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The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent

Gentlemen of the secular press are dealing with the Rev. Mr. Sheldon not altogether fairly. To some very relevant considerations they give no weight. It is not fair, for example, to say, as the distinguished editor of the *North American Review* does, that in professing to conduct a daily newspaper for a week as he conceived that Christ would have conducted it, Mr. Sheldon acted the part of “a notoriety-seeking mountebank.” It seldom is fair to go into the question of motive, for that is something upon which one has the least light, even when the motive is one’s own. The motives that we think dominate us seem simple and obvious; they are in most instances exceedingly complex and obscure. Complacently surveying the wreck and ruin that he has wrought, even that great anarch, the “well-meaning person,” cannot have entire assurance that he meant as well as the disastrous results appear to him to show.

The trouble with Editor Harvey is inability to put himself in another’s place if that happens to be at any considerable distance from his own place. He makes no allowance for the difference in the point of view—for the difference, that is, between his mind and the mind of Mr. Sheldon. If Colonel Harvey had undertaken to conduct that Kansas newspaper as Christ would, he would indeed be “a notoriety-seeking mountebank,” or some similarly unenviable thing, for only a selfish purpose could persuade him to an obviously resultless work. But Mr. Sheldon is different—his is the religious mind, a mind having faith in an “overruling” Providence who can, and frequently does, interfere with the orderly relation of cause and effect, accomplishing an end by means otherwise inadequate to its production. Believing himself a faithful servant of that Power, and asking daily for its interposition for promotion of a high moral purpose, why should he not have expected its favour to his enterprise? To expect that was, in Mr. Sheldon, natural, reasonable, wise; his folly lay in believing in conditions making it acceptable. A person convinced that the law of gravitation is suspended is no fool for walking into a bog. Colonel Harvey may understand, but Mr. Sheldon cannot understand that Jesus Christ would not edit a newspaper at all.

The religious mind, it should be understood, is not logical. It may acquire, as Whateley’s did, a certain familiarity with the syllogism as an abstraction, but of its practical application, its real relation to the phenomena of thought, it can know nothing. That is merely to say that the mind congenitally gifted with the power of logic and accessible to its light and leading does not take to religion, which is a matter, not of reason, but of feeling—not of the head, but of the heart. Religions are conclusions for which the facts of nature supply no major premises. They are accepted or rejected according to the original mental make-up of the person to whom they appeal for recognition. Believers and unbelievers are like two boys confronting each other across the top of a high wall. Each got to his place by means of a

ladder denied to the other. They may fight if they will, but neither can kick away the other's support.

Believing the things that he does believe, Mr. Sheldon is entirely right in thinking that the main purpose of a newspaper should be the salvation of souls. If his religious belief is true, that should be the main purpose, not only of a newspaper, but of everything that has a purpose, or can be given one. If we have immortal souls and the consequences of deeds in the body reach over into another life in another world, determining there our eternal state of happiness or pain, that is the most momentous fact conceivable. It is the only momentous fact. All others are chaff and rags. A man who believing it to be a fact, does not make it the one purpose of his life to save his soul and the souls of others that are willing to be saved is a fool and a rogue. If he think that any part of this only needful work can be done by turning a newspaper into a gruel-pot, he ought to do so or (preferably) perish in the attempt.

The talk of degrading the sacred name, and all that, is mostly nonsense. If one may not test his conduct in this life by reference to the highest standard that his religion affords it is not easy to see how religion is to be made anything but a mere body of doctrine. I do not think the Christian religion will ever be seriously discredited by an attempt to determine, even with too dim a light, what, under given circumstances, its founder would do. What else is His great example good for? But it is not always enough to ask oneself, "How would Christ do this?" One should first consider whether Christ would do it. It is conceivable that certain of his thrifty contemporaries may have asked Him how He would change money in the Temple.

If Mr. Sheldon's critics are unfair his defenders are not, as a rule, much better. They mean to be fair, but they have to be foolish. For example, there is the Rev. Dr. Parkhurst. I shall give a single illustration of how this more celebrated than cerebrated "divine" is pleased to think that he thinks. He is replying to someone's application to this matter of Christ's injunction, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth." This command, he gravely says, "is not against money, nor against the making of money, but against loving it for its own sake and the dedicating of it to self-aggrandizing uses." I call this a foolish utterance, because it violates the good old rule of not telling an obvious falsehood. In no word or syllable does Christ's injunction give the least color of truth to the reverend gentleman's "interpretation"; that is the reverend gentleman's very own, and doubtless he feels an honest pride in it. It is the product of a controversial need—a characteristic attempt to crawl out of a hole in an enclosure which he was not invited to enter. The words need no "interpretation"; are capable of none; are as clear and unambiguous a proposition as language can frame. Moreover, they are consistent with all that we think we know of their author's life and character, for He not only lived in poverty and taught poverty as a blessing, but commanded it as a duty and a means of salvation. The probable effect of universal obedience among those who adore Him as a God is not at present an urgent question. I think even so faithful a disciple as the Rev. Dr. Parkhurst has still a place to lay his head, a little of the wherewithal to be clothed and a good deal of the power of interpretation to excuse it.

Senator Mark Hanna is reported to have an acute disorder of the knees. Evidently they have not the endurance distinguishing his countrymen. Mr. Hanna prays a good deal less upon his knees than he does upon his neighbors.

I observe that General Shafter has presented "to the city and county of San Francisco, in trust for the Native Sons of the Golden West," an ancient Spanish cannon taken at Santiago de Cuba. I wonder how General Shafter came into lawful possession of that gun

as his private property, and if he paid from his own pocket the considerable expense of its transportation from Cuba to California. Far, far from me be the wish to deprive the Native Sons of guns or anything else from which they can draw pride and pleasure; I only wish to assist them in perfecting their title by ascertaining wherein, if any wherein, it is faulty. At this distance from “the tumult and the shouting” of the presentation it looks as if when the orbicular hero of Cot Hollow conceived the notion that he owned the iberian bango he was suffering from what the fairest of her sex calls fatty degeneration of the mind.

Replying to a Senate resolution asking for a certain letter of Aguinaldo, Secretary Root is pained to explain that he cannot find it. That explanation is the administration equivalent for “the production of that letter is incompatible with the good of the Republican party.” Mr. Root is an able writer, skilled in the use of political English, but he would do better work if he would give less attention to the words in which he clothes his ideas and more to preservation of public documents. How would he like it if, on the day of judgment, when his account is demanded of the Recording Angel, that high functionary should explain that he couldn’t find the credits?

The social philosophers and economic sages who attribute the poverty of the many to the luxurious habits of the few ought to rejoice in the closing of the South African diamond mines by the war. The supply of diamonds has run so short that only the most monstrous offenders against honest labor can afford to wear them; whereby the immortal part of the walking delegate is affected with a mighty elation and The Cause advanced half a inch. True, in Antwerp and Amsterdam many a worthy diamond cutter out of work listens with imperfect joy to “the wolf’s long howl” outside his door. But consider the advantage to the principle of Fraternity!

I am not sure that I altogether understand this Puerto Rican tariff matter. I do not, for example, perceive how the proposal to reduce the duties between our home ports and Puerto Rican ports a matter of 85 per cent is a “blow” at the prosperity of that island. I don’t understand the “tyranny” of it. As an absolute free-trader, I am bound to welcome any reduction of these duties, even if it seems a smaller reduction than ought to be made. That, however, is not what I “rise in my place” to say. I want to congratulate the country on the conversion of the Republican party to free trade. For a weary tale of years that worthy organization has contended that high protective duties on imports are necessary to a country’s commercial and general welfare. The farmer has received a special and particular appearance of prosperity from such duties, for, although protecting nothing that he produces, they so increase the wages of the labourers in mills, factories, and so forth, that they can afford to purchase more liberally of what he has to sell—a most ingenious argument. Now when Puerto Rico falls into adversity and need relief, what do we see the Republican party proposing? A wholesome increase of the duties on her imports, in order to stimulate her infant industries, make her farmers fatter and fairer, and in brief, “scatter plenty o’er a smiling land”? Why, no, the proposal is to knock off 85 per cent of the duties on a large part of her imports. And this proposal comes with solemn sincerity from the party of tariff for protection with incidental revenue! If “Truthful James” were among us would he not sing:

Do I sleep? Do I dream?
Do I ponder and doubt?
Are things what they seem,
Or is visions about?
Is tariff protection a failure,

Or is the Protection played out?

Regarding the “military genius” of “the Lion of South African” it turns out that his “skillful strategy” in “extricating himself from Maagersfontein” to be caught at Paardeberg, was just what I said it was at the time—a shining example of military stupidity. For two or three days, while visible columns of British were enveloping his left and rear, his subordinate generals, including the distinguished Austrian officer commanding his artillery, vainly endeavoured to convince him that the movement was not a feint to distract him from defence of his front. When they finally got it through his thick and slab intelligence it was too late to get away. What evidence of genius there was in all that I discern most imperfectly, but doubtless it is clear to the “military experts” of the newspapers—whom I admire, but do not understand.

Heaven forbid that I disparage their talents, the good military experts. Their forecasts are sometimes surprisingly correct, and Buckle says that the ability to predict consequences is the highest and ripest form of human wisdom. A few days before Lord Roberts began the movement mentioned, one of these belted penmen explained that under favouring circumstances Lord Methuen might possibly escape from Cronje. And Lord Methuen really is still at large. Such prescience as that would suffice to foretell the escape of a skylark from a catfish.

Senator Morgan of Alabama says that Mr. Collis P. Huntington is trying to prevent his re-election. Surely he errs; ingratitude is the only vice of which Mr. Huntington has not been accused by the wicked. Four years ago, when he lay daily upon the grill of the Senate Committee on Pacific Railroads, Mr. Morgan turned him every few minutes with the utmost delicacy and tenderness, rubbed him with an excellent quality of salt and pepper and did all he could to make a roast of him which would be appetizing even to Collis himself. And when the last sad rites of the grill-room were concluded and the savory old gentleman had donned his habiliments and replaced his tapeworm (John Boyd), none so pleasantly as Senator Morgan bade him go and singe no more.

During the Wardner “bull-pen” investigation yesterday Representative Lentz directed the attention of an attorney to the overlooked circumstance that he (the attorney) ought to be kicked out of the window. He also signified his conviction that such would be the outcome of the situation if the attorney had not the favour (and presumably the support) of a majority of the committee. Emboldened by these fearless words, Representative Hay deemed it expedient to explain that if his veracity were discredited by the offending attorney all would not be well. At this point in these uncommon proceedings. Representative Cox stood forth announcing the offender’s corporal chastisement by himself as an imminent though conditional phenomenon. While these gentlemen were engaged in defining their positions with reference to the luckless attorney it was remarked by even the most delinquent observation that their manner had not the repose which stamps the cast of Vere de Vere. Among the other persons present, too, the spirit of unrest was rife, and even after the adjournment Representative Hull, the Chairman, discussing with Representative Lentz the probability of the latter continuing to be objectionable to the former, drew his mind to the inadequate area of the committee-room to contain them both in the case supposed. Altogether, yesterday’s investigation by this model committee was not devoid of interest even to a jaded attention familiar with larger inquiry in South Africa.

Hay—Your Majesty.

McKinley—Well, Sir John, what is it?

H.—I should like to read to your Majesty the draft of a letter I am preparing to Lord Pauncefote.

McK.—Go ahead, my boy, though I think that nature has provided you with better appliances for hearing than for reading.

H. (reading)—My Lord, with regard to the matter of your communication of this morning, the President deems it his Plain Duty—

McK.—Oh, no, not that, Sir John, not that.

H.—Why, sire, you do not know what I was going to read.

McK.—I know what you did read. The words “plain duty” are —well, you see, they—that is, you know, they recall—

H. (aside)—Well, I’ll be gam doodled. The duffer is gone clean daft or else—
(Aloud) Why, Your Majesty, what is the matter with those words? You used them in your message on Puerto Rico.

McK.—That’s what hurts. I must beg you to—

H. (aside)—There’s about where I meant it to hurt. Called me a bloomin’ American yesterday.

McK.—Do please leave out those words, Sir John—that’s a good fellow.

H.—Why, of course, if they are painful to Your Majesty I don’t wish—

McK. (with dignity)—They are ungrammatical.

In these columns two weeks ago I attempted to quote the concluding lines of Keats’ fine sonnet “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer”; but the line

Or like stout Cortes when with eagle eyes,

came out of “The Examiner” office in this shape:

Or stood like Cortez when with eagle eyes.

I don’t know who was in fault, nor do I greatly mind the mischance, being hardened to the like by “use and wont,” as every newspaper man naturally is. It is a matter of unceasing wonder to me that under the hard conditions of production a newspaper ever gets anything at all right.

But I do think that the paper’s readers might take things of that kind as philosophically as its writers, and that I ought not to be “snowed under” with letters about it—letters sympathetic, sarcastic, expostulatory, homiletic, humorous, derisive, comic and merely idiotic. And on mature reflection my correspondents will, I trust, take that view of it themselves, granting me full absolution for the sins that I do not commit and rewarding themselves for their magnanimity by pitching into the editor for those that I do commit.