The Archive of American Journalism
Ambrose Bierce Collection

The Wasp
May 15, 1886

Prattle

The troubled waters of litigation deposit a sediment of substantial justice: if there had been no contest of the Fallon will the lawyers would have been denied most of the property.

From pride, joy, hate, greed, melancholy—
From any kind of vice, or folly,
Bias, Propensity, or passion
That is in prevalence and fashion,
Save one, the sufferer or lover
May, by the grace of God, recover:
Alone that spiritual tetter,
The zeal to make Creation better,
Glows still immediately warmer.
Who knows of a reformed reformer?

"Vertigo cocktails" and "biliousness-and-bitters" are the drinks that actors are ordering since Mr. Edwin Booth has explained his recent attack of innocuous desuetude of the legs.

Mr. James Davenport, peripatetic evangeler, *ignis infatuus*, shining light of the Catholic Apostolic tapersuasion, believes that the second coming of the Savior is near at hand because the rush of events in this age of the world is very swift. Mr. Davenport appears to think that Christ is coming on an express train, without a stop-over ticket and allowed only twenty minutes for refreshments. I do not think so: business is business, but I fancy the exigencies of the commercial and industrial situation do not require that the clock-hands of moral progress be set ahead in order to expedite the second crucifixion. The tension could probably be sufficiently relaxed by a religious war.

A local art-critic, whom I admire without emulation and whose opinions I accept without comprehending, thinks that oil-painting is overdone on this coast. This judgement, it is to be feared, will not meet with the approval of Mr. John S. Hittell, who thinks Mr. Keith a greater landscape painter than Claude Lorraine; certainly Mr. Keith has the distinct advantage of being alive. With such artists as Mr. Keith and Mr. Swan, we can hardly have too much oil-painting, for their work inspires the pens of such critics are Mr. Hittell. This gentleman's standard of excellence, by the way, is so high as to be inaccessible to everything but genius: it is disclosed in his famous commendation of the Sistine Madonna—"as pretty as a red wagon."

Mr. Thomas Hill and Mr. Norton Bush share the conviction that oil-painting is overdone, and each by his manner of avoiding the reproach shows the sense in which he

understands it; for Mr. Hill makes his oils look underdone, and Mr. Bush paints the Charges river in caramels-and-cream.

A friend of mine writes me from Chicago that during the recent riots, while he stood watching a mob of anarchists who were being harangued alive by an orator of their own species, his attention was attracted by a young man sauntering by, apparently indifferent and a little bored. He was an elegant example of the regulation languid dude, and his make up included bell-crown beaver, high collar, eye-glass, tight trousers and toothpick shoes. He smoked an enormous cigar directed straight ahead. As he reached the outskirt of the crowd he paused, surveyed the speaker a moment through his eye-glass and pulling something from his pocket, lighted it at the cigar in his mouth and carelessly tossing it into the crowd moved slowly away with obvious unconcern. The mass of murder beat a hasty retreat, squandering like a flock of pigeons, the orator tumbling from his stand and nearly breaking his neck. Nothing else occurred, but when the object was examined by the police it turned out to be a true dynamite bomb, which only a mischance had prevented from exploding and taking half-a-hundred lives.

Major Ben. Ca. Truman is home again after a sojourn of several months on the Atlantic Coast. He speaks highly of Boston.—The Bulletin.

Rare Ben!—with courage and with truth you're blest—
That much your title and your name attest.
Your praise of Boston proves, too, the survival
Of your old virtue—justice to a rival.

A movement is afoot to organize another association for perpetuating the patriotic spirit, and conserving the blessed memories, of the war-time. It is to be called "The Rank and File," and its membership will consist solely of those who served as privates in the late lamented rebellion. Some difficulty has been experienced in getting them together, for one is bed-ridden and the other can't leave his work.

"Hold, hold, assassin, and confess thy crime—
Justice o'ertakes thee in the nick of time!
Yon pool of blood, ere scarce 'twas cold, I found:
It mutely cries against you from the ground.
And see: upon thy hand—thy sleeve—the stain!
Wretch! where's the body of the man you've slain?"
"Come, pardner, lemme go—I ain't that stripe:
My nose bled and I didn't have no wipe."

General Howard has explained that he became a Christian by reading a religious novel. This reminds me of a little anecdote.

A holy minister of the gospel called one day on a new parishioner—a newspaper man, whose reputation for all the minor sins—the misdemeanours of the divine code—preceded him wherever he went. The man was an infidel, a blasphemer, a hard drinker and a chronic debtor. After an unsatisfactory interview the man of God, when about to take leave, said: "I see we must not hope to agree in doctrine, but I do not despair of persuading you to a better life. Pray accept this littler book—*A Tale of Grace and Doom*. I can attest its efficacy in turning souls to the light: under Providence it was the means of my own conversion."

"Shake," said the sinner, gravely, extending his hand: "I wrote it."

It may not be altogether true. I don't know the effect of reading such books; but out of a wide experience and a full heart I can assure General Howard that he would never have become a Christian by writing one.

I have another yarn about a parson and an editor. Entering the sanctum one day to get a free advertisement for his church-fair, the holy man heard the enlightener of the world roundly swearing in an adjoining room. It was no ordinary, commonplace swearing, but a tranquil, deep unbroken flow of profanity like the monstrous encroachment of a river of lava consuming a province. A moment later it ceased, and the scribe, somewhat flushed, entered and greeted his visitor.

"My friend," said the good man, "pardon me, but did I not hear you taking the blessed name of the Lord in vain?"

"I don't know that," the offender replied with a significant twist of the head: "I was 'taking' it at the foreman, but it's too soon to say it hasn't done any good."

A storm-seasoned old newspaper reporter in attendance at the recent yacht-race threw his weather-beaten eye to the wind'ard, shifted his quid, unshipped a tot of amber, triced up his trousers and wrote that "the sky, though not cloudless, was the reverse of indicative of storm." That man's felicitous knack at expression would make him a fortune if he would leave off reporting and begin life anew as the first mate of a river steamboat.

Every time the newspapers relate that some fisherman or hunter has found the body of "an unknown man," the friends and relatives of "the Sacramento Shakespeare" are greatly distressed until they have read the rest of the description.

Fire is over all, and under all, and through all. The rocks are aglow with it, as on Walpurgis-night it bathed the awful facades of Mammon's palace in the Hartz mountains. The seas, lakes, rivers and fountains are full of it; it burns in the leaves of the trees and the roots of the grass. It flames unseen in all the air; the clouds are big with blazes. Our blood is hot and luminous, our muscles generate sparks and coruscations by friction. Not the minutest tissue, cell or corpuscle of animal life but is instinct with fire; not a metal nor a salt; not a blossom, bole or spore, but burns invisible. Everything—all matter, all spirit, all action, speech, thought, feeling—the manner of their manifestation, the sense and memory of their existence, the very conception of their possibility and the doubt that shadows it as smoke—all are but forms and fragments of the solar flame. The only thing which has no fire in it is a poem in the *Overland Monthly*.

If American fishing vessels are not to be permitted to put into Canadian ports for bait they will have to take larger and fatter crews. The extra hands might advantageously be recruited among the anarchists.

At last a man has been shot whose death the judiciary and police will be hot to avenge—he was a gambler and a pimp. Unluckily for the interests of justice his assassin is a pimp and a gambler.

The decision of the United States Supreme Court in the railroad tax cases is doubtless wise and just. But I venture to suppose (without venturing to know anything about it) that the highest and most important function of an appellate court is not merely to secure to an individual litigant his rights, but to make future litigation needless by determining in advance the rights of all. If that view (taken in the darkest ignorance) is just, it follows that in

admitting, concerning certain constitutional questions raised in this case, that “their importance cannot be overestimated,” and then coolly, and without deigning to give a reason, explaining “that this court should not decide them unless their determination is essential to the disposition of the case in which they arise,” the Justices of the Supreme Court simply refused to perform the duty that is most required of them by those who pay them. This refusal to do duty—this determination to accomplish as little for their money and honors as they can is the settled practice of judges, the land through. If any other class of public servants should set up and openly profess inefficiency as a rule of official service it would speedily find itself represented in “the seats of power” by a number of warm spots lingering on the cushions like loving memories in faithful hearts.

It would seem as if our system of enforcing laws before determining their validity were about as bad as a malevolent ingenuity could make it; but when, in addition to this criminal idiocy, we submit to the Supreme Court’s refusal to determine at all, we may justly boast ourselves inaccessible alike to the sophistries of interest and the fallacies of common-sense.

(Source: Archive.org, https://archive.org/stream/waspjanjune188616unse#page/n324/mode/1up)