

San Francisco Examiner
May 6, 1900

The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent

It is only a coincidence, but at the time when the great ecumenical conference of missionaries was in session in New York we were quarrelling with Turkey over a matter of missionaries. A matter of missionaries commonly is to the fore as a cause of quarrel with nations which have the hardihood to prefer their own religions to ours. Prominent in attendance at that conference, dominated by a sense of its goodness and grandeur and solemnly attesting them, were a president and a former president of the United States. Each of these gentlemen, had he been so minded, could have borne witness also to the “days of danger, nights or waking” experienced by him by reason of the pernicious activity of these same missionaries in foreign parts. They constitute, in truth, a perpetual menace to the national peace. I dare say the most of them are conscientious men and women of a certain order of intellect. They believe, and from the way that they interpret their sacred book have some reason to believe, that in meddling with the spiritual affairs of others uninvited they perform a work acceptable to God—their God. They think that they discern a moral difference between “approaching” a man of another religion about the state of his soul and approaching him on the condition of his linen or the character of his wife. I do not think there is any difference. I have observed that the person who volunteers an interest in my spiritual welfare is the same person from whom I must expect an impudent concern about my temporal affairs. The missionary is one who goes about throwing open the shutters of other men’s bosoms in order to project upon the blank walls a shadow of himself.

There is no probability of our making war upon Turkey to collect ninety thousand dollars in compensation for missionary property which her people were provoked to destroy. It would cost a thousand times as much as that, and Turkey has nothing that Europe would permit us to take as indemnity. Moreover, the war would send more souls to Hell than all the missionaries in Turkish territory can hope to save in a month of centuries. And they would be all Christian souls, for the Mohammedan that falls in battle goes straight to Paradise. No, we shall have no war with Turkey, whether she pays or not, and that is satisfactory, for it would be for us an unjust war, as is any war in defence of the right of missionaries to madden. No ruler or government of sense would willingly permit foreigners to sap the foundations of the national religion. No ruler or government ever does permit it except under stress of compulsion. It is through the people’s religion that a wise government governs wisely—even in our own country we make only a transparent pretence of ignoring Christianity, and a pretence only because we have so many kinds of Christians, all jealous and inharmonious. Each sect would make this a theocracy if it could, and would then make short work of any missionary from abroad. Happily all religions but ours have the sloth and timidity of error; Christianity alone drawing vigor from eternal truth is courageous enough and energetic enough to make itself a nuisance to people of every other faith.

The overwhelming majority by which the House of Representatives passed the Nicaragua Canal bill should not be taken as a forecast of its fate in the Senate nor, if passed by the Senate, of how it will fare at the hands of the president. God only knows what the Senate will do, and the President's action is (if one may say so without irreverence) even more doubtful than that. "It was a famous victory," but incomplete, and friends of the bill cannot afford to lie down on the battlefield and count the futile stars. What we have to count are noses in the Senate, with a view to turning a few more of them toward the light, "as a tower that looks toward Damascus." Some of them, kindled by the grape, are themselves a light.

In slovenly confusion of thought some of the timorous protagonists of the original Hepburn Nicaragua Canal bill are hardly excelled by its most muddled opponents. Some of their objections to the amendments whereby the word "protect" was substituted for the word "defend" and the phrase "fortifications for defence" replaced by the phrase "provisions for defence" are amusing—they "goe neare to be fonny." The notion of these worthy persons is that by this weakening of the language of the bill we tie our hands and make our right to fortify the canal less clear than it was. If these amendments had been made in a treaty this would be true—and a treaty is what they have, unconsciously or subconsciously, in mind. But this is a bill. It is drawn without consulting any foreign power and provides for a canal that is all our own. There is no other party to an agreement, nor any agreement. It would have been all the same if no reference or allusion had been made to fortification, defence, protection or anything of the sort. The right of defence is implied in the right of construction and ownership; even an individual—even an alien—has the right to defend his own property. Rioting strikers are the only jurists who have ever denied it to the government, as to the capitalist; in the judgment of all other authorities it is deemed a basic principle of law.

In the bill the words substituted have no force, nor had those for which they were preferred. They provide for defences, but do not provide them; that has to be done by further and more specific and mandatory legislation. To authorize the purchase of a site for a house does not provide the house. Having got the land the new owner can put the house on it or not, at his own sweet will. His describing it as a building site does not compel him, nor would the lack of any description prevent. I venture to hope that all senators will discern the analogy, and that those who favor a fortified canal will perceive that it is not worthwhile to bother about having it so described. Whenever we are ready to fortify we can go ahead and do so, despite anything that may be put into or left out of this present bill. For that matter, if we should change our minds about having a canal, we can repeal the entire bill and go "der Horn around" or "der blains agross," as now.

Gentlemen who are opposed to this canal bill because the latest, and let us hope the last, commission has not made its report and has still some eight hundred engineers and workmen determining the most feasible route and the probable cost, may comfort themselves; though defeated they win. Here is Section 3 of the bill as passed by the House:

That the President shall cause such surveys as may be necessary for said canal and harbours and in the construction of the same, and shall employ such persons as he may deem necessary.

Well, then, the President is always causing "such surveys," and so forth, and is already employing such persons as he deems necessary. Doubtless he will continue to "cause" and to "employ" as long as he likes. There is no time-lock on the work of actual construction; it will not open until Mr. McKinley, advised by Mr. Hay and Lord Pauncefote, is ready with his "key to the situation." Altogether, our respected Uncle Samuel appears to

have no very good reason at present to throw up his hat. Judging from his customary luck, one may entertain a reasonable doubt that it would come down.

Senator Pettigrew has suffered another mischance in the Senate's refusal to have anything to do with his "resolution of sympathy" with the South African "republics." The imbecility of such a resolution takes precedence of that of a dachshund at a show threatening to bite the tiger. What is it that Senator Pettigrew and his fellow Pettigrews would have? The United States, by their president, have already proffered their "good offices" in the matter of the South African war, with a view to ending it, and they have been rejected by Great Britain. Shall we disqualify ourselves for service in mediation at a more opportune time by manifesting a not impartial mind? That is all that a "resolution of sympathy" with either combatant would accomplish—unless it should happen to imitate the other. Perhaps that is the actual purpose of the Pettigrews. They wish to be wantonly insulting—their notion of the correct attitude of the United States in a quarrel which does not concern us in the helpless offensive. Having no sense of personal dignity they have, naturally, none of national. They are of the kind of men whose tongues are freed by whatever ties their hands. When they cannot act they scold; gag them and they make faces. The actual "sympathy" felt by the distinguished author of the rejected resolution may be described as Pettigruel.

No sooner is Senator Pettigrew's "sympathy" turned off at the tap than Senator Teller cometh up as a flower with some more of the same. But Teller to Pettigrew is a roaring lion to a bleating lamb. His candor transcends the limit of the merely human and passes into the thrilling region of divine effrontery. He not only wished our government to declare that it is partial to the cause of the South African "Republics," but to proffer itself as a candidate for the high office of judge between them as enemies. Look at this:

Resolved, That we watch with deep and abiding interest between Great Britain and the South African Republics, a full determination to maintain a proper neutrality between attending forces, we cannot withhold our sympathy from the struggling people of the Republics, and it is our earnest desire that the Government of the United States, by its friendly offices, of both powers, may assist in bringing the war to a speedy conclusion in a manner honourable both to Great Britain and the South Republics.

That is to say to Great Britain: "We have already made our mind about this quarrel, and find that you are in the wrong. We beg you, therefore, to submit your claims to us for addition."

It is understood that the League of American Wheelmen will urge upon both national conventions the expediency of putting into each party platform a "good roads plank." It is understood, too, that the resulting good roads will remain plank roads.

After steaming through the Chicago drainage canal, Admiral Dewey is understood to be of the solemn conviction that to fortify it would invite attack from the naval forces of St. Louis.

If the letter which Eusebius says our Lord and Saviour wrote to Agrippa has really been discovered, carven upon that sovereign's palace at Ephesus, let us not be in too great haste to master its meaning. If we have but the patience to wait we shall have a hundred several and distinct versions of it, each subject to a dozen interpretations. From these each seeker after the truth may make intelligent choice and all be suited.

An esteemed though Republican contemporary solemnly suggests that Congress "back up" the President with a frank resolution declaring it the purpose of the United States to annex Cuba. On that question I am paired with Editor Satan, now in South Africa. If he were present I should vote no.

Indifferently enamoured of being described in the pulpit as a “lewd actress”, Miss Olga Nethersole is going to sue a fashionable parson of this city for fifty thousand dollars of the kind of treasure that he has not laid up for himself in Heaven. There is an alternative: He may apologize in the same way that he offended, which doubtless he will be right thankful for the chance to do. But even so, Olga is a little hard on the good man; an explanation would serve her interest as well as an apology, and that skilled expounder, trained in the divine art of interpretation, could indubitably make it as clear as the book of revelations that by the word “lewd” he understood himself to mean loud, or lurid—that is to say, lucid—in short, beloved.