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War Topics

Gentlemen entertaining apprehensions of long distance bombardment of coast cities by Spanish vessels are imperfectly informed. It is true that a first-rate gun of twelve or thirteen inches caliber can hurl into the air a shot that will come down as many miles away. It is true, too, that some such guns are carried by several Spanish warships, and that behind the guns is a strong disposition to hurl the shots at our seacoast cities, which are broad targets. Nor is it less true that at half that distance from similar guns ashore the ships would be almost absolutely safe. What, then, prevents the successful bombardment of our seacoast cities, over the heads of their defenders? Simply this: to fire a 12- or 13-inch gun on shipboard, with the elevation necessary for so great a range, would destroy the carriage, smash in the deck and virtually wreck the ship. Moreover, a few discharges (if they were possible) would probably destroy the gun itself.

Doubtless carriage, deck, ship and possibly gun could be so constructed as to resist the shock and strain, but doubtless none have been, or will be. The enormous cost would secure no compensating advantages. The pleasure of tossing shells among the women and children of a maritime city is too high and refined for any taste but that which finds expression in the exquisite politeness of the Spanish character—and Spain cannot afford the expense.

If the commodores and rear admirals of the press were less enamored of the spectacular side of things the extreme range of modern great guns would get less attention in the newspapers; whereby the popular mind would be free from “many a blunder” “an’ foolish notion.” The advantage of a long range firearm consists, not mainly in the great distance to which it can throw a projectile, but in the flatness of the missile’s trajectory—its path through the air. That is what makes accuracy; if the trajectory were absolutely flat—that is, parallel with the line of sight—hitting a target at any distance whatever (for the shot would never stop till stopped) would be a very simple matter: range-finders, tables and calculations would be needless. As things happen to be ordered in this obstinate world, the extreme range of really effective fire from big guns afloat is about two miles; and for work of precision one mile is so many times better that a competent commander of a vessel will accept great risks to attain it. In his recent reconnaissance at Matanzas, Rear-Admiral Sampson appears to have pushed up his ships to within about three-quarters of a mile of the fort that he was engaging, which mounted guns of a caliber equal to his own. Had they been well served he would have repented his temerity; as it was, he suffered no damage and probably inflicted none. It is only justice, however, to admit that in the opinion of an esteemed contemporary’s kept commodore, charged with the duty of headlining the war news, he “Demolished Matanzas in Eighteen Minutes!”

I find the following views expressed by a New Orleans correspondent of this paper in a dispatch dated April 28:

“There is nothing more hateful to the American nation than a spy—a creature skulking about the nation’s defenses, gaining information to be sold to the nation’s enemy. Death is the penalty prescribed for such acts, and death by a rifle shot will be the reward meted out to the man captured night before last at Port Eads and carried in irons to Fort St. Philip.”

A spy, I take it, is “hateful to the American nation,” not because he is a spy, but when, and because, he is an enemy. No historian of the Revolutionary War has failed to honor the name of Nathan Hale, of whom a statue stands in the city of New York to attest the respect in which his memory is held by his countrymen. He was a spy that “skulked” about the British defenses making secret notes of their strength, location and condition for Gen. Washington, and being captured was hanged for it. In our Civil War, as in most wars, spies were employed by both sides and some made honorable records, each among his own people. I once had command of about a dozen spies for some months—gave them their assignments, received and collated their reports and tried as hard as I could to believe them. I must say that they were about as scurvy a lot of imposters as could be found on Uncle Sam’s payroll (that was before the pension era) and I should have experienced a secret joy if they had been caught and hanged. But they were in an honorable calling—a calling in which the proportion of intelligent and conscientious workers is probably about the same as in other trades and professions.

Spies are put to death, not as a matter of justice, but as a matter of expediency; so great is their power for mischief that an army is compelled in self-defense to discourage them as much as it can’ and soldiers are a simple folk whose notion of discouragement is death.

If there is truth in the American estimate of the Spanish character Spaniards should be the most efficient spies in the world. Duplicity, treachery and general indirection are admirable qualifications for the business, as they are for that of diplomacy, in which, also, as we know to our cost, the Spanish excel and are distinctly pernicious. The lesser tenderness accorded to the spy in comparison with the diplomatist may be due to the fact that the spy is sometimes caught.

In the destruction of two powder mills doing government work we have something significant. They may not have been destroyed by enemies of the country, but the incident suggests a disquieting possibility. Suppose we have among us a secret organization of fanatical Spanish patriots, its members oath-bound to dedicate their lives to the service of their king. Suppose that the destruction of powder mills has commended itself to the intelligence of the governing body as the most effective blow that can be delivered at our military power. Suppose that lots have been drawn, and that the members so selected are required under pain of death to destroy, within a certain time, a powder-mill each, even if it must be done at the sacrifice of the life of the destroyer. Obviously, it is easy to blow up a power mill if one is willing to be blown up with it. Against a gentleman having no objection to a distribution of himself over a considerable area, or at least preferring disruption to assassination, all ordinary precautions will be, like the name of the Lord, taken in vain.

Such secret organizations are common enough—a little too common. Now and again, they effect the removal of a king. Amongst the Nihilists of Russia and the Anarchists of Southern Europe they are “known to the police,” and feared by them. What is more likely than that one should be going about its nefarious business here in America.

The probability seems all the greater from a little calculation I have made. Taking all the recorded instances of explosion at the Santa Cruz works and figuring out the average duration of

the periods of immunity between—the lucid intervals, so to say—I find that the next explosion after the one of last autumn was not due until June 15, at four o'clock and twenty-seven minutes in the afternoon. Clearly, then, either some Spanish malefactor on the premises put a match to the product, or some inconsiderate wag monkeyed with the calendar and the clock.

The general public concern for the safety of the battleship “Oregon” has a significance that is interesting: it means that the American people are not persuaded of the military value of battleships, as we now have them. For it is to be remembered that this uneasiness is caused, mainly, by the presence along the “Oregon”’s route of a little, inexpensive craft hardly more formidable (to look at) than a steam tug. But she carries torpedoes, this dreaded boat, and is believed to cherish an intention of using them against the peace and prosperity of the greater boat. True, the “Oregon” has torpedoes, and tremendous batteries of guns, both great and small, as well; but the American memory is unsupplied with instances of their effective use by big ships against little ones. It is easy to say that the American public is not a naval expert, and certainly it was not educated at Annapolis, nor, for that matter, anywhere; but if it has little sea lore it knows pretty nearly the cost of a battleship and something of the general inexpediency of putting five million eggs into a single basket.

Our solicitude for the “Oregon” is somewhat abated by the assurance from the Navy Department that she is escorted by the gunboat “Marietta.” A battleship guarded and protected from a torpedo boat by a gunboat—that is the significant and interesting phenomenon that is solemnly presented to us after an investment of some fifty million dollars in battleships! If the late William Edgar Nye were still with us one might suspect that he had entered the naval service of his country as Tranquilizer of the Unseagoing Mind.

I dare say our naval authorities know it all—as once did those of Great Britain, when, after months of investigation, they gravely reported that steam could never be of any service in Her Majesty’s navy. Nevertheless, if it came to a fight between a five-million-dollar battleship and ten half-million-dollar gunboats any “elderly naval man” having an intelligent interest in his own welfare would prefer to take his chances on one of the gunboats. A swift, seagoing vessel, fitted with a ram and armed with one heavy gun, a few rapid-firing guns and possibly a torpedo tube, can be built for a half-million, with something to spare. She need be neither “armored” nor “protected”—at least no more than would be practicable within the limit of cost; her best protection would be found, as that of the torpedo boat and its “destroyer” is found—in her speed and handiness, and in the fellowship of her kind’ for these waterwolves would hunt in packs. If a battleship were beset by a half-score of them could there be any reasonable doubt of the result? It would be the old story of the boar and the hounds. Some of them, doubtless, would be sunk, but as sure as death and taxation (to build battleships) the survivors of the convergent rush would send their clumsy antagonist wallowing down into the seaweed to keep them company. If either our fleet or that of Spain shall not succeed in remaining on its own side of the Atlantic it is not improbable that this is the last war in which that astonishing piece of complicated mechanism, the modern battleship, will be seen in action. With that possibility in mind it is deeply regrettable that Spain has not more of them; for, as things are, the demonstration of their unworthy must be mad at our expense.