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The Seamy Side of It

If on ascertaining the cause of the “Maine” disaster we had expressed our sense of the situation by a demand upon Spain, and thereafter confined our diplomacy to its discussion to the ultimatum stage, our position would be stronger than it is. By paltering with other questions which that gigantic crime so overshadowed in importance and interest that they could be kept in public attention only by the administration’s diligent assertion of their primacy we have suffered the wily, trained diplomats of Spain to “put us in a hole.” To all appearance, every demand that we have made upon Spain has been conceded. We protested against Weyler, and he has been recalled; against his policy of reconcentration, and it has been abandoned; against the imprisonment of Americans, and all have been released; against Spanish misgovernment, and there has been offered the boon of Cuban misgovernment; against famine, and not only have we been permitted to relieve it, but a sum for its relief has been granted from the Spanish treasury; against an inhuman warfare, and hostilities have been stayed by an armistice, or rather in the endeavor to obtain one. It is difficult to discern what, with regard to these pet matters of the administration, is left to us to quarrel about. The ground has been completely cut from under our feet, and in the eyes of Europe—in the eyes of the pope, whose “interference in American politics” we have actually invited—in the eyes of the Powers, with which it has been our prudent desire to stand well—we are virtually without a grievance. We may feel that behind and beneath all these concessions is the insincerity of the Spanish character. We may profoundly distrust the good faith of the Spanish Ministry and people. It is open to us to hold (and we may be unable to think otherwise) that all these concessions promise no permanent advantage to the Cuban people. No lasting peace in the Island, no long relief to us from the burden of neutrality; but from the viewpoint of the European powers Spain has yielded everything to our demands and we nothing to their suggestions.

If we wanted war—and indubitably that is what our people do want, for a whole generation has passed since we had war, and we are “spoiling for a fight”—we should have made demands with which our enemy could not, or would not, comply. Nothing less than extrusion of Spain from the Western hemisphere will satisfy us, for, as matters now stand, ought to satisfy us; but that we have not demanded. We are determined that Cuba shall be free—free for self-government, or free for ultimate annexation, as heaven may be pleased to direct—yet we have not at the time of this writing demanded the freedom of Cuba. In our anxiety to seem just, without necessarily being so; to draw the favor of Europe; to “get a reputation” for moderation and restraint—we have incurred the fate of the disingenuous. We have had the deep misfortune to meet a compliant opponent, and unless we now make a daring and dangerous innovation in our policy we are his. We may beat him with arms by sea and land (and we may not) but morally he has taken us into camp and is making a show of us. Thanks to a president who wanted to be

sly and sure, we are trapped like a rat. It is perhaps natural that our discomfiture and rage should find expression in free fights on the floor of the House of Representatives.

For months it has been obvious that Spain was outwitting us in the game of diplomacy. Our clumsy methods were not match for her subtle ones. Our incapacity for that sort of thing is partly racial, partly political. There is never safety for us but in honestly asking for what we want, at the outset, and sticking to it through such gradations of compulsion as may be required by our necessities. But our ultimatum should differ only in imperiousness and finality from our initial suggestion. The paths of indirection are unsuited to our blundering feet.

Two months ago the good God intervened by opening for us a way out of the clueless maze in which we had entangled ourselves; he put it into the Spanish heart to throw away every advantage gained and proffer us a magnificent opportunity. By blowing up our battleship Spain invited us to a quarrel in which we would have been "thrice armed" indeed. That was the time to draw the sword, for then we should have had the moral support of the world. With incredible fatuity we presented the facts, as soon as we had learned them by tedious investigation, made no demand and continued to wrangle for this and that, blind to the imminent peril that all we asked would be granted.

It is not argued here that we should not have waited to learn how the "Maine" was destroyed before taking action, but having learned, the action taken should have been short and sharp. I am not of those who would make war for revenge; only savages do that. Even primitive wars, which are a trifle different and better, are not waged between two civilized nations, but sometimes against barbarians who are amendable to no other suasion. Between enlightened nations war is waged for accomplishment of some set purpose—some national or general advantage, and is commonly preceded by definitive demands by the aggressor. To fight Spain merely for the gratification of so mean a passion as revenge—for the mere satisfaction of making dead Spaniards—that would be a novelty indeed in the ethics of modern warfare. Let our demands be what they may: Surrender of Cuba, of all colonial possessions, of the Spanish navy entire, of General Weyler, alive or dead—any or all of this, with as much more as Congress may deem it right and expedient to claim. But let it be definitely understood that the claim is based upon the murder of our seamen in the harbor of Havana. To base it upon any other ground now is folly, for Spain's successive concessions have left us little other ground upon which to base it. Through the criminal blundering of the administration and the stupid servility of its partisans in Congress we stand, at the time at which this is written, convicted before the world, not only to hideous indifference to the lives of our sailors, but of promoting bloodshed in support of demands already conceded. The war that we propose to make will be a just war, yet we are suffering it to be made upon unjust grounds. So much for putting our trust in a game we do not understand—the un-American game of diplomacy.

I do not permit myself to doubt the patriotism and good faith of the president, nor to hear in his dispatches to Madrid and his message to Congress the voice of "Wall Street" and the "money power." Those whose sharper ears do hear that malign voice crying for "peace with dishonor" commonly hear it, I observe, in everything to which they are opposed. The wealthy men of this country are now, as they ever have been, and as they showed themselves to be in the Civil war, as patriotic as any class of its citizens, barring the hay-bunkers of the wharves and the sun-bummers of the parks, among whom patriotism is a religion. As to "Wall Street," nothing could be better for it than war. Wall Street gambles, and in time of war the abnormal fluctuations of the market enable it to play for high stakes. The ease with which colossal fortunes were made "in Wall Street" during the civil War was "popularly" believed at the time to have much to do

with the unconscionable protraction of that fateful strife so injurious to the south; though some of us thought Gen. Lee and his ragged regiments guilty of contributory negligence. The trouble of men of wealth seems, on examination, to be that, as a rule, they are no longer young, hot-headed and in mind and morals "bluggy." Mr. McKinley has probably done the best he knew how; the mistake lay in letting him do so much. Congress should have taken the matter out of his hands the moment that it knew what the Board in the Maine matter affirmed.

Thinking persons find in the personnel of the cabinet matter for grave apprehension. The three most important portfolios in time of war are held by men in whom it is not easy to feel confidence. The Secretary of State, a victim of senile dementia, was pitchforked into place in order to make a vacancy in the Senate for Mark Hanna; and the others owe their promotion to causes taking no account of their fitness. The Secretary of the Navy is a prominent member of the Peace society and the Secretary of War is not only an all-round crank (witness his proposal to "relieve" Dawson by means of traction engines running on the frozen Yukon, and the reindeer fiasco which followed it) but during the civil War he was in serious trouble for abandoning his command. For both these gentlemen might advantageously be substituted two members in good standing of the Society of Friends.

Nor are we much more fortunate in the commander of our army. Gen. Miles is distinctively a product of the press. He is John R. McLean's best gift to man; by him taught how to work the oracle and wind the horn. A few years ago he had the modesty to ask to be made a lieutenant-general, and recently the movement has been set afoot again by simultaneous publication all over the country of identical articles, one in each chief city, in advocacy of that great reform. He is a self-taught soldier, and military history in this country affords no instance of notable success of such in independent command. Among American generals all the conspicuously capable ones have been regularly educated to the difficult trade of war, at military institutions. Altogether, we are less well "prepared for war" than we have the happiness to think ourselves.