

The Wasp
June 5, 1886

[Editorial]

The action of an Indiana court in hanging Mr. John Vollmer will be leniently judged when all the facts are known. Mr. Vollmer killed a woman who had refused to marry him. His only plea in justification was that she was a widow; and this was formally rejected as not a mitigating circumstance within the meaning of the law. The fact of a widow refusing an offer of marriage is of so astonishing novelty that, in the necessary absence of statute and precedent to guide the mind, no jury could rightly fix its place in the scale of provocation. The refusal of an offer of marriage by a widow constitutes an emergency, which, unknown to the record of experience, is not provided for in the teachings of philosophy. What a man would or ought to do under the circumstances of an exigency beyond the widest range and longest reach of apprehension it is impossible to conceive and would be madness to conjecture. As neither history, tradition nor observation could throw any light upon the motives of a man subjected to the stress and suggestions of so unfamiliar a situation, the jury in Mr. Vollmer's case acted with true and commendable conservatism in altogether ignoring his plea of justification. In the present state of our knowledge a widow's refusal can with no greater reason be classed as conduct tending to a breach of the peace than as conduct tending to the perpetration of a double somersault. If Mr. Vollmer had pleaded temporary insanity from astonishment it would have been a different matter.

When Mr. John Baker committed suicide the other day he left behind him a brief sketch of his life, in which he said:

During the late civil war I was cashier for John Perry Jr., then the leading stock and money broker here.

From this modest record of the man's military service it appears that he was eligible to membership in the Grand Army of the Republic and justly entitled to a handsome pension.

The incurable idiocy of a "time-honored custom" has no better illustration than in the parliamentary practice of eulogizing a deceased member. Apart from the reasonless and needlessness of the performance it is altogether immoral, in that it is a promoter of hardy and unashamed lying, for whatever may have been the private and public character of the deceased an iron tradition of the business requires that he be credited with all the virtues extant and extinct, and debited with none of the vices, follies and weaknesses which form so large a part of every human life. When a day is formally set apart, not for remarks upon the life, services and character of the departed, but expressly and avowedly for "eulogy," the performance is discredited in advance and the speeches are deprived of all their value before they are delivered. If a witness begins by declaring that he is not going to stick to the truth his testimony may have a certain interest to students of human nature, as showing the degree of intellectual and moral abasement that the witness himself finds congenial, but for any other commendable end it is an impotent means. There is scope enough in this matter for honest

differences of taste and feeling, but for our part we never hear nor read an eulogium on a deceased member without being almost sorry that he died.

No man is ever injured by doing his duty. — *The Chronicle*.

That is so, neighbor, for you got it out of a book. It is a bright blade of truth, and it cuts clean through the fallacious theory of pensions. Those hobbling, lop-sided, honeycombed and fragmentary veterans who are obtaining every year seventy millions of money by false pretenses were all hurt while running away.

Old Hi. Vickery, the burglar recently taken in Oakland, is a bad man now, but only fifteen years ago, while planning his first burglary, he was a constant attendant at divine service and taught a class in Sunday school. Even after conviction and sentence his piety burned warm and bright, and owing to his truly religious deportment his twenty-four years' term was reduced by "Executive clemency" to five, which enabled him to get to business again in 1876. He was then sentenced for a period of fifteen years, but thanks to the operation of the beneficent Goodwin law, Oakland had the advantage of his activity early in the present month. The interesting feature of this strange, eventful history is that an irreclaimable hypocrite and thief has, since October 1, 1876, been formally sent to the State prison for an aggregate period of thirty-nine years, and last week was legally free and diligently engaged in his chosen profession. Not only so, but he had in contemplation a steeper and deeper descent into crime, for there was found on him a list of the names and addresses of all Oakland's principal ladies. Mr. Vickery evidently intended to become a society reporter.

When Herr Most was taken into a New York court handcuffed to a thief it was probably "the proudest moment of his life" but the thief thought of his impenitent ancestor on the cross and wept to think how low the family had fallen.

In their deep affliction by the death of James C. Dennis, for the past fifteen years butler to Mrs. Mark Hopkins, the society editors of our local newspapers have the profound sympathy of the public. Mr. Dennis was a gentleman of urbane manners and those truly democratic instincts which so rarely adorn the characters of men in high station, and the humblest member of the press felt at ease in his presence. His hospitality was generous without ostentation. Many a grateful reporter can testify that the broken meats and heel-tap wines served in the basement of the "palatial mansion" on Nob Hill have nobly nerved him to the task of describing the splendors above and doubtless the action of Mr. Fred. Hackett, who once obtained secret access to the great residence through a soilpipe, made notes on his cuff with a white pencil and departed like a shadow, was the grandest mistake of that eminent journalist's distinguished career. Mr. Dennis' tolerance to society reporters was the more commendable because of the patrician contumeliousness with which they were treated by his illustrious mistress, whose haughty custom of handing them over to the police is extremely painful to their feelings. Mr. Dennis died in New York by his own hand, and the pistol shot which stilled that charitable heart was heard around the social world.

"General" Booth, commander of the Salvation Army, reports that in Great Britain alone, during the past year, that detestable organization has rescued one thousand girls from the streets and established nineteen homes for the poor and friendless. Brethren, let us throw rocks.

It is to be wished we might have a law against the use of wires in “floral tributes”: the “flower piece” is an abomination the abominableness whereof transcends expression. “Harps,” “hearts,” “crosses,” “stars,” “bells,” “ships” and the other vegetable crimes committed by an unhallowed ingenuity in gratification of an untutored taste ought to be subject to destruction by the police wherever found. We hold that no sane intelligence ever looked on any formal arrangement of flowers upon a shaping frame without consciousness of unchristian desire. Among the reprehensible abominations forwarded to New York last week, for use at Riverside Park on Desecration Day, was a “floral equestrian statue.” We were told that it represented the late General Grant and—of course — a horse; General Grant being distinguished from the horse by being on top. A thing of so venomous hideousness and paralyzing power never before desolated the field of human emotion. Why should florists be permitted to live by addition of new terrors to death and fame?

Democratic aspirants to a seat in the United States Senate who base their hopes of succeeding Mr. Hearst upon that statesman’s assurance that “there ain’t much in this, anyhow” are building their air-castles on a shifting wind: Mr. Hearst says that of everything. In 1876 he received a severe injury by falling down a winze in the Noble Dump mine, and was supposed to be dying. Being urged by a clergyman to repent his Democratic life he asked in faint and failing tones: “What can I get out of it?” “Eternal life, a seat at the right hand of God, the communion and fellowship of the redeemed and the bliss of the blessed angels,” replied the good minister, warmly. The feeble sinner’s questioning eyes darkened with a cloud of disappointment. “I don’t see much in that,” said he. Mr. Hearst is a “bear” from ’way back.

The trouble about the San Francisco Postmastership appears to come from the incalculable number of applicants for appointment to the no vacancy.

If Mr. Montague Levenson fail to obtain the Commissionership of Education many of us will feel that he has lived in vain. Some of us feel that way now.

When Dio Lewis had renounced his clay
And to the gate of Heaven had flown away,
Saint Peter, having ascertained his name
And that of the asylum whence he came,
Asked what on earth had been his occupation.
“I taught the laws of health and sanitation,”
Said Dio. Peter said: “If you’d applied
Your wisdom to yourself you’d not have died.”
“I practiced all,” said Lewis, “that I taught.
That’s not what killed me—’twas the cold I caught.”

There is doubtless a deal of humbug and sham sentiment connected with ceremonial observances of Memorial Day, or, as people singularly prefer to call it, Decoration Day. The oration—commonly administered by some aspiring politician ambitious to Bnuggle up to the popular heart—is mostly bosh, as a rule, the music is pretty certain to engender a raging toothache in the auditory nerve and the poem is apparently intended to make the dead heroes of the late lukewarmness turn a point or two in their graves. The “flower-pieces” (elsewhere in these columns duly execrated) must also afflict them with pangs of sharpness. But these things all are but the outward and visible (and audible) signs of an inner sentiment having just claim to toleration and even encouragement. Patriotism is a useful virtue. It not only inspires

us to defend our altars and our fires, but incites us to go abroad, overturning the altars and extinguishing the fires of our neighbors—than which nothing can be more gratifying to the national pride nor offer better promises of profit. To the genesis and development of patriotism the exercises of Memorial Day directly tend, and even those of us who profess a philosophy so high that from its airy altitudes national boundaries are indiscernible and racial peculiarities seem merged in a common character may reasonably forego our cynicism long enough to bestow a posy or two in furtherance of a sentiment commercially valuable. Let, therefore, the aspiring politician spout abundant bosh (shrewdly advantaging his personal canvass the while) the brass band laboriously deflate, the “poet of the day” make himself the butt of the day following and the fragrant vegetable be dumped in quantity alike upon the grave of the just and the unjust — the veteran irreparably tunneled with Confederate projectiles and the veteran who died of a fall over his own feet while escaping the conscription. Let the colonels and majors of the Grand Army suitably attest the valor of the private soldiers—now, alas, no more!—and honor their memory. These various rites are of easy annual endurance, our holidays are too few anyhow and, in short—to be entirely truthful—the observance of Memorial Day is the most beautiful, sensible, harmless and humanizing of all our national customs.

Our thoughtful contemporary, the *Call*, discerns in the facts that Guiteau was hanged and of his two lawyers one is divorced and the other in jail, proof that nothing can “consecrate a crime.” In the endeavor to strike the same trail of reasoning and pursue it to that remarkable conclusion our own faculties have become a trifle bewildered: we are “out on the mountains, wild and bare,” (that is, the *mountains* are wild and bare) of an intellectual desert where logic never lights the inhospitable gloom and the syllogism is a thing unknown.

The cigar-makers of our own race are entitled to the gratitude of the community for their invention and manufacture of a label attesting the genuine white-labor character of the goods to which it is affixed. The price of these labels to the Chinese manufacturer—\$2.50 a thousand—is pretty high, but in the present condition of public sentiment with regard to Chinese cheap labor, we cannot conscientiously say that it is exorbitant. Doubtless the labels could be made at a profit for less money, and competition in producing them will in time bring down the price, but at the present time two-and-a-half dollars is not too much to tax a Chinaman for that which enables him to sell three dollars’ worth of his unpopular handiwork for twelve dollars. Whenever he finds the payment a burden he will start a blue label factory of his own and compel the International Union to close their mill.

When Mr. Timothy Whalen, a rising young patricide, pleaded guilty Judge Murphy would not accept that view of the matter and insisted on giving the fellow a white man’s chance of acquittal. We excepted to that ruling and made an able and exhaustive argument sustaining the prisoner’s right to the plea of his choice. A jury trial having at a considerable expense confirmed Mr. Whalen’s opinion of his connection with his father’s death, Judge Murphy has thought it right to explain. He says that when he disallowed the plea of guilty he suspected that it was offered “under the influence of the benign sentiments of religion.” If that is so we have no more to say: the right of a judge to sit upon the bench is not more clear than his duty to sit upon “the benign sentiments of religion.”

Mr. Joseph T. Goodman, sometime Poet Laureate of the Comstock Lode, has written for the *Argonaut* a poem in praise of Mr. Frank Pixley and in encouragement of that person in some knightly warfare the exact nature of which is not imparted to the reader except by indirection in Mr. Goodman’s confession of his own failure in it. From this we are possibly

justified in thinking it a struggle with the English language and the elementary principles of versification. The beaten bard predicts that Sir Frank will meet with similar disaster—that he will be downed by the enemy and the stars will search his mortal scars with unguents, but wreath no crown for his brow. The passage is very beautiful:

And you, Sir Knight, may behold the stars
That beckon you fade and go down,
While they search with unguents your mortal scars
But wreath for your brow no crown.

Sidereal medical treatment for mortal scars is doubtless efficaciouser than tobacco for ticks, but if a fellow can't get any wreathed crown for his brow—and no star will wreath him a brow for his crown—he is likely to take cold. Such dismal vaticinations are enough to unhorse even a Knight of Labor. Call you that backing of your friend, Goodman Poet?

Mr. Goodman, however, can write very good verses when he tries—his a-th-rsh-p of the following lines is abundant evidence of that:

We met upon the ball-room floor
In well-bred formal fashion
She was my vis-a-vis— no more —
And as she slowly looked me o'er,
Her eyes showed naught of passion.

With cold tranquility her glance
Met mine, and I returned it
As coldly and as in the dance
I touched her hand and watched askance
Her cheek, no blushes burned it.

Two parted lives! You could not see
The dead-line Fate had chalked on
The ground between us two. Ah me!
I'd hated her from childhood— she
Despised the ground I walked on.

But perhaps Mr. Goodman's noblest poem, and the one by which he will be best known to both posterity and antiquity, is the famous "Ruminations on the Lost Cud of a Favorite Cow."

A San Francisco correspondent of the New York *Graphic* is solemnly read out of the profession by our local journals for declaring that Californian opposition to the Chinese takes the form of outrage and murder. There is not a journalist in the State but knows that the accusation is accurately true, and has been true any time in the last ten years. There is not a daily newspaper in the State which has not, within the last six months, expressly counseled and encouraged murder and outrage as a means of making the Chinese "go." Have they not openly commended the action of organized mobs who have notified whole communities to leave their homes and business, under the implied penalty of death? Have they not manifested their favor for cowardly and unlawful conspiracies dignified by the name of anti-Chinese popular meetings, at which political adventurers with everything to gain and village bummers with nothing to lose have impudently advocated expulsion with alternative violence? Has one

of them related with approval the manly and honest action of hundreds of our best citizens in sending to the right about the insolent dirty workers of these conspiracies who have “called round” to deliver their affronting *ultimata* at ranch, factory and kitchen? If the continual discovery in all the counties of this State of Chinese dead bodies full of gunshot wounds is not evidence of murder it may as well be called evidence of forgery as anything. If it is not an outrage to drive from their houses the peaceable inhabitants of entire shantytowns and burn the houses after they are out, it is at least a kind of Christian forbearance and law-respecting moderation not hitherto catalogued and expounded. Perhaps the daily newspapers of this city have “got onto” something better than the truth—as to the advantages of what they have embraced in preference, we are not apprised but at least it is not the truth. The truth is that California’s opposition to the Chinese habitually does take the form of murder and outrage. The mental attitude of the disreputable popular minority represented by our daily newspapers is like that of a sensitive person whom you call a rascal at the peril of your life, although he wouldn’t be anything else to save his own.

It ought to be unnecessary for us to explain in connection with this subject that we are heartily in favor of boycotting the Chinese and all who needlessly employ and patronize them. But we define boycotting as commercial and industrial non-intercourse, inaugurated without menace and maintained without violence. If anyone is hot to affirm the immorality or unlawfulness of that, he will have to look elsewhere for an opponent: there are degrees of intellectual disability that we do not undertake to cure. We would no more undertake to debate a question of that kind than we would dispute about the right to boycott socially a professional gambler or a woman of the town. The right of an individual, acting on his own motion, to deny his money, goods or labor to whom he will is above and beyond all question the right of a combination of persons to declare and urge concerted action, even of this peaceful character, the courts have not as yet clearly determined, but their hesitating and conflicting decisions, obviously following local opinion, give assurance of a final settlement acceptable to the common sense of the country, and without reference to statutes, obsolete, obsolescent or having any other merit of a long antiquity. As the law stands, there are actions which an individual may legally perform, but a number of individuals may not legally threaten the ugly word “conspiracy” covers—with reprobation—a multitude of sins. It is certain, anyhow, that the boycott according to St. McGlashan is already a discredited scripture and must be numbered among the political apocrypha. That cock won’t fight.

It is reported that Mr. John Smith will have a paper in the August *Warmedoverland Monthly*, and readers of that noble periodical fear this marks a departure from its time-honored policy of preferring good work to distinguished names. We are assured, however, that this literary comet, Mr. Smith, will splurge but once among the lesser lights of the regular constellation, the object being to teach them humility and make them content to remain “obscurely bright.”

(Source: Archive.org, <https://archive.org/stream/waspjanjune188616unse#page/n342/mode/1up>)