

UTOPIA FORTY YEARS AGO

BY T. SWANN HARDING

ON a recent Sunday I went to the Library of Congress in quest of the fugitive papers by a man who stands almost alone as an original and clear-thinking American philosopher, Charles S. Peirce. This led me to old volumes of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* and of *The Open Court*. What was my amazement, however, when I opened Volume 4 of the latter journal to page 2248 of the issue of May 1, 1890, to discover some "Notes" by one M. M. Trumbull which were both amazingly witty and precociously wise—their precocity consisting in a successful early production of opinions and comments to be found expressed almost identically in our highbrow weekly journals of opinion of the past five years.

Further investigation disclosed that Trumbull was English born, that he came to America when quite young, worked as a day laborer, taught school, studied law, fought through the Civil War, was wounded, and also became a Brigadier General. Under President Grant he was Collector of Internal Revenue for Iowa. His declining days he devoted to literature and he contributed these "Notes" which later became "Current Topics" to the latter pages of the *Open Court*, beginning on the page mentioned above, and ending on page 4079 of Volume 8 of the issue of May 17, 1894. An issue published two weeks later was a memorial number to the general whose wit had meanwhile been silenced perhaps by a distraught deity for his own peace of mind. The general's department appeared with certain irregularities, usually atoned for by the presence of an entire article or essay in the number, signed M. M. Trumbull.

The issues of the *Open Court* which appeared between May 1, 1890, and January 29, 1891, especially interested me (they hap-

pened also to be bound together along with a few other copies) because, being just about forty years of age I was rather anxious to discover what progress the United States had made, perhaps by reason of my tenure of office as a citizen. It therefore amused me to go through Trumbull's "Notes" and "Current Topics" between these dates to discover the condition of the realm at the time of my birth, the evils and wrongs then extant, the more interesting topics of polite conversation, and the trends of political and social thought. In view of the fact that many recent articles and books assure us that our country is just now sliding precipitately to oblivion in a peculiarly rapid manner, more highly developed these latter days, it may afford some amusement to discover how things were in Utopia forty years ago.

In his very first onslaught, dated May 1, 1890, Trumbull declared that the Mayor of Chicago had just defied the law by arranging that the saloons be open on election day, April 1. The day before reading this I had seen something in a Baltimore paper about stuffing special ballot-collection-boxes for the poor. One such box was located at a police station with a patrolman in charge to watch it. An excited motorist approached with a ticket for overtime parking in his hand, and the patrolmen cheerfully offered to defy the law and tear up the ticket, provided the motorist would stuff the ballot box with \$50 for the poor. This was done to the satisfaction of both. But the Chicago Mayor defied the law in 1890. For his temerity in doing so Trumbull humorously accused him of "abdication of authority" and the "advocation of anarchy"—"anarchist" being the popular hate word of that day as "communist" is of this. About this time it also appears that the unconstitutional suspension of sentences upon prisoners by various judges was brought to the attention of Congress in Washington. Since this abuse of power had been going on for about twenty years Trumbull sagely remarked it was just about time that Congress heard about it and made an investigation.

In the issue of May 29 Trumbull informs us that vigorous efforts are being made to help the farmer. Senator Stanford of California had, in fact, introduced a measure authorizing loans to farmers from the United States Treasury at 2 per cent interest. Another bill had also been introduced suggesting the erection at government expense of government warehouses at strategic points

where farmers might store their crops, the government to advance them 80 per cent of the value of said crops in cash as soon as storage was effected. Trumbull offered as his suggestion the tip to farmers that potatoes were about the best substitute for food he knew of. Senator Plumb of Kansas wanted to help the unemployed, however. He therefore introduced a gaudy bill to enlist what he called a "Grand Army of Labor," the President to issue the call for citizen volunteers as in war time. This, he felt, would tend to help current "industrial depression." The soldiers were to serve four hours daily, five days a week (is the 5-day week so modern then?) at \$4 a day, and were to be paid in "declaratory full-legal-tender silk-threaded greenback paper money of the United States of America." This money, and Plumb was very particular about its silk threads, was to be kept in stock by the Secretary of the Treasury who was to be admonished to replenish his stock assiduously when it showed signs of depletion.

In the issue of June 5 Trumbull was discussing the curious types of Civil War veterans who insistently demanded a reward from the government for their war time heroism. Some of them made their demands purely upon the basis of "mental anguish" endured during the war. The General remembered a Captain who came to him desiring to resign in the midst of a certain battle because he had discovered he was a rank coward. His resignation was accepted but, in due time, he applied for a pension for having been scared out of the army, saying, "Anybody who knows how I was scared at Kirkville, will never begrudge me a pension!"

By June 19 the General felt up to rebuking Macaulay for being an intellectual phonograph, able to read anything at all and then reproduce it verbatim to the astonished listener, and yet so negligent as to declare that a sentence could not end with the word "its." Had Macaulay forgotten those lines from Act I of *Henry VIII*—

"Each following day
Became the next day's master, till the last,
Made former its."

This somehow led Trumbull to reflect upon the etiquette of type-writing letters, he having recently typed a letter to an English friend who rebuked him for doing so. He concluded that possibly a typed letter did lack "the immortal essence" of a friend after all. He concluded his column for the week with a paragraph designed to

show that "government by party is a lucrative business—for the governors."

On July 3 the indefatigable General was amused because the people of Minneapolis turned out *en masse* to aid the census takers in an effort to exceed St. Paul in size. He believed that if 50,000 of them would work with sufficient vigor they might be able to puff their city up to a population of half a million, which ought somehow to be most gratifying. He also discussed two rival candidates for Congress from the Fourth District in Chicago who had villified each other with diligence and scant courtesy in the manner common in that city today. Their separately esteemed kept newspapers also joined energetically in the name-calling and added venom to the vituperation. But after the nomination finally went to one candidate, the press of the other eulogized him in the highest terms, his rival congratulated him magnanimously, and referred to him punctiliously as the winner in this "gentlemanly contest." The General enjoyed this delightful exchange of unctuous courtesies to the full.

July 24th Trumbull commented upon the gorgeous legions of an army "composed entirely of officers," a nobility purchaseable by anyone at \$20 a head—and provided one could stomach the thought of joining the Knights of Pythias. He remarked on our American love of a title and our urgent desire to be knights or commanders, or to have some other intangible distinction based upon anything but personal merit.

On June 31st he discussed the sinking of an excursion boat filled with Sabbath pleasure seekers, which catastrophe the Chicago clergy attributed humanely to a judgment of God visited upon the wicked for Sabbath breaking. This, of course, conveniently excused the reckless seamanship of the captain, and relieved the coroner's jury of any further perplexity or expense. However, when a Sunday later, lightning struck a church and killed fifteen of those within, it became somewhat difficult to construe this as a judgment of God, such judgments habitually being reserved for Sunday excursionists drowned in such disasters as that of The Lake Pepin. Trumbull also dilated on an "air-of-mystery" plan used, with marked commercial success, to advertise a dull, uninteresting novel by an unknown writer. Everybody was asked to guess who wrote the book which resulted in a tremendous sale followed by quick,

merited oblivion. Finally, he opined that the Speaker of the House of Representatives had too much power. For unless the existence of a quorum can be established to the satisfaction of the "speaker's eye" there is no quorum, no matter how many members are present in the body, and business cannot go on. Thus "we are frequently driven to revolutionary practises in order to escape from the fetters of our Constitution," he observes.

August the 7th brought the General to consider a strike of the London police which resulted in a protest from the burglars to the effect that this lack of police protection made their avocation both extra-hazardous and unprofitable. For so zealous were private citizens in falling back upon the doctrine of self-protection, that life became exceedingly irksome for the burglars. Fortunately the police soon returned to duty whereupon "a gratifying revival was observed in the burglar trade." At that date it also appears that we were a "badged people," and the General wept crocodile tears because a G. A. R. member, even though properly badged, was now and then mistaken for a crook, a most intolerable insult. We find too that one Pat Sharkey, recently deceased, was called "one of God's own people" by an eloquent Chicago citizen. Pat had backed sporting men of all sorts. He lost \$27,000 on Kilrain in the "Sullivan-Kilrain affair." He kept a corner saloon on 13th street and was a big Tammany man. However, he was denied burial in consecrated ground by the Holy Church—not because of any past rascalities or trifling deviations from virtue—perish the thought—but because he was a member of the Masons, the Elks, and the Knights of Pythias. Trumbull felt the church was not so far wrong at that. He concluded by discussing "force bills" and remarked—"When laws are made for the protection of the rich and the correction of the poor, the 'force' behind them is regarded as their highest virtue; but when passed for the protestation of the poor and the correction of the rich, 'society' complains that the 'force' principle in the bill is so very coarse and common that its nerves are greatly shocked."

On August 28 we learn that, while the political world is convulsed, while society is disturbed and bewildered by the gigantic conflict between capital and labor, and while the revision of creeds fills the religious with misgivings and doubts, the fashionable elect are tormented by the important question as to which Mrs. Astor—Mrs. William or Mrs. William W.—is *the* Mrs. Astor, and could

rightfully receive a letter addressed merely to Mrs. Astor. "The inflammation" was spreading rapidly and the fever might soon involve the government itself. The "celestial four hundred" had been thrown into "high-toned anarchy," merely because a letter addressed to "Mrs. Astor" had reached the wrong lady. Hereupon Trumbull launched into a delightful satire of the "counterfeit monarchy" at Washington with its "imported Windsor Castle" ceremonials.

There is now a gap until October 2nd when the General remarked that the pronouncements of the aged are inviolate because an old person can always observe how much better things were in the past. He next notes that Queen Victoria, in her old age, can actually attend a funeral by proxy of a gentleman who kindly goes "in her behalf." He expects soon to read where Lord Colville has attended divine services, offered a prayer, sung a hymn, and partaken of communion, "in behalf of the queen."

This brings us to October 16 where the General opened quietly by remarking that the "incivility" of "sales ladies" and "sales gentlemen" in Chicago department stores did not afflict him half so much as their habit of adding a surcharge to the price of purchases which they themselves pocketed. Since certain progressive citizens were going to offer a gold medal to the most civil clerks he suggested other citizens offer a still larger medal for truth and honesty in clerks. From this he diverged into marvelling at the extraordinary accuracy of the phonograph of that day and said: "Figuratively speaking, such a phonograph is in operation at Washington, in the form of a comic paper called *The Congressional Record*." However, reflection compelled him to aver that the duty of this Washington phonograph was to corrupt history, to repeat what was not said, and to certify to what was not done, at very considerable expense to the general public. This somehow propelled him into observations about the Army affidavit officer of his Civil War days, who balanced the Captain's quarterly returns by accounting, under oath, for any missing property. It appears that a really good affidavit officer found no difficulty whatever in accounting for as many as twenty saddles or thirty blankets at one good round oath.

The department concluded on this particular occasion with some comments upon the timidity and lack of self-assurance on the part of a member of a political convention when called upon to nomin-

ate a man for judge. The member declared that the nominee unfortunately had no pull on account of his nationality, and apologized so profusely that the other delegates began to think he was about to propose a Chinaman. However, it proved to be an American he had in mind, a man who could draw no German or Irish votes. "Up to that moment, the selections made had created the impression that the convention was nominating candidates for office in the county of Cork, instead of the county of Cook, and therefore the appearance of an American candidate looked like the intrusion of a foreigner. And even then the main question for consideration was not the character and fitness of the aspirant, but whether or not it would be 'good policy' to give the Americans a 'show.'"

The book-publishing habits of America have changed little, because on November 6 the General speaks of a new book entitled *The Art of Authorship*, which is nothing less than a symposium by 178 successful authors including—Corelli, Huxley, Macaulay, Lowell, Ballantyne, Blackmore, Freeman, and Meredith. While the authors ostensibly told "how it was done," few of them told the truth. Huxley, however, who was cited as a model by many of his colleagues, candidly wrote as follows—"I never had the fortune, good or evil, to receive any guidance or instruction in the art of literary composition. It is possibly for that reason that I have always turned a deaf ear to the common advice to 'study good models,' to 'give your days and nights to Addison,' and so on." He then insistently urged young authors never to ape any model for any purpose.

On November 13 we are regaled with "The Misgovernment of Cities," and the "terrible example and unspeakable villain," in all displays of this sort, was then, as now, Chicago. Her low estate in 1890 Trumbull attributed to "accumulated corruption." To what we may now attribute it I have no idea.

On November 20 the good General sought to define a gentleman. He finally concluded that whatever a gentleman was, good citizens certainly voted too little and bad citizens too much—so often, in fact, that they had repeatedly to be arrested in gangs for their perverted civic assiduity. He finally expatiated upon the extraordinary fact that many cities were impeaching the accuracy of the census of 1890 which, they said, "grossly falsified" their pop-

ulation statistics, and made them appear far smaller than they really were. Do times really change? Have we even a better columnist today than Trumbull was in 1890?

On December 11th the old soldier comments upon the fact that a farmer has just been appointed judge in a distant state and he asks whether a judge must be a lawyer and why a nonlawyer may not possess a fine judicial temperament. He next observed that certain Christians had invited some Jews to a joint conference, only to have their churches censure them violently for their iniquity in doing so. He then fell upon the opulent descriptive powers of sychophant journalists who burst forth into gaudy displays of rhetoric in depicting the opening of Congress. He had read that Vice President Morton wore "the rarest of roses," and "beamed upon the Senate"; that Senator Vest had a new suit; that Senator Harris wore lavender kid gloves—a predecessor of Ham Lewis in sartorial splendor?—; that Senator Ingalls' hair was ruffled; that Senator Cary had the baldest head, and that Chaplain Butler's prayer was a trifle long, probably to keep the Chamber from falling into a state of religious destitution.

In the Christmas Day issue 1890 we find the General exercised over the fact that newspapers always carry semi-obituary notices in the form of editorials of sympathy for bankers whose banks fail, but never express sorrow for the poor depositors who really suffered. He found editors also chiding industries in this period of acute depression for withdrawing their confidence from the speculative markets and he wondered why they should not do so. He read of General Miles' declaration that if we would only feed the Indians they would cease to stage revolts. "Sockless" Jerry Simpson was in Congress, "threatening the hosiery industry with disaster." A new Jersey manufacturer had just sent Jerry an elegant assortment of hose but "with Roman courage he resisted temptation." Since he objected to the tax on socks Trumbull reminded him that, to be consistent, he should adopt the entire costume of Leatherstocking and not the moccasins only.

We also read something else that should be most stimulating just now. The H. C. Frick Coke Co. of Scottdale, Pennsylvania, had just banked 255 of its ovens and discharged all its single employeés. It retained the married men at full wages, however. Thereupon the single men met together, remembered the Scriptural

injunction that "it is better to marry than to burn," and began to cause quite a flutter among the young women of the coke region. They had faith surpassing understanding for, when their suits were successful, they hurried to Frick and demanded back their jobs. Unfortunately we are not told the final results of this industry-matrimonial crisis.

In the issue of the *Open Court* for January 15, 1891 we read that the *North American Review* has just most inconsiderately and intemperately asked—"Are we a nation of rascals?" The General could see a great deal of evidence for the affirmative, and then he deviated into condemnation of the frenzied literary hyperbole utilized by society press reporters in describing the costumes of great ladies and of Supreme Court Justices. January 29 he devoted himself to a description of the manner in which eighty cents had been metamorphosed into a dollar by Act of Congress, in order to "restore confidence," "stimulate business," "move crops," and "lift mortgages."

All of this has such a devitalizingly familiar sound and such a modern ring that it may be better for our peace of mind to part company with the General at this point before he discovers drought relief and a soldier's bonus. Personally, I feel that my life has fallen short of success, as the evidence all goes to show that my forty years sojourn in this vale of tears has produced no discernable progress whatever.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

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 - II What is the Place of Postulate Systems in the Further Progress of Thought?
 - III On the Nature of Systems of Postulates
 - IV Concerning the Postulational Treatment of Empirical Truth
 - V The Structure of Exact Thought
 - VI The Notion of Doctrinal Function
 - VII Hypothesis Growing into Veritable Principle
 - VIII What is Reasoning?
 - IX The Larger Human Worth of Mathematics
- Index

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