? Why are they not “lions?” Wherein is General Joubert, who for many moons has scorned delights and lived laborious—is repressing White with one hand and Buller with the other—wherein, I say, is he deficient in the qualities that make a man lionesque? Lionesque? Nay, what lesser name that “lion” shall we find for superb old Buller himself, who, when all is said and done, is the real “hero” of the war? To no other commander was ever allotted so difficult a task; by no other was the task allotted performed with so magnificent devotion and military skill. As these lines are written Ladysmith has not been relieved. But any student of the war, with even a gleam of military knowledge to guide him, knows that the direct relief of Ladysmith is but a small part of the work cut out for Buller. Indeed, in holding strong forces of the enemy there his services have been more effective, if less showy, than if he had dispersed them. Doubtless he has tried to relieve Ladysmith; it was only by trying to accomplish the lesser purpose that he could accomplish the greater. Day and night, week after week, he has “pressed his disadvantage”—now in the centre, now to right and again to left; no sooner balked at one point that attacking at another; a score of times repelled, but never defeated, never disheartened; steadily gaining ground, inch by inch, and gaining something far more precious—time and opportunity for Lord Roberts. And in all this the clowning jokesmiths and smirking “cartoonists” of the American press have seen nothing but their own detestable opportunity to be silly and offensive. Nothing of the sublimity, the devotion to duty, the moral courage, the unconquerable will and tenacity of purpose—not

Through obvious clouds one transient gleam

of all this have their filmy eyes been favoured withal. To their imbruted understandings not even war’s pitiful tragedy and awful pathos make audible appeal. At a country fair a jocular yokel grinning through a horse collar is a natural phenomenon. But at a funeral--ugh!

Buller has not (as I write) relieved Ladysmith. But Buller has relieved Kimberley. Buller has captured Cronje. Buller is advancing on Bloemfontein. For it is he who has made these things possible. Cronje the “African lion,” indeed!—The lion who, squat in his lair, stupidly watched the marshalling of the hunt until it was too late to run away! The cruel brute who permitted his females and young to fight beside him and denied them and his wounded

the mercy offered by the compassionate hunters! The plain fact of the matter is that General Cronje has shown no military capacity whatever. It required none to be twice beaten by a duffer like Methuen, to beat him once and then hold the ground over which his enemy was forbidden to advance. It required none to be beaten for three months at Kimberley. It required none to be surrounded and pounded to pieces by Kitchener. All that one can credit him with is the cheap quality of physical courage, which he shares with nine out of every ten men in either army. The Lion of Africa is a stuffed lion.

Representative Shafroth, of Colorado, is enamored of the notion that the United States ought to proffer mediation in the South African war. He says:

“As this mode of ending hostilities is recommended, in fact enjoined, by the twenty-six great powers of the world, it ought to be invoked in the interest of humanity and civilization, irrespective of the right or wrong of this war. With how much greater reason, then, ought the United States to invoke it when the existence of a sister republic is endangered and when the war upon the part of Great Britain is the most unjustifiable of any that has occurred in history of modern times?”

Now what do you think of that, my reader? We are to suggest ourselves as proper and eligible mediators because without hearing argument we have already uttered judgment. Seeing two men trying to swallow one oyster, Mr. Shafroth says to one of them: “Here, you scoundrel, let that man’s oyster alone and submit the question of ownership to me.” Would he expect the competitors to accept his “good offices” with equal alacrity? Most likely he would have the oyster thrown into his face. And most likely it would not return.

The nation that can decently offer itself as mediator in South Africa is not the nation which not only prejudices the case, but considers that fact a good reason for making the offer. Even in “compulsory arbitration,” as a case in court, we demand that the judge upon the bench and the jury in the box shall go to their work open-minded. Of the “swift and willing witness” we say harsh things; what should we say of the swift and willing judge, or the volunteer juror? Even the defendant in a murder trial is expected to be open to conviction.

“The Boers,” says a contemporary, “for a long time objected to the introduction of railways in their country because railways are not mentioned in the Bible.” They seem to have always thought that good book singularly garrulous about Mauser rifles and Creusot cannon.

The fact that within a few years several hundred thousand dollars have been expended on furniture for the Senate chamber without providing decent furniture should not surprise. When United States senators take ten thousand dollars annually, besides their salaries, it is a little too much to expect that their humble purveyors will refrain from taking as much of what the senators leave as they can get their hands on. Every great art is practiced under hard conditions. If it were not for the regrettable interposition of small subordinate thieves between him and the treasury, a senator’s annual rake-down would enable him to give something to the poor. I don’t say that a senator’s practice of making the rest of us pay for shaving him, burnishing his footgear and augmenting the overhang of his stomach with mineral waters is unlawful; I only say it is inexpressively mean. It is a practice which the House would speedily put an end to if the honest and self-denying gentlemen constituting that body did not cherish the hope of being senators themselves.

Representative Norton of Ohio is of the solemn conviction that in its treatment of Mr. Macrum, “the State Department has been making an asinine performance, through blundering stupidity.” Mr. Norton is the most courteous of critics; a man of inferior civility

might have intimated that in playing the role of Ass the department was actuated by love of the character. A magnanimous foe is better than an unfair friend. But Mr. Norton's sense of justice is even stronger than can find full expression in refusal to assign a base motive. He goes on to admit a possibility that there was no asinine performance—that the Department is merely “guilty of treason,” and that its treason is only “as infamous as that of Benedict Arnold.” Noting how this fair-minded critic feels compelled to modify his accusation till so little is left of it, one cannot help wondering why he thought it worthwhile to make it. “Blundering stupidity” is so common that it may almost be called a household virtue; and as to Benedict Arnold, it is a bad day for his reputation when several gentlemen in Congress do not summon attention to his comparatively good character. When the process of rehabilitation is complete—when all our men of high political preferment have been shown to be distinctly worse than he—public opinion will demand that the hero of West Point be supplied with a monument.

Molineux, the murderer, will not down, and every day the newspapers are compelled to say something about him and his famous “case.” He fatigues, but his trial had features of perennial interest to the thoughtful. For example, in the course of it the judge explained to the jury that the defendant's refusal to testify was not a matter from which they should draw an inference of guilt. Yet the judge permitted the District Attorney repeatedly and at great length to argue that such an inference should be drawn—that it should have a determining weight. If that was an unfair argument it must have been made with a conscious intent to do the defendant an injustice. Having only the dim glow of common sense instead of the great white light that comes of a knowledge of law, I am unable to see that it is an unfair argument, but if it is, why did the judge who condemned it continue to tolerate it? Let us take an easier one: Why is an elephant?

Whether the argument is unfair or not—whether or not it should have been permitted to be made, there can be no doubt of the jurors' curiosity to hear the defendant's story, nor of their disfavour to his counsel for not letting them. He seemed imperfectly to have observed then what he knows fairly well now, namely, the high value that juries set upon their power and immemorial right to punish counsel. The magnitude of that appraisal is the eighth wonder of the world.

The friends of Ambassador Horace Porter say that he would not accept the Republican nomination for vice-president unless it were “forced upon him as a party necessity.” Even in that case he could claim the protection of the law: The humblest American citizen cannot be compelled to accept a nomination to the vice-presidency against his will. Ambassador Porter's objection, it seems, is that “he prefers his life and work in Paris to the strain of a political campaign.” How would it do to accept the nomination and refuse to engage in the campaign? Why not say, “Thank you, gentlemen. If you want me to be vice-president it is your privilege to elect me. It would not be decent for me to have a hand in the matter. As a man of modesty and self-respect I cannot try to elect myself, but will serve if elected. In the meantime I will justify your good opinion of me by remaining here at my post of duty.” It may be urged against this view that what is right and reputable conduct in a candidate covers a good deal of ground—that it condemns as disgraceful the action of any man in assisting in his own election. Well, yes, to be entirely candid, it is open to that objection.

Apropos of the Nicaragua Canal matter considerable interest is manifested in the circumstance that Great Britain has recently taken to constructing “heavy modern

fortifications” in Jamaica. Her action is less reprehensible than it seems: after a careful examination of the ground her military engineers decided that construction of an ancient fortification was impracticable.

It seems very foolish for Great Britain to make any fortifications at all: according to Admiral Dewey they are needless and invite attack. If the gallant admiral were a Briton he would urge that Gibraltar be dismantled to “guarantee the neutrality” of the Mediterranean and prevent the strait from becoming a “battle ground.”

A memorial against the bill providing for promotion of Adjutant-General Corbin to the rank of major-general affirms that he was once court-martialed for cowardice in the presence of the enemy. What has that to do with the expediency of his promotion? He would require no more courage in the one rank than in the other. He is safe in any event. Even should the enemy have the good fortune to get through the entanglement of red tape and penetrate to the heart and brain of the Army and Navy building, the great man would be found impregnable; for he is the illustrious inventor of the iron-clad desk with a clockwork drum which beats to battle every fifteen minutes when wound up. When Adjutant-General Corbin is busy with his private affairs this formidable and intelligent mechanism commands the army.

Mr. Richard Olney is turning and muttering in his political grave. “Cuba” he says, “is ours, and the sooner Congress makes it so in law, as it is in fact, the better.” Mr. Olney appears to be imperfectly informed as to what took place on earth as he left the surface and before the worms woke him to a ghastly semblance of life. Before we made war upon Spain, Congress, from whom he demands so lovely work, declared to all the world that “the people of Cuba are, and or right ought to be, free and independent.” And then it added that “the United States hereby disclaims any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction or control over said island, except the pacification thereof and asserts its determination when that is accomplished to leave the government and control of the Island to its people.” Mr. Olney supplies a distinctly precious example of the ruling passion strong in death: in life he was ever in the forefront of progress and he is now in an advanced stage of decomposition. He is an able-bodied corpse—a picturesque and interesting remain; but he would be a good deal sweeter if a good deal deader.

When Mr. Olney is not only politically, but really and truly dead, I mean to erect a monument somewhere—anywhere will do—appropriately inscribed to his memory as follows:

Step lightly, stranger, this is sacred ground:
Dick Olney’s carcass cannot here be found.
He lies (God rest him) in another spot,
And every place is holy where he’s not.