

San Francisco Examiner
August 20, 1899

The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent

For several months the booksellers of the principal cities in this country have been reporting that the book "David Harum" sells better than any other. The sales have already gone into the hundreds of thousands. It has been reviewed with acclamation by all the popular newspapers and magazines, stares at you from every "centre table" and is flung into your ears whenever you have the hardihood to enter a "parlor." "David Harum" is one of the most candidly vulgar and stupid books ever proffered to the pigly taste and clamwise understanding of that infinite ass, "the general reader." It is of course written in "dialect"—that is, in the loutly locution of the unlettered (and therefore interesting) kind making a go at his mother-speech. Its "dialect" is so particularly offensive and sickening that I suppose it to be a "transcript from nature"; persons to whom it is possible would certainly not deny themselves the happiness of speaking it; and the book may have some value to the hardy philologer tracing backward the line of linguistic evolution to the grunt of the primeval razorback hog. To record the ropey vocal riddances of gowks and gabies may be one of the high purposes of popular fiction, for anything that I know, but at least its authors might, in the interest of art, charge its horrible words with something that a person guiltless of congenital idiocy might think to be thoughts. And perhaps they would if that pandemic infirmity had not marked them for its own.

Hereto appended are a few aphorisms from "David Harum," selected by one of the book's local reviewers, who lays waste the vocabulary of eulogism to signify his sense of its greatness:

A hoss trade ain't like anythin' else. A feller may be straighter 'n a string in ev'rythin' else an' never tell the truth—that is, the hull truth—about a horse.

Hosses don't know but dreadful little, really. Talk about hoss sense—wa'al, the' ain't no such thing.

It ain't a bad idee, in the hoss business, anyway, to let the other feller make a dollar once 'n a while.

In a hoss trade do unto the other feller the way he'd like to do unto you—an' do it fust.

A reasonable amount of fleas is good for a dog—they keep him f'm broodin' on bein' a dog.

The kind of honesty that won't actually steal 's a kind of fool honesty that's common enough: but the kind that keeps a feller's mouth shut when he hadn't ought to talk 's about scurcest thing goin'.

Let us translate this profound philosophy into English and we shall see how much of its interest it owes to the fascination of its cornfield style:

A man honest in all else may be otherwise in a horse trade.
Horses are unintelligent.
In trading horses it is sometimes profitable to lose.
In trading horses cheat.
A dog's fleas—

But that is enough: a man to whom this coarse and shallow nonsense is acceptable literature may congratulate himself on having been born with a self-respect invincible to his own contempt. It is related that the author of "David Harum" died a few months before it was published. If things were ever ordered aright in this pernicious world he would have died a few months before writing it.

While to literature inclined I may remark that that learned and delightful writer, Prof. Harry Peck, the editor of "The Bookman," has steered his literary galleon against the rock of Poetry, where he remains, hard and fast, a spectacle to the enlightened. It was upon this rock that the gallant craft of the late Charles A. Dana struck and split. It truth, the rock is a kind of touchstone to test the merit of navigators on the high seas of letters. The skillful mariner lands upon it with security and joy, but it is fatal to him who has not the secret. Dana wrecked his reputation as an oracle in the world of literature by pronouncing "Gunga Din" one of the ten greatest poems in our language: and now Peck declares "The Vampyre" "the best short poem that has been written in the past ten years"—these "besters" are fond of the number ten, somehow. I doubt if Prof. Peck (or for that matter Dana) was treated by the Kipling craze as Puck treated Nick Bottom the weaver; I think it was Madam Nature that "put a head on him," and he himself indiscreetly directed attention to it. His disability is a common enough one; not one writer in a dozen knows poetry when he sees it; can distinguish it from mere verse; can detect and feel that subtle something suffusing and transfiguring the words—that

vibration and the light
Of worlds before and after.

There is nothing of that in either of the two poems mentioned, and they are therefore not poems at all—even if we grant that "Gunga Din" is full of feeling and "The Vampyre" written, as Mr. Peck says, "with a pen of iron dipped in vitriol." To one unaware how common is the congenital intellectual delinquency noted above the phenomenon of a cultivated and brilliant man of letters solemnly preferring "The Vampyre" to "Recessional" as poetry would seem incredibly grotesque. Some would call it wicked, and I am myself not altogether sure that Prof. Peck ought not sternly and firmly to be prayed for.

Bret Harte has again related the old, old story of the trouble that he had in getting "The Luck of Roaring Camp" into the magazine that he edited himself; the story having been thought immoral. And that reminds a New York paper of what Robert Louis Stevenson wrote to Sidney Calvin: "This is a poison bad world for the romancer, this Anglo-Saxon world. I usually get out of it by not having any w-m-n in it at all." The blanks are mine, despite his pretensions to delicacy Stevenson, I am sorry to say, wrote the shocking word in full.

One of the latest political assassinations in France was that of a lock-maker. *Vive la Republique!*—to Hades with all who live by baffling the will of the majority.

Since Mr. Edwin Markham abandoned poetry for demagoguery he has naturally taken to cant and snivel: you shall not read a dozen lines of his prose without encountering the words “God,” “Christ” and “Bible,” all duly invoked for fortification of the faith and instruction of the brethren and sisters. He knows—none better—that anything can be proved by the Bible, and he works that open secret for all that it is worth. Here is an example of his artless manipulation of the oracle; it will serve, too, to show this white soul’s innocence of logic and superiority to sense. With one eye upon the Holy Book and the other upon the possessions of a prosperous neighbor he propounds the doctrine that all property is held in trust (under Providence) for the common good—including his good. He proves that by solemnly quoting: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” His intimate acquaintance with the Divine Will (one of the tools of his trade) enables him to add: “God desires that men should have an equal access to his storehouses of good things. Otherwise He would not be the Father of the people.” One with whom God has not consulted and advised may be permitted to think that possibly the purpose of an incomprehensible Deity’s holy will could be served by giving access to his “storehouses of good things” to the thrifty or fortunate persons only who provide them—as an earthly father may encourage thrift in an earthly child. I do not know that this is so. I do not know just what kind of world God “desires” this to be. About such a one as it is, I fancy, for it is denied to me to discern how any number of human beings, however rich and influential and unscrupulous, can baffle the will of their all-wise and all-powerful Creator. Whenever the Rev. Mr. Markham and the red brethren shall have illustrated their understanding of Fraternity by pushing their arms into the treasure-chests of their more prosperous neighbors I shall believe that God desires them to do that; at present it seems to be his wish that they crouch in the Cave of Adullam, blinking like bats, and alternately cursing and driveling.

But not only is the earth the Lord’s, but also “the fullness thereof.” So all property belongs to the people as a whole. And if by any chance it gets lodged in the hands of one man he is bound to look upon it as a sacred trust handed down from on high.

In point of logic this is like saying “Birds of the air have nests, so a fish can swallow a turtle,” “Twice two are four; so black is not only white but green.” The possibilities that inhere in this unearthly syllogizer’s “so” are startling. When he has stated, or implied, his major and minor premise you can no more forecast his conclusion that you can chart beforehand the leap of a shot cat. When one has arrived at that stage of intellectual Nirvana in which the words of authority mean whatever one wishes them to mean one is probably reluctant to be disturbed in that happy habit of mind; so I shall leave Mr. Markham his conviction that in the passage quoted the word “fullness” is obliging enough to mean “property,” as he desires. But I really must protest that “the Lord” and “the people as a whole” are not convertible terms—two names for one personality. If all the property in the world is the Lord’s it no more follows that it belongs (also) to the people as a whole than that it belongs to the souls of the dead, the priesthood, or the sharks at the bottom of the sea. Mr. Markham’s outfit as a thinker consists of two tanks, in one of which he keeps his dreams, in the other his facts. He selects a dream for its beauty, displays it in the most captivating light and then, pulling a fact out of the other tank at random, shouts: “Behold the proof!” The more one reads this ready reasoner the wiser seems the goo-gooing from the moist muzzle of a new-laid babe.

But I like Mr. Markham's (and "the great Mr. Ruskin's") notion that if you are employing a man to make lace and paying him every day the price of a good blanket you ought to discharge him forthwith in order that (having received wool and a loom by inspiration from Heaven) he may put in six weeks' work in making a bad blanket for himself. That is what Mr. Markham calls getting off the man's back. The man himself has another name for it; and when it is done to a number of workmen at once they call it a "lockout" and smash your factory windows with stones from the street. Alas, why cannot they learn from their good friends, the philosophers, poets, artists and unasserted dreamers, when they are well off and which side they are buttered on?