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The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent

Three of my distinguished collaborators, Messrs. Howells, Markham and Ingalls, have expressed for "The Examiner" their views regarding the rich man and the poor man, and I have been permitted to know what they have said. A more interesting exhibit than their contrasted opinions I have not seen in many a day. Mr. William Dean Howells, regarded by many as the foremost living American writer, surveys the poor man at his worth and his woes from the viewpoint of the professional altruist, to whom the laws of nature are unconstitutional and void. He complains that the poor man, the wage-worker, is a slave; therefore the wage system, no better than the systems that have preceded it, should be abolished in favour of some system that would strike away the victim's chains and make him "free." That, at least, is what his argument implies. Like many another good gentleman whose sorrow for the privations of the poor is not incompatible with enjoyment of three meals a day, Mr. Howells is steadfast in the faith of a golden future for the man who has nothing to sell but the somewhat common power of contracting his muscles. Else what does he mean by propounding it as "the great problem for statesmanship to solve," how every man shall be "secure" in "the means of livelihood," with "equal freedom (which can mean only equal wealth) to all"?

In every civilized country in every age there have been Howellses and Markhams, (and Debses too); the world is never for a moment destitute of them and their golden dream. And many of them have sat in the seats of the mighty. Yet the poor, too, we have always with us. The oldest Egyptian papyrus that we have relates to labor strikes and attendant rioting among the workmen in the Necropolis at Thebes, dissatisfied with their allowance of corn and oil. There were labor trusts in Athens, there were labor trusts in Rome, and they made it as warm for the small dealer in that commodity as do those of today. They and their literary protagonists dreamed the same dream, nourished the same hope as do those that we have the happiness to know. They "hailed the dawn of a new era" of "equal freedom to all" with the same vociferous acclaim. To them as to their modern successors, the Golden Age of universal prosperity lay just a little way beyond the confines of the present—their present—and they chased the rainbow "even as you and I." To them as to us, how to "guarantee equal freedom to all" was "the great problem for statesmanship to solve." It might have occurred to Mr. Howells that a difficulty that is so very long in getting itself surmounted is perhaps an insurmountable difficulty.

After all, Mr. Howells is constrained by candor to confess that the lot of the wage-slave is not altogether dismal, even in the present: The "conditions" are malign, but the "circumstances" befriend him a bit. The distinction is eminently worthy of so ingenious an author; although not at all understanding it, I admire. As a poor man and a wage-slave I propose to adopt as a permanent policy the suppression of conditions and the promotion of

circumstances. For the word Heaven we have at last an adequate definition fit to displace all the old ones, including Omar Khayyam's "Vision of Fulfilled Desire." Heaven is a world where there are no conditions, but many circumstances. Whether one will get there or not is a very simple question in which personal character and conduct do not figure: It all depends on whether one is a circumstance or a condition.

Mrs. Atherton's accusing finger having already pointed out the foolish fallacies in Dr. Edwin Markham's diagnosis of the rich man's disorder, but little remains to be said of his part in the discussion. His peasant notion that the price of wealth is wakefulness—that the wealthy cannot sleep because of their sins against the poor—is a distinctly precious contribution to the gayety of nations. Between the two of them Messrs. Howells and Markham—Arcaded Ambo—have made a pretty mess of the matter. Poverty, says the one, is slavery; wealth is freedom. But wealth, says the other philosopher of this freak alliance, is insomnia. Now, between the adversity that serves and the prosperity that lies awake o' nights there is no great choice. Perhaps under the benign sway of Fraternity there will be a better and more equitable apportionment of blessings. The poor will have freedom (to plunder the rich) and the rich will sleep—while their wealth is taking flight.

In saying to Mr. Markham "Thou ailest here and there," Mrs. Atherton has shown herself better at diagnosis than he is himself in telling us what is the matter with the rich. "Why," she asks him, "waste a beautiful gift in grovelling for popularity with the mob? . . . Striving to please the common mind has a fatal commonizing effect on the writing faculty." It is even so—nothing truer could be said, and Dr. Markham is the best proof of its truth. His early work, when he was known to only a small circle of admirers, of whom I was one, was so good that I predicted for him the foremost place among contemporaneous American poets. He sang because he "could not choose but sing" and his singing grew greater and greater. Then he had the mischance to publish "The Man With the Hoe," a poem with some noble lines, but an ignoble poem. It made him famous with those who know nothing of poetry: the "captains of industry" and the entire foot, horse and artillery of general discontent. His fortunes turned, and his head with them. He looked upon himself with adoration as the saviour of society: He believed, and believes today, that under his light and leading the immemorial conditions of human society can be altered—that a new Heaven and a new Earth can be created by the power of his song. Most melancholy of all, his song has lost its power. Since he became the Laureate of Demagogy, he has written no line of poetry. In the smug prosperity that he reviles in others his great gift "shrinks to its second cause and is no more."

False to his art and to the high command,
God laid upon him, Markham's rebel hand
Beats all in vain the harp he touched before:
It yields a jingle and it yields no more.
No more the strings beneath his finger-tips
Sing harmonies divine. No more his lips,
Touched with a living coal from sacred fires,
Lead the sweet chorus of the golden wires.
The voice is raucous and the phrases squeak;
They labor, they fatigue, they sweat, they reek!
The more the wayward, disobedient song
Errs from the right, discrediting the wrong,
The more the singer diligently strums,
To drown the horrid sound, with all his thumbs.
Gods, what a spectacle! The angels lean

Out of high heaven to survey the scene,
And Israel, "Whose heart-strings are a lute,"
Though now compassion makes his music mute,
Among the weeping company appears,
Pearls in his eyes and cotton in his ears.

As to the article by Mr. Ingalls, I wish it might be put into the hands of every young American, and as many older ones as servility to public opinion has not deprived of the sense to understand it. It is the wisest, manliest utterance of the season: For when the scent of the British lion is not tainting the gale John J. Ingalls is a singularly wise and manly man. He does not whine about the wrongs of the dear, dear workingman as he knows him—from studying him (I trust) at the table of Mr. Howells. He does not blackguard and vilify the rich; though if he had a previous engagement he probably would decline an invitation from one of them "to meet Mr. Markham." Mr. Ingalls makes it entirely clear that this is a country and government of equal opportunities and equal disadvantages, but unequal men.

I had the right to build railroads or to go into Wall Street and wreck them; to invent the telephone; to write Uncle Tom's Cabin; to mine for gold and silver; to concoct patent medicines; to corner petroleum; to bull pork and wheat, like my contemporaries. The only thing I lacked was brains. I did not know how.

If that candid passage is not utterly refreshing my taste in refreshment is altogether bad, which may be true. Ninety-nine in every hundred of those who prosper were once unprosperous. Ninety-nine in every hundred of those who remain in adversity fail because of some natural incapacity to succeed. Mr. Howells may snuffle and Mr. Markham curse, but if poverty means slavery "equal freedom to all" means (and it can mean nothing else) that the few shall support the many—that the comparatively small number of capable shall support, or partly support, the vast multitude of incapables. "Equal freedom," that is, equal fortune, "to all" is, however, not altogether a dream: It comes pretty near to being the rule among certain Alaskan Indians, who have a skin suit, a dong and a case of consumption each. Deprive them of these belongings and they would be equally and absolutely "free."

At a time when seventy million Americans are cowering cowardly before a brutal fraction of the country's three or four million wage-workers—a fraction that by its acts affirms the right to destroy property, commit murder, tear the clothes from respectable women and chase them naked through the streets—at such a time it makes American civilization seem a shade more real and American manhood a shade less contemptible to read so brave words as these from such a man as John J. Ingalls, or from any man:

The worst enemy of the poor man, except himself, is the trusts, and of tall forms of this odious tyranny and the most intolerable is the labor trust. The money trust kills the body, the labor trust kills the soul. It destroys the independence of the labouring man, effaces his individuality, cancels excellence and substitutes brute force for intelligence.

This is true—the labor trusts are that kind of trusts; yet three-fourths of the newspapers and politicians of this country ("The land of the free and the home of the brave") habitually flatter and fawn upon them, excuse their crimes and promote their power. And only a few days ago the House of Representatives, in amending a law directed against trusts in general, explicitly exempted these. Well, if the Chinese empire is not about to be broken up there is still a refuge from the shame of American citizenship.

One may become a subject of the Empress Dowager of China.

Every war has its comic feature, which stands out against the black background of death with perhaps unnatural accentuation, seeming funnier by the contrast than it really is. The “unpleasantness” in China is no exception. The amusing feature is the name of the Chinese patriots, “The Boxers.” Their Chinese name, it appears, really means something like that, the organization from which they take it being a kind of religious athletes, such as in this country are turned out by the gymnasia of the Young Men’s Christian Association. I don’t know how it is with others, but I confess that my absurd and disobedient imagination insists upon presenting these troublesome warriors as preparing for battle by “putting on the gloves” and capering up against the enemy to “spar for an opening.”

If that were really the way of it I should not feel half so guilty as I do in wishing them success, particularly against the missionaries. I know it is a sin, but I do honestly think the Christian missionary in a heathen land the most pestilent animal that roams the palmy plains. It is he, with his impudent zeal in cracking theological nuts on the heads of others and eating the kernels himself, who creates all the trouble over in China, as he creates it everywhere. If we were truly civilized and enlightened and half as polite as the Chinese our Christian missionaries would be officially reminded that their activity is “conduct calculated to provoke a breach of the peace,” and that if they choose to pursue their irritating vocation it must be at their own peril. I deny the right of our government to embroil us in wars for protection of ill-bred zealots in spreading a religion which nobody wants till he has it and nobody understands till he no longer wants it.

Congress is again “off our hands” for a while. The last days and nights of the session were marked by “the customary incidents,” not all of which, by many, are related in the newspapers (they are not going to be related here) nor noted in the “Congressional Record.” Always at such a time that discreet publication is subject to a censorship from which in the matter of vigilance, the Lord high blue penciler in South Africa might learn many a profitable lesson in his gentle craft. As to the newspapers—well, the Washington correspondents are pretty good fellows who do not need both hands to hold their tongues. If they told the one-half of what they know about matters at the nation’s Capital (that is, if they wrote it, for they do speak it freely enough—to one another) there would be consternation from Puerto Rico to Luzon. With regard to “the closing scenes of the session” I will only say that if any one of the nice old ladies of the W. C. T. U. had been present in the gallery of either House she would indubitably have dropped dead.

Some of “the incidents” are not “privileged,” for example, the action of Representative Lentz, of Ohio. This gentleman who is one of the most pernicious demagogues in Congress virtually held up for three days all legislation requiring unanimous consent for its consideration. He had a grievance, and that was his nasty revenge. He is a member of the House Committee which has been investigating the Coeur d’Alene affair. His grievance was that the House refused to print the measureless mass of mendacious testimony submitted to his committee by the discomfited gentlemen who were not permitted to run the camp as a dependency of Hell. Mr. Lentz had passed most of the session in attempting to run the committee that way. It is to be hoped that the fellow is now politically dead; when he is physically dead it will not be necessary to send his soul to any particular place of punishment. It will make a Hell wherever it goes.

The Senate’s adjournment was devoid of “features.” The grave (and commonly stupid) old gentleman who enjoys the privilege of membership in that club of hairless hunchbellies never has the happiness to forget himself and his awful dignity. He is even more

serious than the condensed ship's-company of "the Nancy Brig," for he has not so many as "a single joke." But as payment for stern admiration of his dismal identity and ghastly virtues he allows himself a rascally ten thousand dollars a year out of a contingent fund, in addition to his salary. On this "allowance" he manages to keep himself fairly well groomed all the time and "full as a tick" most of the time. So he feels that he can afford to forego, even in "the closing hours of the session" the advantages of bonneting his fellow Senator and singing, out of time and tune, "he's a jolly good fellow!" I never see a United States senator without thinking of a brass Buddha in everlasting session on a pedestal, solemnly contemplating the glories of his own navel.

Before the Senate chamber had begun to empty itself after adjournment a venerable white haired man (if man he was) whom no one had seen enter and no one saw depart, stood in the gallery and announced "a message from the Great White Throne." The message was brief: "Jesus is coming!" It cleared the House more quickly than it was ever cleared before. Within thirty seconds the Capitol was exuding statesmen at every pore. It was the first time in the history of sport that a United States senator had been got going. Considering the extraordinary nimbleness with which these brittle old men legged away from where they were to where they were not—wonderful sincerity in absenting themselves from the sphere of danger—there were surprisingly few casualties. The most serious one was that of the President pro tem, Mr. Frye, who, I am told, fell over his own feet and broke the ten commandments.

Perhaps it is none of my business, but I just want to say that a picture labelled "Ambrose Bierce," in the issue of this paper dated June 1, is not a picture of Ambrose Bierce. I do not know of whom it is a picture; it looks as if it might be that of the assassin who put it in. I hope so; it will serve to identify him when I return. It may be that by that time I shall have experienced a change of heart, but my present feeling is that it would be better if he were dead.

Edison and Tesla have altogether too many freak ideas.

In creating the new science of electrology the Author of all things seems, for some reason to us unknown, to have decreed that only fools should attain to proficiency in it. Of Thomas Edison, the Blind Tom of the Science, it may be said that he knows more about electricity and less about everything else than any man living, except Nikola Tesla. Neither of these men ever opens his head to tell us what he knows without diverting attention from the performance to the gigantic sum of what he does not know. Both appear to suffer from an incontinence of words aggravated by an impediment in sense. They always think "the time has come," as the walrus said, "to speak of many things," and of many things accordingly they do everlastingly and pitilessly speak; but mostly of what they are about to accomplish in the way of turning the world inside out and the universe outside in.

A favourite topic with these peaceful civilians is war, which they are always going to "revolutionize" or "abolish." Many of this paper's readers will recall Mr. Edison's leglong utterances on this topic just before the Yanko-Spanko unpleasantness—How his electrified water, fired from a garden hose, was to paralyze entire legions, his electrified chains, flung out of two guns each, were to mow them down, his torpedoes, travelling on endless trolley lines under water, were to make smithereens of battle craft, and the rest of it; all showing with clarity his fitness for the great leather medal of the Society of Friends for Distinguished Services as one of the horrors of peace.

Mr. Edison's conception of what war is like would, if it could be photographed, resemble a combat between a set of ten-pins and a row of beer bottles.

And now comes (for the one hundred and fifty-ninth time) Mr. Nikola Tesla with the old battle-fire blazing in his eyes—"of which he hath two." He is going to revolutionize warfare off the face of the earth, the ocean included. The ocean, indeed, appears to have the honor of selection as the best field for his military activity against the demon—war. Briefly, the good man has invented an automatic battleship, which needs no crew, and can be navigated from port. In an emergency this wonder of the deep can think a bit for itself, and act on its own best judgment; so if the patriot at the push button should fall by disease, or be elected to Congress, it will not greatly matter; the floating fortress will pursue the evil tenor of her ways, managing her guns and torpedoes all by her lone self.

It is a great invention, but Mr. Tesla has somewhat impaired its value to us by coldly intimating his intention to impart it to all nations of the world, so that wars shall henceforth be carried on without sailors and soldiers. This, he astutely infers, will make it bloodless and therefore uninteresting, and eventually it will fall into the sear and yellow leaf and be waged no more. That will be a great relief, certainly, particularly to those—if any such there be—who have no old ships to sell to the Navy Department. Still, war is not without its advantages. While it is "on," for example, we hear nothing from freak electricians and their devices for revolutionizing it. As a whole pond full of yelling frogs are silenced by the splash of a stone, so the roar-of-arms fool inventors of impossible weapons hide their diminished heads and are "heard to cease."