

The Wasp
February 20, 1886

Prattle

The Rev. Dr. Henry J. Van Dyke has been called to the San Francisco Theological Seminary to fill the "Chair of Systematic Theology." Systematic Theology may be defined as holy nonsense reduced to rule. It is a pretty study, truly, and many there be who line their ribs with it; who plant therein the seed of temporal profit, which bring abundant harvestage—ingenious drones, piously consuming, whereof the Rev. Henry is one. For the man who gets his living by being religious one may entertain a certain compassion, but the villain who builds up a belly at the dugs of theology is one of reason's outlaws, whom it is right to exterminate. Theology is to religion what the shell is to the kernel. There is this difference: theology contains no kernel—nothing but a big fat worm, edible to fools and rogues. The theologian cracks the shell upon a fool's head, presents him with the fragments and himself devours the worm.

Six months ago Mr. Sams, of Georgia, had the bad luck to be chewed by a rattlesnake. Wherefore Mr. Sams entombed aneath the nose of him a sovereign quantity of the wine of corn, and was made whole. "Later," says a press telegram, "he has developed violent symptoms, so much so that he beats his wife and family"; though, truly, these are symptoms pertaining rather to the antidote than to the bane. But the snake has a place in the diagnosis, for the patient is said to "act like a man with a well defined case of rabies; only, instead of barking he makes a rattling sound." That a man with rabies (hydrophobia) barks is one of the most interesting assumptions of modern science, but it pales its ineffectual fire before the dazzling fact of Mr. Sam's "rattling sound." With what under the sun does he make it?

If a man were gored by a mad bull would he bellow? Belabored with the trunk of a mad elephant would he trumpet? Kicked by a mad jackass would he bray? Pecked by a mad owl would he hoot? By a canary would he sing? by an agent of the Associated Press would he lie like a fool?

The Salvini craze was an apotheosis of pantomime. It was grounded on the assumption that, having a general knowledge of the play, it is possible to know by an actor's movement, gestures and expression the particular thing that he is saying. It seems incredible that this folly should find acceptance. After five minutes' trial every auditor, or rather spectator, knew that with regard to himself the assumption was false—knew that he did not know what Salvini was saying and therefore did not know if his acting was correct or not. I speak, of course, of those who do not understand Italian. To enjoy acting it is not enough to know in a general way the plot and dialogue of the play: one must understand every word the actor speaks. How else may one know if the action is suited to the word, the gesture what it should be, the expression of the face agreeing? If one does not know what is said the acting is to him pantomime and nothing more—the actor would as well say nothing. Yet who of all Salvini's disappointed audiences had the frankness to confess the disappointment? They

braved it out, all, applauding for mutual support in the hideous falsehood of their absurd position. They were like the guests of that king who after dinner pretended to eat, with royal relish, a bit of wax candle, and passing a piece to each man present had the satisfaction of seeing all devoured without a visible qualm.

The critics, naturally, were the worst. The mendacious hardihood of these creatures was astounding. They competed for the crown of folly—they gloried in their shame. Nothing was too extravagant for these dull sycophants to say. They exhausted the vocabulary to prove the worthlessness of words—to show that the dramatic art is independent of speech. Unconsciously, they affirmed that its highest pleasures are open to the deaf audience of a dumb actor. Had Salvini been a famous English elocutionist paralyzed from birth they would have sworn his acting was a blessing to the blind. Let not those despair to whom Heaven has denied both sight and hearing: they may some day have Othello nobly interpreted to the nose by some artist of incomparable smells.

Am I unfair to the critics? Do I overstate their folly? Be so good as to read this, from our leading literary journal, remembering that it is written and published in grave good faith:

He can speak with his eyes, his hands, arms, legs, body—nay, with his very bones, for he turned the broad of his back upon us in Conrad, the other night, and his shoulder-blades spoke to us a volume of hesitation, fear, submission, desperation—everything which could haunt a man at the moment of inevitable detection.

Let me ask what humorist, consciously caricaturing, could more grotesquely gey the devotees of the shoulder-blade drama.

Once Moses (in Scripture the story is told)
Entreated the favour God's face to behold.
Compassion divine the petition denied
Lest vision be blasted and body be fried;
Yet this much, the Record informs us, took place:
Jehovah, concealing His terrible face,
Protruded His back from behind a great rock,
And edification ensued without shock.
So godlike Salvini, lest worshipers die,
Averting the blaze of his withering eye,
Tempers his terrors and shows to the pack
Of feeble adorers "the broad of his back."
The fires of their altars, which paled and declined
Before him, burn all the more brightly behind.
O happy adorers, to care not at all
Where fawning may tickle or lip-service fall!

The total abstinence cranks have evolved from their cold and clammy boweling a bill which, if it become a law, will prohibit the use of wine at the President's state dinners—restoring the vulgar and humiliating Hayes regime and making it perpetual. No doubt the affairs of the nation could be conducted by successive Governments of lemonade. For that matter, they could be conducted in log houses by an Administration of blue jeans, and without soap. The practical value of wine at the President's table might easily be overstated: it is merely a question of whether we will have gentlemen at the head of affairs, and whether

we will or will not court the contempt of the civilized world. For my part I would rather be a butt of wine than a butt of ridicule.

Two more women have been killed with a carpenter's hammer. There is really no economy in this when nails are so cheap.

McCullough as Virginius! Well,
The statue, though a bad one,
Will fill a want: for, strange to tell,
Virginius ne'er has had one!

The story comes from Colorado that a newspaper man, formerly of this city, has run mad. Insanity, like freedom, "broadens slowly down," but I'll swallow my leg if ever I thought it would get so low. I'm for the bottom of a well.

A gristle-brained contemporary, gifted with congenital idiocy and happy in the added advantage of an impenitent ignorance, has bestowed the levity of his adhesion upon the fantastic hypothesis that the plays and poems commonly ascribed to Shakespeare were written by "Lord Bacon." It will surprise this rushing fool to learn that neither history nor tradition tells us anything about such a person as "Lord Bacon." A certain Lord Verulam there was, whose name was Francis Bacon. If that is the person the congenital idiot chances to mean, the fact that he came so near saying what he meant must be regarded as a singularly happy accident.

The Chronicle will oblige by sticking to its own planet: when it soars into the measureless reaches of space it is as much as one's life is worth to follow it. On Tuesday last it reported the recent occultation of Aldebaran by the moon—"queen of the evening," as it preferred to call that orb—and gave us a lovely diagram of the event. But the reporter did not feel at home in the heavens, and his really spirited engraving represented "the queen" in the act of obscuring the wrong star. Aldebaran is not in the "left nostril" of Taurus, as he stated, but in the left eye. I will not deepen this astronomer's dejection at his bad shot by making the joke appropriate to the sad occasion. He may have a mother, poor man.

It is a genuine and pure delight to be able to commend a parson for forthright common sense of the secular sort, and for the truth as it is in sinners. The Rev. J. W. Ross, a Methodist preacher, explains the emptiness of churches by the fact that the masses "hate the gospel" and "don't want to be saved." Reverend brethren, it is a cold, hard, bitter and unbeautiful truth. It falls upon us like a brick chimney out of a clear sky, and overcomes like a hornet. It knocks us silly. Wherefore, good brethren, let us take thought of what we shall do, and wherewithal we shall be comforted. Let us knuckle down upon our beseechers and strive. For behold it is written: "Whoso shall ask for grace to wedge in between the sinner and his soul, to him shall be given a heap o' cheek."

I cherish a temperate and becoming respect for the Grand Army of the Republic. It would add something to my happiness to hear that its older members had ceased to call themselves "boys," and if its camp-fires could be successfully conducted without a resort to such extreme measures as hardtack, sow-belly and tin cups, that would be no small advantage to morality. There are certain memories of the civil war which it is a crime to keep green—among them, that of its dinners: the diet of the great struggle was essentially felonious. However, the Grand Army men are, in the main, very good fellows. It is not their fault that

the period of their “encampment” in San Francisco next August will be made hideous and odious by a cataclysm of bosh unthinkable and fudge lacking an end. The mortifying memory of her indiscretion with the “Knights Templar” may possibly save San Francisco from another scandal of similar magnitude, but the giddy old girl will indubitably go again astray, to repent in burlaps and ashes; her local veterans themselves blushing through their scars for their part in the escapade. The reunion of the gallant old lads of the battle period is a subject that lends itself with fatal facility to the horrible purposes of the infestive sentimentaler, who will wreak himself upon it in the language of the heart a hundred and fifty ways, deboweling the mind of him to its ultimate intestine; for when afflict with a right entuzimuzy, your true sentimentaler will expose his in’ards with all disquieting indelicacy of a skeleton clock. If the villain isn’t already pigeon-holing abundance of screamy adjectives and rocketing adverbs in the various newspaper offices I’ll eat my head.

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