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Prattle

A Record of Individual Opinion

It is stated that the furniture for the new cruiser *Charleston* "would grace a palace." Mention is made of "magnificent sideboards with elaborate carvings and panels and fine mirrors," "great heavy mahogany tables and desks of elaborate design and finish, and upholstered chairs by the score." The cabins and staterooms, it is added, have sides "composed of panels of polished sycamore and teak, each of which is a gem of the cabinet-maker's art." It is to be hoped that the officers and sailors of the *Charleston* will harmonize with the beautiful environment. An Admiral out of keeping with the elaborate carvings, a midshipman who should not match the panels of polished sycamore, or an able seaman unable to subdue his complexion to the exact shade of the mahogany tables, would precipitate a grave artistic disaster-at-sea. If the vessel's gunpowder is suitably perfumed with attar-of-roses, her guns gold-lated and operated by crews in silk attire, captained by Professors of Department, the national honor may be considered safe until there shall be a war.

If our "new Navy" had no graver virtues, no more perilous perfections than gorgeous furniture, it would be well for us; but (in my humble judgment) we have not, and are not likely soon to have, a single war vessel that is worth the cost of its rudder. Our safety is to be found in the fact that the war vessels of other nations are no better. The entire "modern" system of military naval architecture and armament is a joke. Our ships are the dreams of civilians, machinists, scientists and constructors. The whole unheavenly lot of them, from the stolidest European line-of-battle ship down to the tipsiest submergible torpedo-boat invented by the Sage of Squedunk, will go out of commission as soon as the first naval engagement shall have unwritten "the lesson taught in Hampton Roads" by showing that the glorified successors to the *Monitor* and *Merrimac* can neither fight with efficiency nor founder with grace. The ship will then replace the machine, the gunner the artillerist, the sailor the mechanic; the scientific technologist will be invited to vacate the conning tower (there is no longer a quarter deck) and a navy will not be thenceforth a possession devoutly to be got rid of. These cumbrous and unwieldy craft, crowded in every square inch of their bodies with complicated and delicate machinery for doing everything except something damaging to an enemy; with their elaborate devices for making cowards of all on board by "protecting" them instead of killing others; their electric plants and electricians; their torpedoes and torpedo-nettings; their hundred-and-one various kinds of engines and motors--steam, hydraulic, alcoholic, and the devil knows what--for doing all the necessary work and much of that which ought not to be done; their appliances for finding and removing submarine mines and obstructions; their auto-electric fixtures for firing simultaneously half a dozen guns, the shock of any one of which would derange half the machinery on board; their fearful and wonderfully made steering gear; in short, their ingenious

mechanisms for elevating war to the chief place among the arts of peace--these "monsters of the deep," I was about to say, seem all to be designed with a blank and black ignorance of important elementary truths. First among these is the truth that fighting is rough work.

The complexity of the modern warship's machinery, its liability to derangement, the special knowledge required in those who work it and *their* liability to derangement, the interdependence of all the parts and their functions--all these characteristics make it unfit for the storm and stress of battle. It is like using one's watch to drive nails. I verily believe that almost any line-of-battle ship or cruiser afloat today would be partly disabled by the mere impact of a 300-pound shot delivering a glancing blow upon any part of her periphery, and that the recoil of one of her own broadsides would complete her disability. As for ramming an enemy, she might as profitably be rammed. The shock would "stop" her like a clock.

But over the modern battleship "peace hath her victories no less renowned than war." complexity and delicacy in machinery are not vitalizing qualities; they make it liable not only to derangement, but to deterioration. The cruiser which has today a speed of nineteen knots will have next year a speed of eighteen and the year after sixteen and a half. Today she can turn in a circle of 600 yards diameter, tomorrow she cannot. And so with her every function: "when she dies she dies all over." She decays with the rapidity of a dead fish. She is not to be kept in stock, but ordered fresh for each engagement. She should be built one day, receive her armament (and "magnificent" furniture) the next, go into action on the third and on the fourth be raised from the bottom and sold as old iron.

I have said that fighting is rough work. It is also extremely interesting; it engages one's entire attention. The ordinary mortal feels in battle but one emotion--an overwhelming sense of danger. He does not think at all: his every act is instinctive, automatic. To expect him to manipulate a complicated machine is to be disappointed. Experience has shown the wisdom of making military weapons of extreme simplicity. Even the old muzzle-loading rifle was a mechanism too complex for the soldier; more than 20,000 of these arms were found on the field of Gettysburg with from two to fifteen bullets in them. Fancy relying on swarms of engineers, machinists, electricians and all the other sorts of eers, ists and icians of a modern man-of-war intelligently to perform their vital, difficult and delicate duties in an atmosphere of exploding shells! There is not an indicator which they will not misread, not a lever which they will not move the wrong way, not a button which they will not press at the wrong time. They will not know whether they are afoot or on horseback; and it will not greatly matter, for their absurd apparatus would not work with even the most intelligent attention. The attempt to win battles safely by making machines do the fighting is enough to stir the immortal gods to inextinguishable laughter.

There is not a man-of-war afloat which might not profitably be scuttled and replaced with an ordinary merchant steamer suitably strengthened, armed with a few heavy guns and nothing else and manned by seamen who if hurt in battle would not feel that they had a good cause of action against their Government for breach of contract. The inventor who should show his sloping forehead above her rail should be promptly chucked overboard--particularly if he murmured the word "electricity." The machine-gunner, the revolving-cannonier, the torpedo crank, the search-lighter, the general apparatus and appliance man and the gentleman afflicted with impenetrability should be tenderly and considerably destroyed in the order of their

intrusion. One chap I would spare to perpetuate the race and breed freaks for the naval museums of the future--the inventor of the gull-blast. It is thought that the noise and confusion of a naval engagement will demoralize the gulls, causing them to lose their heads and "come aboard," probably for safety. So all modern men-of-war are (I am told) to be fitted with automatic electrical apparatus for producing a strong current of air along each side of the ship, about ten feet above the upper deck. This, it is thought, will carry the gulls astern and prevent them from disturbing the meditations of the philosopher in the conning-tower.

Redding's "business men and citizens, male and female, irrespective of politics" (namely, Mr. Bush, a Postmaster, Mr. Bell, a Superior but not very Superior Judge, and Mr. Smith, a featherless biped), having invited Senator Stanford to visit their town for the purpose of hearing how great and good he is, that gentleman has assured them that he will be there. The kindness of their invitation, he apprises them, appeals to his "sacred sympathies"--the sympathies of a millionaire, it will be observed, are sacred--and in this he is gracious enough to "recognize an expression of your recognition of *That* which has for its object the appreciation and development of humanity." I have ventured to italicize and capitalize a word in this remarkable sentence; I don't at all know what the word means, but it seems to me that the name of something having so exalted an object is entitled to dignification by such means as I can command. If I could have it printed in letters of gold I would do so; and the pedestal of the proposed Stanford statute at San Jose might properly have the following inscription:

For this iconolith Stanford sat--
Famous forever for this and *That*!

But Mr. Stanford is in error; he has not accurately apprehended the motives of Redding's Redding's three business men, male and female, irrespective of politics, though all Republican. What they desire to recognize in him is not *That*, but his peculiar relation to federal patronage, local elections and social distinction. The postmaster would like him to drop a good word into the presidential ear, the superior judge a suitable sum into the local corruption fund of the party and the featherless biped a smile or two where they would generate the most happiness, as cucumbers are yellowed by sunbeams. "The appreciation and development of the possibilities of humanity" are not into it.

Mr. Henry Dahl is held in Oakland on suspicion of having committed a horrible crime. When arrested he was in the rooms of the Young Men's Christian Association, but in order to convict him there must be, I suppose corroborating evidence.

A Virginia City woman fired three bullets into her body because she had been slandered. If one should do that every time one is slandered the seaside bathing resorts could make money by closing; we should all be too full of lead to swim.

In the report of the Utah Commission I find what is to me a new word--"Councilmanic." It is built on the same lines as "Aldermanic," which might serve, too, as a model for many more: "madmanic," "noblemanic," "statesmanic," "hangmanic," "salesgentlemanic," etc. In this city, not having any city council, we shall have no use for the new word, and in Oakland it will probably undergo a trifling change and appear as "Councilmaniac."

The Hon. Charles Sumner tells a story so badly that it is a crime to sit by and hear him. The other day he attempted to illuminate one of his long somber speeches with the familiar anecdote of the treed 'coon which, seeing Davy Crockett aiming his rifle at it, promised to come down if he wouldn't shoot. In Mr. Sumner's version the 'coon is not a raccoon, but a negro, who says: "Fo' God's sake, don't shoot; I's a-comin'!"--which, under the circumstances, is about what he might naturally be expected to say. If Mr. Sumner can discern any point in the story as he understand it he must have a sense of humor to which a butcher's meat block seems a work conceived in singularly light and airy spirit and the "keening" at an Irish funeral a performance uncommonly comical.;

It is the pious and professionless conviction of the Rev. D. Bothwell that Sabbath-less nations are physically and morally degenerate. Words are wasted on Dr. Bothwell. For a dismal tale of years have labored to show that the superior moral and physical development known as civilization is the product, not of the Christian Sabbath, as Dr. Bothwell believes, nor of the free coinage of silver, as Senators Jones and Stewart affirm, nor of the freedom of the press, as is held by the proprietor of this paper, nor of the love of oysters, as I am assured by a man who sells them in the California Market. Civilization, in my judgment, is a flower of which the root is to be found in the practice of paying good salaries to public writers. I ask attention to these facts in proof. In France, England and the United States writers for the press are paid better than elsewhere; in these countries we have the highest and best civilization. In Russia, Turkey and some of the Spanish American countries they are less adequately rewarded, and the lower degree of civilization is there conspicuous. In Madagascar, Tartary, Timbuctoo, and Patagonia they get nothing, and there you find moral and physical degeneracy actually rampant. I am aware that a similar showing has been made in support of the silk hat, but the fact that it was made by a hatter removes it outside the domain of serious consideration.

Mr. Adolph Sutro is accused of appropriating to his own use 100 acres of the City Cemetery. Well, poor man, he cannot hope to be with us always, and his estimate of the extent of territory required to bury him without cramping is entitled to respectful consideration. My own notion is that if placed with his head to the west in the usual way he can easily enough be got in between two parallels of latitude.

Justice Field has been expounding the significance of the Terry incident to Eastern ears. He thinks it will result in laws for the better protection of judges against dissenting litigants. This appears to be a confession that his own protection was accomplished outside the law, for certainly "better" protection than he got it is impossible to conceive. Justice Field would leave to the future a richer legacy of wisdom if every time he opens his mouth he would fill it with potatoes and gravy.

O Dr. Cogswell, who'd have ever thought
That you could be accused of naughty conduct?
'Twould be a pity, truly, were you caught
And (for you love cold water) in a pond ducked.
Yet such a fate has often been the lot
Of men who do the things they ought to not.

I don't at all believe that you are bad;

You do not look it in your famous statue
(Stone lions, though, you'll find, seem blind and sad
Merely because unable to get at you).
Seen in the flesh, i dare say you appear
With something less of smirk and more of leer.

No, I repeat, I don't believe you did--
Unless, indeed, the lady'd lost her eyesight.
'Twere very sad to feel, when you are hid
Beneath that monument, uproared a sky's height,
That one who gave himself at death such fame,
While still among us lived a life of shame!