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A Freak War

Of all wars concerning which we have knowledge—and history is mainly a narrative of wars—none has been distinguished by so many odd features as this of ours. Somebody has dubbed it the Yanko-Spanko war—a comical name which seems likely to stick for its apt and felicitous suggestion of something comical in the war itself. On examination we find this element easily “isolated,” as Lewis Carroll’s imagination isolated the grin of the cat, or, for a closer analogy, an even more daring fancy might detach that of a skull.

If in an opera bouffe the sovereign of Patagascar, moved by the sufferings of the oppressed people of Novagonia, whom their wicked rulers were starving, were to undertake their deliverance by a strict blockade of the country we should call it great fun. The notion of “starving out” the oppressors, with all the resources of the country at their command, in order to succor their landless and penniless victims, would nimbly and sweetly recommend itself unto our gentle sense of humor. Yet that is what (without a smile) we have done for the Cuban “reconcentrados,” who made their moan to us, and to whose tale of woe we responded with a blockade. Truly we must be terrible indeed to our enemies if so fatal to our friends.

I have no disposition to criticize the blockade of Cuban ports as a military measure; it is both right and expedient and would in itself have been sufficient to effect the surrender of the entire island if the Spanish navy had been first destroyed in Spanish ports, or wherever found. But as a main incident of a “holy war” avowedly undertaken in the cause of humanity to break a famine in Cuba, it “goes neare to be fony.”

No less amusing (to our side) are some of the more spectacular scenes of our military extravaganza. In the first battle, when a dozen of the enemy’s warships and hundreds of their crews were destroyed not an American was killed. But the pranking gods who composed the piece were not utterly devoid of literary conscience; they mitigated the incredible disparity by no neat a touch of restraint as the wounding of a half-dozen victors by explosion of their own ammunition; the gods thereby securing something of the ludicrous effect natural to one’s hoisting with one’s own petard.

The most humorous feature of this battle is without a parallel in comic history; it reads like a narrative by Mark Twain or the late William Edgar Nye. After the American commander had battered the enemy’s ships for several hours, and “had them going,” he deliberately ceased firing and steamed out of range, greatly to the relief and joy of the opposition, who saw in the movement a confession of defeat. Alas for their hopes!—the “Yankee pigs” had merely gone to breakfast! After the refection they returned, picking their teeth, and made a finish of the fight. We are all proud of them, but they must excuse us if we laugh.

When the stage was set for the next great naval scene “the Master of the Show” had observed that in his topsey-turvey travesty of war he had gone too far—had transcended the

decent limits of the possible; so he met the demands of artistic vraisemblance by solemnly providing that the victors should have one man killed. With this concession to realism the dead man's surviving seamates were so delighted that they raised a memorial fund for the widow. And now a movement is afoot to comfort the defeated Admiral for the loss of his men and ships by presenting him with a homestead in Florida.

At Santiago the naval operations were for several weeks confined to terrific "bombardments," the horrible uproar being punctuated at intervals by explosions of gun-cotton shells from the "Vesuvius." Sometimes of a stales night this vessel would sneak up close to and utter a brace of earthquakes against a hillside, or into the lone waters of the harbor, or wherever it might please Providence to direct them. For several hours the battleships bombarded the city at a distance of five miles across a concealing mountain range, laying the guns by chart and compass and giving them elevation by listing the ships. After several weeks of this terrible work (tremendously applauded by the gallery) the place was taken by the army and it was found that none of the defenses had been materially injured by the bombardment, no guns had been dismantled, nobody killed. "And the cat laughed."

The fighting about Santiago by the land forces was real enough and tragic enough to satisfy the most exacting demand for something "bluggy," and Heaven send that we have no need of more of it; but in one of its immediate results the "freak" character of the war comes again into attention. The beleaguering army persuaded its not very hard pressed enemy to yield by promising to send it to its native land across the sea! If earlier in the campaign each man had been promised in addition an acre of land and a mule "effusion of blood" could probably have been prevented altogether. Doubtless it is safer, cheaper and every way better to send Spaniards to Upper Spain than to Lower—better even than to feed them as prisoners until it shall please their Government to submit and end the war. The inexpediency of it is not here affirmed; only the humor of it—which if the reader fail to discover let him thank Heaven for a serious nature and pass on.

Another humorous feature of this merry war is seen in the grave, not to say solemn, discussion of whether we shall keep or give away the Philippine islands. For three months the entire nation has been debating this question with engaging earnestness, without coming to any conclusion, and the administration is equally undecided. In negotiating a peace it hesitates between retention and restoration, and with an intelligent eye upon the next presidential election finally unloads the responsibility upon the unheeding shoulders of a commission. The fun of all this is that we can neither keep the islands nor give them up, for we have not yet been able to get possession of them. We hold just as much of them as is covered by the feet of our soldiers. Even the single city of Manila, lying beneath the guns of our fleet, we dare not take if able, for fear of provoking a rupture of our precarious relations with the insurgent army and the eight or ten millions of people behind them. The utmost that we can hope is such a shadowy title to these islands as we can compel Spain to give; actual possession is a matter of military operations extending over the lifetime of a generation and consuming hundreds of thousands of lives. Yet the debate on surrendering the Philippines or keeping them goes bravely on. I venture to suggest that if ambitious to promise hilarity in Heaven we can be equally entertaining by considering what we shall do with Mars and appointing a governor-general of the Pleiades, with headquarters in the Lick Observatory.

In both Cuba and Philippina (the name is deferentially submitted) we are confronted with a possibility that is as droll as anything known to the stage. At Manila, indeed, it is more than a possibility; it has the imminence of a reasonable expectation. All signs foreshadow the necessity of an alliance with those whom we went to conquer, against those whom we went to aid. At Manila this amusing peril, though imminent is evitable; by tact and patience we may put the hemlock from our lips; but in Cuba we shall almost certainly have to drain it with a constricted nose and a wry mouth. Nothing is more certain than that the Cuban insurgents are a minority and in the popular government that we are pledged to set up will be outvoted and undone. That they will submit and “bow to the will of the people” is not to be expected; submission to the majority is to them unthinkable; of the will of the people they have never heard. They will indubitably take to the hills again and Gen. Wyler will not laugh alone at our efforts to find and subdue them.

It is a good war, and no American has cause to blush for our part in it. Some of even its drollest incidents have been singularly creditable to us. For example, our bloodless victories by sea and our magnanimity to the vanquished on land. In respect to that, indeed, we have made a record of which we may be justly proud. IN fact, there has been on neither side much of that reasonless animosity and duncelike inability to be just which is war’s ugliest characteristic. The traditional Spanish cruelty and treachery have not been in evidence—a fact most gratifying to those of us who hold that manner is an index to character—that gracious words and pleasing ways come of good hearts. True, they may be counterfeited by a rascal who is a good actor and ever attentive to the part that he is playing, but from such a thing as a whole nation of good actors heaven has spared us, and, from highest to lowest, the Spaniards are a people of charming courtesy. The rudest and most illiterate of them will address another of his class, even his own wife, with a ceremonious yet simple civility, and aptness and delicacy of compliment and a natural dignity of delivery which are the envy and despair of our ruder race, imperfectly accessible to the contagion of refinement and signifying with coarser speech the sturdy brutality that subjugates the world. The Latin race has had its day. Despite certain savage “survivals” that mar its social life, it has carried personal refinement to a pitch incompatible with dominion in a world of “bloody noses and cracked crowns”; but in the sunset of its power its face is suffused with something of the glory of the transfiguration.

We can conquer these people without half trying, for we belong to the race of gluttons and drunkards to whom dominion is given over the abstemious. We are descendants and successors of the robber barons, the villeins and the earls of mediaeval days who, unlike in all else, felt the fellowship of drink and bloodshed—gorged themselves torpid upon roast boar, swilled mead out of cow’s horns until incapable, and after a swinish sleep overran a province or two by way of picking themselves up for another bout at the trenches and the tun. We are successors to the Berserkers, who fought all comers and all stayers, and drank themselves shivering drunk in every port of Europe. We are of the blood of the English, who with seventy thousand devotees of the great Belly God, to whom they offer abundant sacrifice of beef and grog, can hold in subjection and punish for infraction of their will two hundred and fifty millions of Asiatic vegetarians and teetotalers.

Yes, we can beat these soft spoken, temperate and picturesque Spaniards—beat them in boasting, beat them in swearing, beat them in battle and lie about them afterward as we did before—as during the period of our own civil dissensions we lied about one another. We can thrash them consummately and every day of the week, but we cannot understand them; and is it not a great golden truth, shining like a star, that what one does not understand one knows to be

bad? Yet at the end of it all, when the clamor of battle is heard no more upon the hills and ocean no longer shivers from the shock of great guns, it may dawn upon use, slowly in the mild, dry light of a growing revelation, that the Spaniard is not so very bad a chap after all. And each elated American laying off his armor may perhaps hear and heed the still small voice of the conscience in his breast as it ventures to whisper: "And pray which of the saints are you?"