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edited by D. H. Stewart

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THERE ARE three great centers in America—San Francisco, Chicago and New York. These three are administered by the alien for the alien—by the Irishman for his own interests and those of the German. And the rule of the Democracy is a rule of iron. The newspapers must bow to the power that controls the vote: and they bow with reverence. The Cronin murder at Chicago\(^2\) will be an old story by the time these lines reach you. I have seen paper after paper from Chicago, New York and in San Francisco dutifully suggesting that the murder was a “put up” business arranged by the British Government to discredit the Irish cause. The more outspoken journals vacillated pitifully between their desire to condemn the murderer and at the same time to refrain from offending Irish susceptibilities. And they were the journals of a free country, helping, it may be presumed, in the work of government. Wherefore they came to heel like whipped hounds at the bidding of the power that controlled them.

And, indeed, they were fit for no better fate. Within the past few weeks I have learned what it is to be ashamed of my profession. To their credit be it said that the average American journalist disclaims any idea of teaching or elevating his public. Not one, but scores of newspaper men have said to me: “We aren’t responsible for the morals of the people. We give ‘em what they want.” Gentlemen not in the profession have bade me watch the papers in the hand of the crowd, and note how a cheap press was elevating the people. I prefer to believe the journalists. They are responsible for publications which are
lively and perfect images of a purposeless Hell. With infinite pains and the expenditure of a vast amount of money they produce day by day newspapers that ought to move a man to despair. Their first need is sensation—and their last also. A pyramidal vulgarity marks the abomination of their quadruplicated head lines. As a butcher dresses with red and blue calico rosettes the shamelessly exposed vitals of the steer, so they dress their murder cases for the world to stare upon. It is no fault of theirs if they miss a single sob, squeak or gasp of the day’s tale of woe. Disregarding such elementary pity as allows a stricken beast to get to his lair and die in peace, they send their brazen representatives to hunt down the relatives of the latest and most notorious criminal, that the world may know how murderer Smith looked when he was a baby or a boy courting his first love. This is enterprise.

In scorn of common decency they judge and condemn the accused before a jury has been empanelled, trying a case day by day with the gaiety of a legally appointed tribunal and the ignorance of the half-educated. For the sake of advertisement they employ detectives of their own to hunt down or out or into doubly-confused confusion the mystery of the hour. And the impertinence is called enterprise. They publish feebly prurient slush of the pink-garter-and-black-silk-corsage order under the guise of fashionable notes; they foment dissension between citizen and citizen already bearing each other ill-will, in the hope that a “sensational affair” may result. They cause to be interviewed the abortionist and the adulterous, the “bonnet” of a gambling saloon, the owner of an opium “joint;” and the seed of these interviews springs up and bears fruit throughout the city. They deal in personal invective always unedifying, frequently vulgar, and at times cowardly and brutal. They distort the reported speeches of their political opponents and do not present both sides of the question. They minister to the crazy self-consciousness of their nation by means of turgid statements of the “might, majesty, dominion and power” of the people. They collect news as the bower-bird gathers rubbish without order, arrangement or sense of proportion. Their interviewers are reckless of the truth, imperfectly informed, and insult to their boot heels. Lastly, they degrade, debase and defile the English language from day to day by persistent and willful use of every variety of slang, cant, short cut, back talk, thieves’ Latin and argot that
can be gathered from the lips of the counter-jumper, engine-driver, brake-man, bar-tender, gambler or traveling salesman. They spawn hybrid words unfit for self-respecting tongues to touch, and sling them across the continent. So that they are now fast reducing the English tongue, their heritage, to the *lingua-franca* of the hotel-clerk. They are without dignity, decency or reverence: and their reward is that no man shall respect them, though many shall fear their abuse and buy their favour.

And yet they are amusing, when one gets over the recurrent thrill of horror. The “direction” of a leading San Francisco journal afloat on the boundless sea of continental politics has lately been moving me to tears of graceless merriment. They were grappling with a European crisis⁴ and, naturally, spoke of “old Bismarck,” “young William,”⁵ and so forth in the true Republican spirit, and the way in which the royalties and diplomats of effete Europe were banged and fumbled about was amazing. The writer was going to have Europe fixed to rights somehow, though he wasted half a column over it. If in the settling he ignored not more than three of the conditions under which Europe lies, and showed an all-embracing ignorance of the history of the past five years, the defaults did not weight his radiant spirit. A man does not know what genuine American humour means till he watches a journal sailing out upon the vast profound of “Russia, and the Balkan States,” “The Outlook in France,” or something similar. But mirth dies swiftly in face of other studies. It is not amusing to read again and again at breakfast in the papers from Chicago, Cincinnati, New York and the rest coarse, violent and ill-considered attacks on England, her Queen, her court, her customs and everything that is hers. Were the expressions of dislike genuine and prompted, let us say, by the unquenched hate of a hundred years, they would be laudable enough, though hardly wise. But both those who write and those who read are at pains to assure you that the outpouring is nothing more than a daily performance gone through for the purpose of catching the Irish eye. And herein lies the sadness. The journals may be taken as representing public opinion, though everybody says they don’t. Here, then, we find a nation descended from Anglo-Saxon stock compelled to bespatter so many times per annum the land of its birth by order of an alien who does not happen to approve of the aforesaid land. The vitae-
operative skittles may or may not find its way to England, where it does no harm beyond helping to still further corrupt our decaying speech: but what is the effect on the average American citizen? Does he without exception know that it is all play—ugly play because it is compulsory, but play none the less—or does he believe in it and mould his notions accordingly? I should very much like to find out. At present I cannot understand.

Side by side with this thorough-going denunciation of all things British, with prophesies of mutiny in India, insults to the Queen, and painstaking misapprehension of all our motives, exists an exquisite self-consciousness that shrieks aloud at a breath of criticism from the altogether despicable and of no account little island. Exempli gratia. There is a paper called Puck in New York which answers in some measure to Punch. A Saturday Reviewer wound up his weary tale of books not long ago by hastily noting three or four little volumes of light work by American authors. The Notices did not occupy more than twenty or thirty lines altogether. These lines Puck, a large paper, took for the text of a lengthy article headed “English Opinion on American Literature.” The books represented America as much as the opinion represented England, but that was good enough for Puck, who waxed very serious over the matter: and from the first to the tenth-rate journal this note of uneasiness runs without break. The leading journals of New York will devote time and space that is presumably valuable to rebuking a President’s son for being “overcome by monarchical influences,” the said son on a European tour merely having made himself pleasant, as every man in the world should do, to his hosts. This is provincialism, rank, untamed, contemptible, but patriotic.

Some day circumstances will call these journals to account for making fools of their clientele. It is not useful in season and out of season to pander to every form of pride that grows in the breast of a nation—to tell the town that there was never finer city on the sod—the village that there was never sturdier commune—the man that there was never better citizen—or the author and poet that they excel their brethren throughout the earth. Because the earth is a very big place, stocked with some remarkable large men, and the end of these dreamings is an uncomfortable awaking or, if not, at least the lower-
ing of self-respect. A parish tucked away in the fold of some lonely hillside may be justified in believing in its own virtues to the exclusion of all others: but a big country is not a parish.

As these things are written, the great American nation have learned that their delegates at Berlin have settled with Prince Bismarck the international control of affairs in Samoa, and are very much disposed to believe that America in the matter has got the best of Germany. I fancy they will be undeceived later on: but that is beside the question. The visible result is vastly entertaining. With one consent the newspapers childishly joyed at their country’s plunge into the troubled waters of continental diplomacy, are at one in declaring that never have such skilled negotiators (American) conducted so delicate and august an affair (American). “Henceforward,” they cry, “our country must take her place among the powers in lively earnest. She must be respected more than of old. She must dabble in foreign affairs and impress the world.”

It is a very big boy whose first tail-coat, fresh from the tailor, sits uneasily on his big limbs, and dearly he desires recognition at the hands of the old men. But he comes into their presence whistling, his hat on his head, his hands in his pockets and uninformed insolence in his restless eye. “I am a man, a great, big, grown-up, live man. Hear me cuss,” says he. And he cusses.

“Run along and grow, my son,” answer the seniors. “Come back in a little time and tell us all about it.”