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The War To Date

As was to be expected, the skinless patriot is forth, executing leaps and yawps of sensibility to attest his adermatous condition. I have letters from him, abundant and abusive, expressing his sense of my treasonable and false appraisal of the success of our navy. In Saturday's issue of this paper I said:

"The frozen truth is that up to the time of writing (Saturday morning) success has rewarded the American arms but twice: we won a great battle in Manila harbour, and succeeded in landing a few arms for the insurgents at Cabanas."

This statement was really open to criticism as inaccurate, for the attempt to arm the Cubans failed and the weapons were taken back to Key West. So we had on Saturday and have to-day (Thursday) only one victory to our credit. Through all the shouting of the "correspondents" and the thunder of the editors an experienced military ear hears on every breeze that blows from the West Indies the note of defeat. If we credit our naval commanders with an intention to do anything more serious than make a great noise and retire under cover of the echo we must admit failure after failure—an unbroken succession of aborted endeavors. Doubtless in many instances no intention more serious than amusing our ships' crews and firing the national heart was entertained; but this can hardly be said of such affairs as those of Cardenas, San Juan de Porto Rico and Cienfuegos. These were pitched battles—deliberate attempts of our fleets to reduce fortifications and capture cities. Naturally, in the dear old familiar way, an afterthought intention pushed itself forward in mitigation of the discomfiture—it always does. We are told that the Cardenas affair was undertaken merely to destroy some troublesome gunboats; and lost the failure to do even so much as that should too much depress the national spirits we are treated to an apocryphal account of their destruction afterward. The "intention" at Cienfuegos was only to "cut a cable." That is, we asked to believe that a naval officer of the United States, of sound mind and legal age, deliberately and with enterprise aforethought sent two small boats into a hostile harbor to drag for a cable in broad daylight; and that the fire of our vessels was merely for the protection of the men engaged in the enterprise. Reflecting minds may be persuaded to take that view of the matter when shown that there is no night in the latitude of Cienfuegos. In the meantime it is comforting to know that as an incident to the attack the cable seems actually to have been cut.

The defeat at San Juan is covered up variously; the favorite explanation seems to be that while hourly expecting a battle with the Spanish fleet Admiral Sampson exposed his big ships to the guns of a fortified place in order to destroy some coal. That the coal is not affirmed to have been destroyed must be accepted as an instance of uncommon candor. It is to the credit of Admiral Sampson that in his official report of the engagement he does not mention the coal and scorns to say anything to minify his failure: he does not "claim" to have silenced the forts, even, nor to have wrought the customary "great slaughter." He began an action at daylight with his

most powerful ships. He had all day in which to finish the work, but at the end of three hours retired, why? There can be but one intelligent answer, for victors do not withdraw: he had found the place too strong for him. The promptness with which the newspaper correspondents immediately wrung a “capitulation” from the victorious Spanish commandante and dispatched eight thousand (8,000) United States troops from Key West to occupy the undamaged forts is worthy of all praise; such deeds of heroism and prowess shine in the general murk.

American courage needs no stimulation, as was abundantly shown in the Northern States during the dark days of the civil war and in the Southern during the rest of that turbulent time. He is not the best patriot who makes his country ridiculous in order to cheer it. And how ridiculous it is to celebrate defeats as victories we observe when it is done by the enemy.

Happily our failures have been small and more significant than important. Noisy bombardment of fortified places—much of it from a distance of miles—is merely military incivility. There has been no real fighting in the West Indies: our losses in action have hardly exceeded a dozen men, and there is no reason to suppose that the enemy’s have been greater. I do not forget the report of an enterprising compatriot who after one of the recent bombardments walked ashore and counted one hundred and thirteen dead Spaniards in a bunch; but unfortunately this pious person buried them darkly at dead of night, and they were counted by no one else; so it is not a “record.” A fairly good rule is never to give the least credence to estimates of the enemy’s losses. Our official reports of our own losses are credible; so are those of the Spanish regarding theirs; but neither side in any war ever had the honesty to approach to within a marine league of the truth in speaking of its own handiwork in thinning out the opposition. It is a dread and dismal fact that most interesting and worthy personage, the military hero, is irreclaimably addicted to the baleful habit of saying the thing that is not. He is endowed by his creator (the mustering officer) with a strenuous and passionate inveracity. That picturesque quality seems, indeed, inseparable from the profession, or at least the practice, of arms everywhere; and I entertain no doubt that after expelling General Satan from Heaven General Michael, in his official report of the engagement, absurdly overstated the numerical strength of the insurgent dead.