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The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent

By advocating painless removal of incurable idiots and lunatics, incorrigible criminals and irreclaimable drunkards from this vale of tears, Dr. W. Duncan McKim has provoked many a respectable but otherwise blameless person to throw a cat-fit of great complexity and power. Yet Dr. McKim seems only to anticipate the trend of public opinion and forecast its crystallization into law. It is rapidly becoming a question of not what we ought to do with these unfortunates but what we shall be compelled to do. Study of the statistics of the matter shows that in all civilized countries mental and moral diseases are increasing, proportionately to population, at a rate which in the course of a few generations will make it impossible for the healthy to care for the afflicted. To do this will require the entire revenue which it is possible to raise by taxation—will absorb all the profits of all the industries and professions, and make deeper and deeper inroads upon the capital from which they are derived. When it comes to that there can be but one result. High and humanising sentiments are angel visitants whom we entertain with pride and pleasure, but when the entertainment becomes too costly to be borne we “speed the parting guest” forthwith. And it may happen that in inviting to his vacant place a less exacting successor—that in replacing Sentiment with Reason—we shall, in this instance, learn to our joy that we do but entertain another angel. For nothing is so heavenly as Reason; nothing is so sweet and compassionate as her voice—

Not harsh and crabbed, as dull fools suppose—
But musical as is Apollo’s lute,
Strung with his golden hair.

Is it cruel, is it heartless, is it barbarous to use something of the same care in breeding men and women as in breeding horses and dogs? Here is a determining question: Knowing yourself doomed to hopeless idiocy, lunacy, crime or drunkenness, would you or would you not, welcome a painless death? Let us assume that you would. Upon what ground, then, would you deny to another, incapable of exacting it, as boon that you would desire for yourself?

Oh! It seems that the purpose of the Puerto Rican bill is not disclosed in its title, nor was it avowed in the arguments of its proponents. That bill was not devised in order to raise revenue for the needy Puerto Ricans: that was only a pretext—just a little political play, as it were. The esteemed New York “Tribune” now stands up “like old Goliath tall” and “gives the whole thing away.” Under pretence of tranquilizing those amazing Republicans who believe in our right to set aside the Constitution in dealing with colonial Americans, but deny the expediency of exercising that right against Puerto Rico, that candid journal explains that the purpose of the bill was to provoke a decision from the Supreme Court for our guidance in

other matters. Congress—or rather the Republican majority in Congress—may want to do a number of things affecting the colonial American. Some of these things can be done if he has constitutional rights, unless, says our frank contemporary, “some way not now seen, can be found to get around the constitution as nations always do get around their constitutions in great emergencies.” The transition from despair to hope in those words is admirable. The writer does not discern—alas!—any way to beat the Constitution, but by the general experience of other beaters is encouraged to believe that in the great emergency of his need it can be done.

But the Republican party is not without a vestigial conscience; it would rather have a right to do wrong than suffer irritating criticism for doing it without the right. “So,” says the “Tribune,” “actual legislation withholding constitutional guarantees is necessary to test the right of Congress to withhold them in any instance whatever, no matter how essential to the general welfare the denial may be regarded by the whole country”—that is to say, the whole party.

As it proceeds our hardy contemporary’s exposition grows more and more on exposure. Like our Potomac drinking water, the longer it is suffered to run from the tap, the fouler it is. To the merely human understanding of a non-Republican it seems plain that “constitutional guarantees” cannot be “withheld” and “denied” unless they already exist. If there already exists “actual legislation” that “withholds” them from Puerto Rico, or potential legislation “denying” them to Luzon or Guam, it must be unconstitutional. The services of the Supreme Court are needless: the great oracle of the Republicans has decided the matter; and decided it our way. It is not for us to inquire what they think of the decision.

The President, also, is explaining that the bill was drawn in order to obtain a Supreme Court decision on its lawfulness. Evidently the word has gone forth that this is to be the avowed justification of the bill. As proof of a quickened conscience it is acceptable. It shows, too, that the Administration is not devoid of ingenuity nor insensible to the advantages of afterthought.

The “Evening Journal’s” portrait of President McKinley singing in church leads like a kindly light to the inference that if he can repair his political fortunes by doing that, the Methodist vote has not a speaking acquaintance with the Methodist eye.

A man who is not as good soldier as I am, is, I take it, a mighty poor soldier; and the man in general command of the Dutch forces in South African appears to be of that kind. As early as the third of last December I said in this paper, in an article entitled “The Thunder of the Captains”:

From a military point of view General Joubert’s strategy is inexcusable. From Ladysmith to Kimberley, following the general courses of the Orange river, the distance is not less than 400 miles; and this long line he has attempted to hold with a half dozen small armies, and at the same time keep his grasp on Mafeking, 200 miles in Kimberley’s rear.

Having affirmed the faultiness of this disposition of his troops, I ventured to point out what seemed to me a better one:

Leaving a small “containing force” to watch Colonel Baden-Powell’s paltry six hundred, he should have called down to the line of the Orange all the troops operating in that vicinity. In the same way he should have released his hold upon either Ladysmith or Kimberley, or both, and by rapid concentration of his entire force secured the advantage given him by “interior lines.” Having massed his forces he could fall upon that column of the

enemy most deserving of the distinction, overwhelming it before it could be succored by its distant co-fractions.

Belonging as it does in the category of imaginary operations, this plan is re-stated here for what it is worth. As a mere looker-on at the game, I have not the immodesty to claim for it any special consideration. The next best thing that can be said of it (as of the plan of tunnelling under the British and catching them by the coat tails) is that, being untested, it is not discredited by failure. And the best thing? Oh, nothing much—only that it strictly conforms to all the principles of the art of war.

Permit me to make an end of the matter and spare myself additional blushes by quoting the concluding lines of the article in question—which if General Joubert has the happiness to take this paper (as I trust he has) must have seemed to him exceedingly impudent, however they may seem to him now:

Apparently he cannot make up his mind to let go; he clings to the shadowy advantages of his semi-sieges in the desperate hope of capturing troops that can be spared and places that he would soon be compelled to abandon. The pounding that he is getting at the right of his line is the legitimate fruit of his error and a prophecy of what awaits him everywhere if he persists in it.

Let us be serious. If any reader thinks that I am laying claim to a superior sagacity he misses the meaning of these remarks; I should be sorry to believe that any cadet at West Point in his junior year, having given an equal attention to General Joubert's operations, could possibly have made a different forecast of the result. The purpose is to show that the immemorial and immutable principles of strategy cannot be violated with impunity; that he who, having advantage of "the initiative" and of "interior lines," throws it away to indulge in dubious sieges, and having opportunity to concentrate against a gathering enemy tries to hold an extended line, is foredoomed to defeat. In this instance my own forecast is the only one immediately available in illustration. Any regularly educated officer of our army, or any intelligent civilian student of the military art could have made, and many doubtless did make, a better one. The topographical features of the theatre of war, the Boers' unsuspected state of preparation, the long-range firearms and smokeless powder—all these gave amazing and unforeseen superiority to the defence and postponed the day of inevitable punishment to him who defied the laws of his trade. But eventually, when confronted by a fairly good soldier, sensibly observing and skilfully applying them, he went to the wall. And with him, thank heaven, go the belted civilians, and kept corporals of the press, and every Anglophobe harangue-outang wooing the Irish vote by waving the red flag in the cave of the winds.

In offering his free-trade amendment to his party's Puerto Rican tariff bill, Senator Cushman K. Davis said:

"I have never yet, in all the years that I have been in the Senate, been accused of doing anything because I thought it politically expedient, or because I believed it was 'good politics.'"

It is hardly likely that Senator Davis knows accurately all that he has been accused of; what he means is that he has never done these things. That is to say, he has neglected all the surest means and methods of political preferment, as practiced by those "born leaders of men," the bosses. That accounts for Senator Davis' failure and his humble position. If he knew "practical politics" and had a sounder respect for its immemorial traditions, instead of being what he unfortunately is—merely a great-hearted gentleman whom his foolish countrymen delight to honor—he might be as magnificent a figure in political history as the

Hon. Mark Hanna of Ohio, the Hon. Thomas C. Platt of New York, or the Hon. Jack Satan of Lower Kansas.

The distinguished president of the Stanford University is an eminent ichthyologist—he knows a shell from a jellyfish without eating them. Nevertheless, there are things that he does not know; for example, that the people of the South African republics will ultimately have their “freedom,” and that the present century (or the next) will witness “the downfall of the British Empire.” Yet he is foolish enough to declare that these things will come to pass, because he wants them to come to pass. Of his reasons for wanting them to, it is worthwhile to speak. On second thought, indeed, it is not worthwhile to speak of the distinguished president of the Stanford University.

It was a great speech, that of Senator Lodge, yesterday, on the Philippine islands and their eternal “question,” and it expired in a grand “peroration” abundantly embellished with fireworks. Pious and reverent it was withal, for Senator Lodge is not of those who belittle The Power that gave him to his country. This from the “peroration”:

The same laws which govern the movements of the uncounted stars in space tint the wings of the moth so that his green-eyed enemy cannot distinguish him from the dead leaf or the roughened bark, and paint the little sand spider so cunningly that unless he move, his most virulent pursuer would not know that he was not a part of the glittering grains among which he hides.

Admirable! But might it not have occurred to the distinguished perorator that possibly the moth and the sand spider are entitled to some of the credit and glory? That perhaps their colors were “laid on” without any reference to their personal security. If he had been differently tinted maybe the moth would have sought and found an equal security elsewhere than in the dead leaf or the roughened bark—as green insects, for example, find it on the living leaf. Maybe the sand spider was not made to glitter because predestined to lurk among the shining grains, but like the sensible fellow that he is, lurks among the shining grains because he glitters. Is Senator Lodge quite sure that Massachusetts men (like the heavens from which we submissively receive them, and to which we thankfully surrender them), really “declare the glory of God” when they point out His peculiar care of certain of His creatures in preserving their liberty to the great disadvantage of certain others which have nothing else to eat? It is greatly to be wished that persons to whom nature has denied any knowledge which is not the fruit of hard special study would abstain from expounding in Congress the laws of God and try a good deal harder to improve the laws of man. That, I take it, is what, with a free hand in the government of their country and an occupied one in its treasury, they overpay themselves to do.

The learned ladies of the eclectic club have been debating the relative influence of moral and immoral women.—New York Paper.

What? Really? Can immoral women be?
I thought they all were nice—dear me, dear me!
Explain, O ladies, if 'tis understood,
How bad ones are distinguished from the good.
And when I'm freed from this vile life below,
Pray tell me where is t'other world to go.
O virgin devotees and saintly nuns,
To be among the—well, the pretty ones.

Mr. L. E. Cooley, a well-known civil engineer, who has been in Nicaragua, says that the people of that country favour annexation to the United States. If the people of Costa Rica feel the same way, peaceful annexation may someday come about. But not under our present administration. Messrs. McKinley and Hay would set their faces like two flints against anything of the kind. Meddlesome critics would be sure to construe our possession of the country through which the ship canal must run as an objection to invoking the Concert of Europe. They would invoke it all the same, but with hearts less light and joyous.

Here is an imaginary conversation:

McKinley—I observe that Representative Josiah Hunker, of New York, is going to introduce a bill providing for condemnation of the Erie Canal and the making it into a shipway by the general government.

Hay—Yes, Your Majesty, I have been looking into the matter. The State Department will do its duty.

McKinley—What the devil has the State Department to do with it?

Hay—Eh? Surely Your Majesty forgets the European Concert!

McKinley—'mm. Yes, I'm an absent-minded beggar. It had escaped my memory. What does the British ambassador think about the scheme?

H—The British ambassador says that he does not think about it.

McK—And the French ambassador?

H—Is deeply engrossed in study of the French ambassador.

McK—Then they are all alike: Behold the concert of Europe!

H—Yes, Your Majesty, it is very gratifying.

McK—Look here, Sir John; I've an inspiration! Is it certain, after all, that their concert is necessary?

H—Sire, you astonish and pain! Am I necessary?

McK—Alas, yes—you are inevitable.