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The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent

Mrs. Almon Hensley, who has a “national reputation” as president of the Society for the Study of Life (it is difficult to find a woman who is not president of a society of some kind) has been talking to her sex. Naturally, Her Excellency’s theme was—her sex; they do not care to hear about anything else. It is Mrs. Hensley’s conviction that “women were not intended for business.” I am not in the confidence of their Creator and cannot say what His “intentions” were, but am sure, at least, that business was not intended for women. If this seems to imply that I am in the confidence of the devil I want to disavow the distinction: I learned it by doing business with women.

The business which seems to me the least fit for women is that of talking about women, although Mrs. Hensley has in this instance made an uncommonly good “stagger” at it. One of her notions is that American women are afflicted with nerves. “I have seen”, she says, “an impatient woman in a slow street car expend anxiety of thought and convulsive effort enough to have run the car.” Now, if a woman like that had real business capacity she would utilize those pent-up forces as a motor to run a vehicle of her own. She would just remove the horses from an ordinary carriage, get into it, turn on the power of her impatience and with a few convulsive efforts go speeding on her way. This is an age of “triumph over the forces of nature,” but a good many of them have not yet been subdued to service. Who will be first to “harness” these and give us the neuromobile?

The esteemed New York “Tribune” is greatly concerned about the introduction of the stiletto into American controversial methods through our growing Italian immigration. The stabbing habit is by no means the worst part of our heritage from “Sunny Italy”; the worst is the sunny Italian. As it is commonly another Dago into whose back he inserts the bleak steel of the weapons of his fathers he could do a good deal worse than disarm at a barge office. We should be well pleased if he would have the goodness to send over his implement of dissent, with all its contagious traditions and all the alluring sentiments that lisp along its blade, and leave himself at home. American zoology knows no more pleasing object than the untraveled Italian peasant dreaming the happy hours away.

In that fair land o’erlooked by Ischia’s mountains,
Across the charmed bay
Whose blue waves keep, with Capri’s sunny fountains,
Perpetual holiday.

By the way, one of the fellow’s dreams is that he is a son of Roman sires—a descendant of the great race which once peopled his historic land and from it went forth to conquer and colonize the known world—the British of that early day. He thinks himself a survival of “the grandeur that was Rome,” whereas he is only a vestige of the barbarism that

overran and destroyed it. He is an irreclaimable Hun, a degenerate Goth. There is not a drop of Roman blood in an entire province of him. The Italian immigrant has, however, one conspicuous virtue: He is distinguished for his domestic affections, and loves his own copper cent as well in proportion to its value as the silver dollar of another. And either to save the one or earn the other he would drown the pope in holy water and bury the body in unconsecrated ground.

Governor Stephens of Missouri has “defined his position” with regard to the weeks of rioting in St. Louis. He has been sharply censured for not ordering out the National Guard of the state to quell the disorder, but he shows that the Board of Police Commissioners of the city (of which the mayor is a dishonourable member) has all along professed its power to deal with the difficulty. The sheriff alone has made appeals for military aid, but has not satisfied the governor, nor anybody else, that he had exhausted his own powers in the matter. The governor has held for regiments of the state militia in readiness to act, but very sensibly demanded that St. Louis first act for herself. This she has at last thought it expedient to do and her bodies of armed citizens appear to have suppressed the assassins as easily as a hawk stampedes a brood of yellow-legged pullets. To those who believe, as I do, that the best and only final security of liberty, law and order lies in a wholesome public respect for the bullet and the bayonet it will be gratifying to reflect that the National Guard was not given another opportunity to run away.

Of course the customary “claim” is made by the labor unions that the persons killed in St. Louis by the sheriff’s men were “innocent spectators shot down in cold blood.” We will not dispute about that: it is enough to know that in the kind of innocent spectating in which they happened to be engaged they will engage no more. One would have preferred to see them in the penitentiary at harder labor than unsmocking blameless women and chasing them naked through the streets, but if they would not have it that way, it does not greatly matter what kind of blood—cold or hot—they had the bad luck to be shot down in. The important thing is that it was their blood.

The President of one of the unions engaged in the “strike” has thoughtfully come forward disclaiming the outrage on the women who rode on the boycotted cars and denouncing with a good deal of *vraisemblance* the unworthy persons concerned in its perpetration; and the he-rioters loudly protest, in the manner of Adam, that not they but the she-rioters did it. That is not altogether true, but supposing that it were, the responsibility cannot be shifted from them to their females and young. In law and in morals the consequences that naturally flow from a man’s acts are the acts of the man. It was the strikers who boycotted the cars. It was the strikers who incited the maltreatment of passengers and set the example of engaging in it. That it took a particularly dastardly form, affecting a particular class of victims, is nothing to the question and does not exculpate. He who unlawfully releases a malign force which he cannot hope to control is justly liable for all the mischief it may do. If by firing my enemy’s dwelling I destroy a village I cannot plead in mitigation of punishment that I applied the torch to only one house. By their plea that it was not they, but their women and children, or the women and children of their sympathizers, who tore the clothing from the persons of those girls, beat them black-and-blue and pursued them with yells, curses, foul names and missiles, the labor unionists of St. Louis have made their case worse than it was before they spoke. It is not permitted to a savage to prove in extenuation that he is also a coward. Moreover, the proof is needless: we knew that before.

Surely it would be a graceful act in the mayor of the great city of New York to express officially his sympathy for the passengers and crew of the steamship “Alpha”, bound for Cape Nome. She is thought to have been caught in an ice-pack.

I have met a man of letters—one who, as himself confesses, “keeps up with current literature.” He is something of a student: He reads one hundred and sixty-one and nine-tenths books every day—a little more than fifty-six every hour of the twenty: for the man never sleeps lest a book escape him. That is pretty rapid reading—nearly one book a second—but he has to do it to “keep up with current literature,” and he says he does. Of new books there are published every year in Germany 24,000, France 13,000, Italy 9,500, Great Britain 7,300, the United States (a comparatively illiterate country) 5,300. Total, 59,100. Probably as many more are published in countries not named, but as the man is no great linguist I give him the benefit of his ignorance and call it “keeping up” if he reads half what there is to read. When you meet a person who professes to “read all the new books” you will know what it really is that he professes to do.

What such persons really read is novels and nothing else. Novels constitute about one-fourth of the whole number (in Great Britain and this country more than one-half are of that sort of stuff)—say 126 a week. Now the most ravenous reader will hardly average more than two a week—one in three days. The others are absolutely unknown to him. He is all the better off for that, and would be still better off if he knew nothing of any of them. He reads only those which he is told are the best by a small class of magazine and newspaper writers who, like himself, have not read the others, and whose taste and judgment are no better than his own. So guided in his choice, his chance of sometimes getting hold of a good novel is about what it would be if his eyes were put out and instead of the year’s product he chose the first volume he laid his hands on. One ought to be as much ashamed of having read a new novel as of having committed gluttony on some unknown happenstance picked up in the street.

Democratic politicians and newspapers are trumpeting a loud alarm about the number of costly commissions for this and for that which the administration has turned loose upon the country, like clouds of appetites from Locustland. It is a brazen outcry they are raising, these audible economists, but when the President appoints seventeen high-salaried officials to look into the matter they will wish that they had shouted down well.

McKinley—Sir John, I am greatly troubled.

Hay—Your Majesty, permit me to send for the head of the Bureau of Exculpation and Avoidance.

McK.—Not today; it is another kind of matter.

H.—Ah, then; the Lord High Disheartener of the Importunate—

McK.—No, no, Sir John, it is about you.

H.—About me? Surely, you do not mean—you cannot think that another change in the Cabinet—

McK.—May you be Secretary of State for a thousand years.

H.—Then speak it out, Your Majesty.

McK.—Well, it is this: I have not seen nor heard of anybody who seems to want you for vice president. Actually, your name has not been mentioned except by myself.

H.—And to whom were you graciously pleased to mention me if I may ask?

McK.—To Senator Hanna.

H.—And am I worthy to know what he said?

McK.—It will pain you, Sir John. Mr. Hanna is a strong coarse man who says what he thinks and never stops to think what he says. He handles everything without gloves.

H.—Soap excepted. What did he say?

McK.—That you would make a good running mate for lame tortoise.

H.—Indeed!

McK.—He added that you had been drowned in the Nicaragua Canal.

H.—Anything more?

McK.—He said that you parted your beard on the Greenwich meridian.

H.—Yes.

McK.—He said that if asininity had not been invented you would invent it.

[Enter Mark Hanna. Exit, hurriedly, McKinley.]

Mark Hanna—Good morning, Mr. Secretary.

H.—What is your business with me, sir?

M. H.—Why, John, I came to ask you if you would accept the nomination for vice president.

H.—After what you said to the President on that Subject?

M. H.—It has never been mentioned between us.

H.—Ho-o-o-wat! [falls in a fit of shivers].

M. H.—The gentleman appears to be indisposed. Guess he was struck by a draft from the Open Door. [Curtain]