Carpetbagger's Crusade

Olsen, Otto H.

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The Continent Disaster

As the educational controversy proceeded, Tourgée continued, for a few years, to ride the tide of literary success. Toinette was republished in 1881 under a new title, A Royal Gentleman, and with a more appropriately tragic ending, and the following year John Eax and Mamelon, or the South Without the Shadow garnered a bit of praise and success. Hot Plowshares also appeared as a magazine serial that year, and a flow of articles, letters, and speeches expanded the Judge's commentary on the Negro and the South and extended it into such concerns as Christianity and civil service reform. For the first of many times, he addressed the Chautauqua Assembly in 1881, and a year later he effectively impressed a convention of newspaper editors with the neglected responsibilities of a free press. Emma, who had endured such anguish in the South, delighted in her husband's new prestige and in the constant round of theater and opera, concerts and parties that it brought, with such highlights as an invitation to Harriet Beecher Stowe's seventieth birthday celebration, a visit from the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and a conversation with Oscar Wilde, whom Emma found "not anything overwhelming."

The Tourgées spent the winter of Garfield's election in Philadelphia, a good part of the time at the home of old friends from Ohio, and the Judge now added the lyceum circuit to his activities. His reputation ensured an initial success that his ability captured and retained.

On the platform his glistening eye and massive, bristling mustache seemed to convey the excitement of his Reconstruction experience, while his handsome appearance and casual dignity effectively dissipated the stereotype of the carpetbagger. He was credited with "a fascinating voice and manner, an easy, graceful style of speaking, and a humorous way of putting things." Common sense and serious simplicity characterized his presentation, and reformism, his message.

One of Tourgée's many lecture tours led to the purchase of a family country house in western New York, in the little town of Mayville. While he was traveling by train to Chicago in the spring of 1881, the Judge's fancy was captured by an illustrated newspaper advertisement of a large, white house overlooking the northern end of Lake Chautauqua. On his return he stopped off to see it and was completely captivated. Reputedly built at a cost of over twenty thousand dollars as a wedding present for a daughter of one of the Tweed Ring, the twenty-three-room residence was surmounted by several attractive gables and towers and fronted by a large veranda, pleasantly reminiscent of the South. The area, not far northeast of the Western Reserve, resembled the surroundings and recalled the pleasures of both his and Emma's youth. Here was lovely countryside, Lake Chautauqua on one's doorstep, and Lake Erie only a few miles away. Here was a writer's welcome seclusion, together with a center of intellect and ideals only a few miles away at Chautauqua. Within a few weeks the Tourgees had purchased and entered their new home and christened it Thorheim, translated (with tongue in cheek) as "fool's home." Their arrival was a social event in Mayville, but it would be several years before the Tourgeés actually settled down on Thorheim's fifty acres.

Meanwhile Tourgée had become involved in preparing a stage version of A Fool's Errand in collaboration with the actor-producer-playwright Steele MacKaye. Comparisons of Tourgée's work with Uncle Tom's Cabin helped encourage this project, as did the reported success of an unauthorized dramatization somewhere in the West, which was quickly broken up by Tourgée's legal threats. For the official dramatization, it was agreed that MacKaye's authority was to be supreme in matters of structure and Tourgée's in matters of fact, but the two proved difficult.

2 Clipping, Boston Daily Advertiser, December 13, 1881, and other clippings, Tourgée Papers.
to separate, and the author's didactics were inclined to clash with the playwright's dramatic sense. A more serious problem was provided by MacKaye's distressing immersion in certain fiscal and legal struggles, the result of which was that several days before the play's opening the last act had yet to be written, a leading actor quit, and several parts remained to be filled. Nevertheless, the play opened, a few days late, on October 26, 1881, at the Arch Street Theater in Philadelphia and met with a varied reception. Some critics were mildly encouraging and others strongly so, but objections to the play's length of four hours and to various dramatic faults were rather unanimous. MacKaye had added to the absurdity of plot and melodrama and was subject to special censure, but there was also opposition to the "bloody-shirt" theme, an attitude that boded much future ill for Tourgée. "It embodies the polemics of ten years ago," objected the Philadelphia Times, accusing the play of reviving an "excitement that has passed away and that nobody cares to recall." MacKaye, who also played a leading role, was extremely satisfied, however, and concluded that he had so cut the "political verbiage of Judge Tourgée" as to produce an admirable play. "I have obtained laughter—applause—silence—tears, precisely where I calculated upon doing so," he boasted, but unfortunately the "money success" was "very moderate." Two weeks later, despite a cut in length, the show collapsed from lack of funds.

Whatever Tourgée's business ability, he was invariably involved in ambitious undertakings, and the failure of his play was followed by an even costlier venture. It was simply impossible for the habitually active Tourgée to accept a life as placid as that of a writer. He liked influence and power and was anxious to invest his wealth in an attractive and profitable career, and what could be more fitting for one of his experience than a venture in publishing? So, in the fall of 1881, Tourgée participated in the formation of a hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar corporation, Our Continent Publishing Company, which was to publish an illustrated weekly magazine.

Tourgée was president of the corporation and editor of the weekly, Our Continent, although he later attributed its inspiration and initial

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3 Clippings, Philadelphia Times, October 27, 1881, Philadelphia North American, October 27, 1881, American Register, November 26, 1881, Tourgée Papers.
policies to the treasurer, Robert S. Davis of Philadelphia. A third major investor and secretary of the firm was Daniel G. Brinton, an ethnologist of some repute, as well as owner and editor of the Philadelphia Medical and Surgical Reporter. Opportunity existed in the rapidly expanding magazine field, and the ambitious journal did anticipate an existing need in launching “the first serious attempt ever made to put into a weekly the attractions and excellences of our great monthlies.” 5 Tourgée’s fame provided excellent publicity, and among the minor investors were included the son of one of Tourgée’s publishers and no less a personage than Ulysses S. Grant. But competition was keen, and the rate of failure among such enterprises was about fifty per cent.

The first issue of Our Continent appeared in February, 1882; it was a ten-cent illustrated quarto of sixteen pages that focused its interest upon quality, intellectual independence, and nationalism. The very title was designed to encourage “Americanism in literature and art,” and a vow was made to present the “best” work of “our best writers” and “our best artists.” 6 The venture started well, and like the best monthlies of that period, Our Continent was filled with prints and illustrations and carried short stories, serials, articles on an endless variety of topics, and such regular features as “Literary Notes,” “The Household,” “Science Jottings,” “Our Society,” “In Lighter Vein,” and “Home Horticulture.” Preparations had been lavish, and the journal has since been characterized by an eminent scholar as “a brilliant and ambitious attempt.” “An unusual staff was assembled—Donald G. Mitchell in charge of art, Kate Field in a dressmaking department, Louise Chandler Moulton in a society section, Max Adeler for humor, and Helen Campbell editing household notes. All were stars; but with the exception of Adeler, they seem not to have been well cast in these rather humble parts.” 7 More satisfactory were the illustrators, most of whom were competent, though academic, craftsmen associated with the Bozart Institute in Philadelphia, including Will H. Low, W. T. Smedley, Joseph Pennell, Howard Pyle, Kenyon Cox, Frank Bellew, and A. B. Frost. The staff and illustrators were “eualped by a remarkable galaxy of writers of articles, fiction, and verse,” and in response to complaints

5 Continent, II (October 18, 1882), 477.
6 Ibid., I (February 15, 1882), 8.
that the weekly was of too high a quality for the average reader, Tourgée pledged to "stubbornly adhere" to the "theory that the best is none too good for 'the masses' of American readers." The first two issues contained poems or stories by Oscar Wilde, Sidney Lanier, Rebecca Harding Davis, Frank R. Stockton, and Hjalmar H. Boyesen, and "three days after the first issue was out, 58,000 copies of it had been sold." 

Fortune, however, did not remain so favorable, although extravagant expenditures continued (Tourgée was shocked at the fee of one thousand dollars paid Oscar Wilde for a single brief poem). When regular circulation failed to rise beyond about thirteen thousand copies, Davis and Brinton began to panic, but not the ever-determined and hopeful Judge. "At Albion's request," wrote Emma in her diary, "I write that his prediction is that one year from today he has $100,000 in the bank, outside of his property and Thorheim, and if this prediction is fulfilled, he goes to Europe and stays a year." The following month Davis and Brinton sold out to Tourgée, who assumed full control.

Although altered in size to a smaller folio and changed in name to the Continent, the weekly retained its essential character under the Judge's editorship. He set policy and wrote for the journal but was frequently absent on lecture tours or stints of writing at Thorheim, which resulted in a visible increase in the activities of one member of the original staff, Helen Campbell, and in Emma's shouldering of much of the day-to-day management of the Philadelphia office. While Aimée and her father found need or excuse for frequent lengthy visits to the home at Mayville, the sometimes exasperated Emma seemed doomed to wearisome labor in Philadelphia, with her visits to the pleasant surroundings of Thorheim confined to summer weekends.

Tourgée's few literary contributions to the Continent included Hot Plowshares, a short story, and several poems. His poetry, like earlier efforts, consisted of story-sermons of little artistry, although the Negro theme could evoke such powerful touches as the following excerpt:

Yet up from the Southland comes a moan
Like Yesterday's ceaseless monotone.
Hark! 'Tis the half-freed Slave's lament

8 Continent, I (April 12, 1882), 130; Mott, American Magazines, III, 558-59.
9 Mrs. Tourgée's Diary, May 17, 1882, Tourgée Papers.
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For the bliss we promised and woe we sent!
The moan of the fettered, untaught soul
Charged with a freeman's power and dole!  

Reflective of the Judge's editorship and proclivity, however, were his more manifold and extensive thousands of words on literature, law, economics, education, and history. His initial editorials were replaced by a regular and opinionated column, "Migma," and he also wrote or contributed to "Literary Notes" and "The Bookshelf." Together with numerous articles, these columns soon placed his previous promise of "no axes to grind nor hobbies to ride" quite beyond his realization. Judge Tourgee was becoming a part of a much broader stream of the nation's critical life, although, as with his literature, he would never attain again the achievement or recognition that had marked his Reconstruction writings.

As was to be expected in a business venture, circulation was sought through the exploitation of accepted traditions and well-known names, but the literary and intellectual accomplishments of the Continent were not without merit. Its romance and sentimentality were provided by able and established stylists like Harriet Beecher Stowe, E. P. Roe, Julian Hawthorne, and Edward Everett Hale. But the magazine also presented the newer talent of Frank R. Stockton and utilized the more uncommon abilities of Charles G. Leland, the humorist; Anna K. Green, initiator of the popularity of the detective story; Joaquin Miller, then past his peak, who wrote on Indians and the West; and two delineators of urban life, Harriet P. Spofford and the satirical Edgar Fawcett. Although the Continent was inclined to rely upon popular competence and traditional style, it made a noticeable effort to encourage significant content in American literature. Among its romantic stories were plots ranging from the slave revolt, in a novel by Marion Harland, to economic problems, treated in Patience Thornton's "A Stock-Gambler's Daughter" and in the anonymous "On a Margin: The Story of a Hopeless Patriot." Important regionalists who appeared included Rebecca Harding Davis, Rose Terry Cooke, Sarah Orne Jewett, Constance Fenimore Woolson, and Joel Chandler Harris, and Tourgee applauded the realistic portrayal

found in Harris, Edward Eggleston, Charles Egbert Craddock, and George Cable, the last of whom turned down Tourgée’s offer of seventy-five hundred dollars for a serial.\textsuperscript{11}

Much less discerning was the Continent’s attitude toward the emerging realism identified with William Dean Howells and Henry James. The magazine recognized this school, but denounced its literary attitudes, Tourgée’s traditional biases having been ingrained by his collegiate training and dramatized by his life. The Judge’s preference for an entertaining story was one consideration in the denunciation, but the real essence of the controversy was his prudery, his moral didacticism, and his exalted view of mankind. “The novel with a purpose is made a matter of artistic ridicule by over refined dilettanti,” he complained, and endorsed the view that Howells and James were “novelists of first-rate abilities, writing with second-rate purposes, on second or third-rate materials.” The reaction against romanticism had gone too far in Tourgée’s view, and by shunning the reality of principles, ideals, and hope, “the modern novel—the artistic, analytic, realistic novel, as it is called in gushes of self-laudation by its prime votaries—becomes a false and distorted picture of life.” Admittedly, there were “unpleasant, petty and debasing elements in human nature,” but this, he insisted, “does not justify the novelist in dragging them always to the front. A picture is not truthful merely because it has dirt in it.”\textsuperscript{12} Tourgée demanded a fuller picture, not only the scabs and warts, but also the nobility, the courage, and the hope of mankind. “A ceaseless flood of epigram, eternal analysis of the most trivial and insignificant motives, the dalliance with vice as a common and familiar presence, and a belief that life has nothing good or noble in it worth the novelist’s while to seek out and portray,”\textsuperscript{13} these were the tendencies he denounced in American fiction.

Tourgée failed, no doubt, to appreciate adequately the subtle perception and purpose of the realists, but there was much substance to his criticism. These writers could be boring, trivial, and, in their own fashion, trite, and the broader social interest of Howells had not yet developed. It is interesting to note that despite their literary antagonism, Howells and Tourgée were somewhat similar products of the ante-bellum

\textsuperscript{11} Arlin Turner, George W. Cable. A Biography (Durham, 1956), 132.

\textsuperscript{12} Continent, III (May 23, 1883), 669; IV (August 1, 1883), 159; IV (August 22, 1883), 252.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., IV (August 15, 1883), 219.
Western Reserve, sharing an equalitarian bias, a didactic commitment, and a puritanical morality. But while Howells was, in a sense, pursuing the tedious methods of science in creating character and scene, the impatient and involved Tourgée demanded synthesis and open commitment. A similarity was revealed, however, in their mutual appreciation of the entertaining and enlightening Balzac and Turgenev, although Tourgée's prudery hindered his full acceptance of such genius as that of Emile Zola, Leo Tolstoy, or Walt Whitman. This puritanical champion of freedom even favored the banning of "immoral" books from public libraries and refused, to his own detriment, to accept tobacco or liquor advertisements in the Continent. He did accept such ads as one for an electromagnetically charged corset calculated to cure everything from eczema to spinal ills.

In addition to literature, the intellectual interests of the Continent ranged from anthropology to zoology and attracted such contributors as the economist Richard T. Ely and three eminent university presidents, Charles W. Eliot, Daniel C. Gilman, and Noah Porter. The editor's most apparent bent was for sociology and history, and he served the latter profession well, drawing attention to the inception of the American Historical Magazine and praising the works of Moses Coit Tyler, Justin Winsor, John B. McMaster, Hubert H. Bancroft, and the lesser figures John Esten Cooke and George W. Williams.

The pages of Tourgée's magazine also flaunted his equalitarian idealism and began to define a newer reformism that he would champion throughout his life. Reconstruction was still a topic of vital concern to him, and although his specific emphasis remained upon Federal educational aid, this was but a step toward a larger goal announced in one of the first issues of the Continent. In Tourgée's eyes, the recent amendments to the Federal Constitution were based upon the "doctrine of equality of right," and, not content with the mere existence of such laws upon the statute books, he considered himself engaged in creating "a public sentiment that would not only permit but demand their enforcement, in letter and spirit, in every nook and hamlet in the land." 14 The focus of this interest was obviously the South. Tourgée believed that the final solution must be worked out within that section,

14 Ibid., I (May 17, 1882), 210. But see the stereotype Negro cartoon allowed to appear (ibid., III [May 16, 1883], 640).
however, and looked especially to the influence of such enlightened southerners as Rev. Atticus G. Haygood, President of Emory University. At the same time, he believed that the North could and should exert an influence, and his hope in such a possibility was encouraged by his experiences with Garfield and other Republicans and by the continuing educational debate. But he had been aware of more discouraging trends for many years, and in the pages of the *Continent* he complained of the sacrifice of vital principles to reconciliation and gain, of the acceptance of millionaires as greater heroes than war-scarred veterans, and of the betrayal of the Reconstruction amendments by the nation’s highest court. Adding to the Judge’s exasperation at the changing tide was his conviction that, as earlier indicated by the Ku Klux Klan, it was the southerner who still displayed the most courage and pride in the defense of sectional ideals. The nation’s history was being perverted, said the Judge, because the North was “too busy in coining golden moments into golden dollars to remember a past that is full of the glory of noble purposes. . . .” “The South surrendered at Appomattox, the North has been surrendering ever since.”

While thus continuing the Reconstruction dispute, Tourgée spoke, too, at this early date, of other evils—of a basic “wrong in the economic and social system,” of mass poverty, of the dangerous power of corporate wealth, and of the world’s dilemma in being “able to produce more than it is ready to use.” He applauded Henry George’s *Progress and Poverty* and denounced the antilabor novel *The Breadwinners*, by John Hay. Bitterly critical of economic injustice and contemptuous of Herbert Spencer and the doctrines of *laissez faire*, he nevertheless opposed radical panaceas and favored corrective action by a democratic government, an approach that doubtlessly reflected his Civil War and Reconstruction orientation. Consistent with this reliance upon government was his support of various political reforms intended to enhance popular control. In its entirety, Tourgée’s stand in the early 1880’s displays a striking resemblance to the progressivism that would open the succeeding century, and suggests a neglected tie between this reformism and the old radical, anti-Liberal, and anti-Mugwump portion

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15 *Continent*, V (April 2, 1884), 444; VI (July 30, 1884), 156.
16 *Continent*, V (January 23, 1884), 125–26; V (June 4, 1884), 730. See also *ibid.*, II, 503–7; III, 59; IV, 251; V, 59–60, 220, 728.
of the Republican party. Also related to progressivism was Tourgée's promotion of conservation and his partial and perplexed conclusion that imperialist expansion contributed to world progress despite its selfishness, brutality, and racism, all of which he denounced. Less immediately popular were his proposals for a government-owned communication system and, in a reaction against the expense and danger of armaments, for "an international court of arbitration in perpetuo." 17

This expanded reformism did not destroy Tourgée's Republicanism. His Reconstruction experiences, the Negro issue, and the question of laissez faire remained rigid barriers against the Democrats, and, lacking any other promising alternative, he chose to do what he could to influence his once-idealistic party in the desired direction. During the early 1800's he urged reform and castigated his own party for promises betrayed, and, although he opposed the nomination of James G. Blaine and was disgruntled by an abysmally weak platform, he threw the support of the Continent behind the Republicans in the presidential election of 1884. 18 Nevertheless, he continued to bemoan the nomination of Blaine openly, and he found his speaking services resisted that year by the Republican National Committee because it had been decided to suppress the race question, which Tourgée most decidedly would not agree to eliminate from his speeches. The Judge's Republicanism was an older one, which, as it labored to return Republicans to earlier commitments and ideals, would increasingly fight as much within as without the party.

The Continent's Republicanism in 1884 violated certain nonpartisan declarations of earlier years, but this was neither surprising nor the first time that such a thing had occurred, although it may have been inspired by hopes of patronage, for the Continent was foundering. Neither Tourgée's continued disbursements nor his proclamations of "assured success" had changed an outlook that had been doubtful from the first. But already heavily committed, he persuaded himself to continue his salvage efforts, and not only his recently acquired fortune but his income from lectures, a mortgage on Thorheim, the proceeds from the sale of

17 Continent, III (February 14, 1883), 219.
North Carolina real estate, and assignments on his copyrights were dropped into the abyss. Then, when appeals to the Republican editor and publisher James Gordon Bennett brought no succor, the Judge began to contract short-term loans at usurious interest rates and to surrender insurance policies and royalties as collateral. Late in 1883 he moved the magazine to New York in search of prestige and more local support and instituted various contests to stimulate interest. A slight increase in circulation and advertising may have made the magazine self-sustaining at its new location, but its position was precarious, and it remained heavily in debt.

The precise nature of several subsequent events is unclear. In the late spring of 1884, already exhausted in mind and body, Tourgée reinjured his spine while stepping from a curb and found himself bedridden. He had meanwhile become heavily indebted to, among others, one Charles H. Blair of New York. At this moment certain notes of Blair were due, and to secure a postponement, Tourgée went so far as to mortgage his future writings. He was then also desperately dictating *An Appeal to Caesar* from his sickbed, and Ulysses S. Grant, faced with misfortunes of his own, requested the return of the one thousand dollars that he had invested in the magazine. Upon learning of the predicament of the *Continent*, however, Grant apologized and begged the Judge not to give the matter another thought. Tourgée’s efforts at fiscal and physical recovery were making encouraging headway, when a *Continent* stockholder suddenly instituted a “friendly” suit. This action frightened Blair, in turn, into demanding immediate payment, and the *Continent* collapsed.

It is not easy to evaluate this failure of what was, in some respects, an astute venture. Although the real breakthrough of the modern magazine occurred about two years later, Tourgée’s weekly anticipated the popularity of the ten-cent, high-quality literary magazine that was timely and practical, partial to middle-class democracy, and not extremely genteel. The *Continent* displayed a nationalism and reformism of growing significance, and its editor was imaginative, able, and widely informed. Even Tourgée’s traditional idealism could have been of some assistance in achieving popularity, just as it was for another magazine editor, his onetime literary idol, Josiah G. Holland. But the *Continent* lacked the technical advantages of the inexpensive halftone illustrations.
developed a decade later, and the decision to make the Continent a weekly was of doubtful wisdom. Low-priced weeklies of this type that did succeed in the future could not afford the quality-consciousness of the Continent. Also, the trend toward briefness and crispness was not strong in Tourgée’s magazine, and his puritanical code may have turned away subscribers as well as advertisements. Moreover, Tourgée denied the Continent his complete attention and supervision, and he had troublesome axes to grind, older ones that were losing public favor and newer ones that alienated business and political support.

The underlying difficulty of the Continent was, however, a business and fiscal one. As an entrepreneur Tourgée was perceptive but unrestrained, and his imagination, or his determination, or both, too easily outran his resources. The capital commonly required to succeed with a magazine such as he desired was far more than he could supply, while his independent and controversial position alienated other assistance. Scribner’s, for example, expended half a million dollars to establish itself as a quality magazine at about this time, while Tourgée relied upon less than a fifth of this sum. As the well-known editor Edward W. Bok stated, “It was not so much a survival of the fittest as the survival of the largest capital.” 19 A Philadelphia newspaper, commenting on Tourgée’s disaster, concluded that his magazine “was one of the best periodicals, taken all in all, that ever appeared in this country, which, if backed by sufficient capital and less persistently persecuted by evil fortune, would have become in time a great financial success.” 20 But one should balance this conclusion against the Judge’s own conviction to the contrary, that his ex-partner, Davis, had misled him into an extravagant attempt, whereas had costs been drastically cut from the beginning, the magazine could have succeeded.

Instead, there had been another failure, and Tourgée collapsed with his magazine, a ruined and shattered man. “My poor husband!” wrote Emma many years later, revealing more of herself, perhaps, than of her husband. “How his life was embittered, ruined, by his trying to do what he had no capacity to do. His mind was too large to take in business details, and without that ability no one can succeed in such ventures as the Continent, which took all his fortune, his ambition, his

19 Mott, American Magazines, IV, 15.
hopes—everything but his wife.” 21 The Judge spent that fall recuperating at a cousin’s home in Canada, while the ever-faithful and helpful Emma endured a cruel fiscal examination that revealed a fortune lost and liabilities of over seventy thousand dollars. Near the end of the year, Judge Tourgée returned to Thorheim to begin again at the age of forty-six.

21 Mrs. Tourgée to Mr. Moot, June 17, 1905, Tourgée Papers.