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The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent

At the Ohio Democratic convention the holy man of God chosen to invoke the divine favour made so eloquent an appeal for it that it was received (here below) “with rounds of vociferous applause.” The Democratic party is not a party of prayer; it is too Jeffersonian for that; but it knows a good thing when it hears one, and backs it up. And let it be understood that it is a pious party, too, in its way; and if after that convention had nominated John R. McLean for governor the angel Gabriel, with one foot in Zanesville and the other in Lake Erie had signified the Divine sense of the situation by declaring that time should be no more some gentleman would doubtless have risen in his place and seconded the motion.

The Democratic Expansionist with his ear to the ground will find little ease in the fact that the applauded prayer of the Ohio convention’s Chaplain was an urgent plea for deliverance of the Filipinos from the “brute force” (commanded by Gen. Otis) “now afflicting them.” Nor will he be comforted by the incorporation of that sentiment into the “platform.” These be signs and portents that he will do well to heed. For president (subject to approval by the Democratic national convention of 1900) Emilio Aguinaldo. For vice-president Elwell S. Otis.

An anarchist plot has been discovered in Brazil, a young girl chosen by lot having been sent to France to displode the buildings of the Paris exposition with dynamite. It looks as if she would have to hurry, or she will be too late: they will have been blown up by home industry. The Parisians are very enterprising and forehanded in matters of local improvement.

A chap named Gartland is entitled to my acknowledgements for pointing out a misquotation in one of my paragraphs on Mr. Edwin Markham’s notion about the prevailing “system of social injustice.” It seems that I quoted him as saying that “it is no man’s fault” whereas he said that “it is no one man’s fault”—which is a very different thing. As to that, I can only say that I quoted the words as I read them—or misread them—and it seemed odd that Mr. Markham should think that way. I had previously believed, and am now happy to resume my faith, that he thought just as many scoundrels concerned in setting up that system as the whole number of human beings that have been better off than himself. There is no more temptation to misquote Mr. Markham than to throw gravel at an ox in a quicksand.

Admiral Dewey has with him on the Olympia some Chinese sailors who at Cavite fought gallantly for the country upon whose coast they are forbidden by law to set foot. It is a glorious country quite the same—as it was a few years ago when a Negro orator said: “On Lake

Champlain my father fought in blood up to his ankles to gain for me the liberty of which I am now deprived by law.” One wishes that God would remove these dark races; he seems to have created them on purpose to make us ridiculous.

An Oakland burglar has been arrested in Santa Cruz, but there may be difficulty in getting him back to the scene of his activity. They will naturally want to keep him over there and make him Country Treasurer.

Apropos of one of my recent bold ventures into the field of literary criticism, an esteemed correspondent (with a truer taste than that distinguishing my austere friend of the “Evening Post” from an isosceles triangle) writes me what follows:

“Your treatment of the ‘hoss’ story acted with good results on one I know who was suffering from ptomaine poisoning by the Harum book. But novel-devourers are subjected to things more sickening. I have in mind a book now in ‘its thirtieth’ edition—‘The Honorable Peter Sterling.’ The women and the critics have brayed “—my correspondent must mean prayed—louder and longer over it than over ‘David Harum’: yet it fairly reeks with rotten sentiment. Its author still lives and writes: have you not a little thwack for him?”

I should dearly love to deal the fellow a buffet or two, for I’ve no doubt he robustly deserves to incur that mischance and much more, but I have not read the book. In order that one may salute an author’s sensibilities with accuracy, tickling him in his lonesome rib with precision and effect, it is needful that one know a little of his work; otherwise one may call him a blathering jobbernowl when in fact he is only a hebetudinous gawber. Literary criticism is a delicate art in which nice distinctions should be preserved and reproof suggested with an infinite refinement of intimation. No, I am not qualified to allot to the creator of the Hon. Pete the exact proportion of praise and blame that the cacocephalus gastropod requires.

One who has not lived a life of controversy, yet has some knowledge of its laws and methods, would, I think, find a difficulty in conceiving the infantile ignorance of the race in general as to what constitutes argument, evidence and proof. Even lawyers and judges whose profession it is to consider evidence, to sift it and pass upon it, are but little better than others in all that when the matter in hand is philosophy, or religion, or something outside the written law. Concerning these high themes I have heard from the lips of hoary benchers so idiotic argument based on so meaningless evidence as made me shudder at the thought of being tried before them on an indictment charging me with having swallowed a neighbor’s step-ladder. Yet doubtless in a matter of law these venerable babes would deliver judgment that would be roughly reasonable and approximately right. The theologian, on the contrary, is never so irrational as in his own trade; for, whatever religion may be, theology is a thing of unreason altogether, an edifice of assumptions and dreams, a superstructure without a substructure, an invention of the devil. It is to religion what law is to justice, what etiquette is to courtesy, astrology to astronomy, alchemy to chemistry and medicine to hygiene. The theologian cannot reason, for persons who can reason do not go in for theology, Its name refutes it: theology means knowledge of God, concerning whom some say that he has no existence and all the others that he cannot be known.

I set out to show the folly of men who think they think—to give a few typical examples of what they are pleased to call “evidence” supporting their views. I shall take them from a letter written by a man of far more than the average intelligence and dealing with the doctrine of

immortality. He is a believer and thinks it possible that immortal human souls are on an endless journey from star to star inhabiting them in turn. And he proves it thus:

No one thinks of space without knowing that it can be traversed: consequently the conception of space implies the ability to traverse it.

But how far? He could as cogently say: “No one thinks of the ocean without knowing that it can be swum in; consequently the conception of ocean implies the ability to swim from New York to Liverpool.” Here is another precious bit of testimony:

The fact that man can conceive the idea of space without beginning or end implies that man is on a journey without beginning or end. In fact, it is strong evidence of the immortality of man.

Good—now observe the possibilities in that kind of “reasoning”: The fact that a pig can conceive the idea of a turnip implies that the pig is climbing a tree bearing turnips—which is strong evidence that the pig is a fish. In each of the gentleman’s dicta the first part (the “minor premise”) no more “implies” what follows than it implies a baboon on a crimson iceberg.

Of the same unearthly sort are two more of this innocent’s deliveries:

The fact that we do not remember our former lives is no proof of their having never existed. We would remember them if we had accomplished something worth remembering.

Note the unconscious *petitio principii* involved in the word “our” and the pure assumption in the second sentence.

We all know that character, traits and habits are as distinct in young children as in adults. This shows that if we had no pre-existence all men would have the same character and traits and appearance, and would be turned out on the same model.

As apples are, for example, or pebbles, or cats. Unfortunately we do not all know, nor does any of us know, nor is it true, that young children have as much individuality as adults. And if we did all know it, or if any of us knew it, or if it were true, neither the fact itself nor the knowledge of it would “show” any such thing as that the differences could be produced by pre-existence only. They might be due to the will of God, or to some agency that no man has ever thought about, or has thought about but has not known to have that effect. In point of fact, we know that such peculiarities of character and disposition as a young child has are not brought from a former life across a gulch whose brinks are death and birth, but are endowments from the lives here of others. They are not individual, but hereditary—not vestigial, but ancestral.

I have noticed this gentleman’s arguments at some length because of all the many “replies” to my recent remarks on immortality they are the least unintelligent. Moreover, in support of the doctrine that they are supposed to buttress they are as valid as any that it has been my happiness to see or hear. From which I draw the inference that men of sense who expect to live forever maintain an iron silence about it. The kind of “argument” here illustrated by horrible example is not peculiar to religious or doctrinal themes, but characterizes men’s reasoning in general. It is the rule everywhere—in oral discussion, in books, in newspapers. Assertions that mean nothing, testimony that is not evidence, facts having no relation to the matter in hand, and (everywhere and always) the sickening non sequitur, the conclusion that has nothing to do with

the premises—"everything goes." I know not if there is another life or not, but if there be I do hope that to obtain it all will have to pass a rigid examination in the art of not being a fool.

If Dewey really "dreads" the "reception" in New York it is unfortunate that some Christian soul does not apprise him of his liberty to decline it. There is nothing compulsory about it; as great men as he have refused to be made into shows for gratification of homolaters and gravel-gangers. This country might be fairly prosperous even if kneelers and shouters were denied expression.

"Gov. Gage," a lady writes in a local newspaper, "is a man of intense personal magnetism." Yes, dear, he is a magnetic noodle true to the pull.