

THE HUMOROUS SIDE OF POLITICS.

Charles Sumner had no more sense of humor than a hippopotamus, but there was something excessively humorous about his colossal self-consciousness, of which it is no paradox to say he was apparently unconscious.

His egotism was inordinately vast, though innocent in its simplicity. It was far from conceit, and led to no disparagement of his associates. Indeed, I doubt if he ever instituted comparisons.

Probably Grant, whom he hated and abused, came the nearest to sizing him up when he said: "The reason Sumner doesn't believe in the Bible is because he didn't write it himself."

He had large intellectual powers, but not so large as he imagined. He had no influence on legislation. He was unable to endure opposition. If he could not have his own will, he would do nothing. But this is not intended as an analysis of his work or his character. I started out to say that soon after I entered the Senate we were riding up the Avenue in a street-car, and, by the way of conversation, he asked me about my predecessor, Senator Pomeroy, who had met with an accident politically. He spoke of his early fidelity to the cause of freedom, and the unusual degree to which he held the confidence of his associates till the impeachment of Andrew Johnson.

"Indeed," he continued, with great gravity, "had he died before that time, Kansas would have owed him a monument, and I should myself have pronounced his eulogy."

The self-consciousness of Roscoe Conkling was quite as egregious as that of Mr. Sumner, but his egotism was tinged with vanity and compounded with scorn, contempt, and disdain. He was a past-master in "the gentle art of making enemies," and well versed in the vocabulary of derision and hatred. Hamlet might have had him in mind when, in his soliloquy, he mentioned, among other things that make life not worth living, "the proud man's contumely." The hinges of his knees were pregnant, and he had none of the thrift that follows fawning. When I first knew him, he was in the meridian of his great powers. He possessed an extraordinary assemblage of physical and intellectual attributes that made him by far the most prominent, picturesque, and impressive figure in public life.

His presence was noble and commanding; his voice and elocution were superb; his bearing and address somewhat too formal, but marked by dignity and grace. His vocabulary was rich and ornamental, sometimes almost to the borders of the grotesque, but fertilized with apposite quotations and allusions that showed wide reading, especially in poetry, romance, and the drama. Some hostile critic described one of his speeches as a "purple earthquake of oratory." But he was always heard with delight on any theme.

Had he possessed a greater flexibility of temper, been less inexorable in his animosities, and learned how to forget where he could not forgive, there was no height he might not have reached, even the highest in the people's gift. But he would

not flatter Neptune for his trident, nor Jove for his power to thunder.

In that state of moral typhoid which always follows great wars, an era of profligacy, of sudden wealth at the price of honor, of *Crédit Mobilier* and Star Route scandals, he was not contaminated. He walked through the furnace with no smell of fire upon his garments.

Toward the end of his career in the Senate he fell out with the newspapers, and sometimes when he arose to speak, every reporter in the press gallery closing his note-book, the whole crowd would rush noisily out into the lobby, leaving every seat without an occupant.

He flushed at the insult, but speaking of journalism afterward, he was moved to remark, in his propitiatory way, that the only people in the world authorized to use the first person plural, "we," in speaking of themselves, were "editors and men with tapeworms."

His allusion to Governor Cornell as "that lizard on the hill," and to President Arthur, after his refusal to abdicate in favor of Mr. Conkling, as "the prize ox in American politics," and his refusal to speak for Blaine in the campaign of 1884, on the ground that he was "not engaged in criminal practice," are well-known illustrations of his methods of compelling his political associates to be either his vassals or his enemies.

But Jove did not always sit on Olympus. Sometimes he descended to the plain, though never quite on terms of absolute equality with mankind. He was inclined to "jolly" those whom he did not feel disposed to bully.

When Thurman once asked him, in a debate on some legal proposition, why he kept looking at him all the time, Conkling replied, with elaborate raillery, that he turned to him as the

source and fountain of the common laws as, at the call of the muezzin, the Mussulman turned to Mecca.

Another favorite butt for his chaff, banter, and ridicule was Judge David Davis, a native of Maryland, who migrated early to Illinois, where he laid the foundation of an immense fortune by sagacious investments in farming lands. He was an original friend of Lincoln's, and a delegate to the convention that nominated him for the Presidency. Riding with him once from Bloomington to Quincy, he gave me a most interesting inside history of the movement for Lincoln, one of the extraordinary facts being that the entire expense of his nomination, including headquarters, telegraphing, music, fare of delegations, and other incidentals, was less than seven hundred dollars.

He was a Falstaff in proportions and good nature, and the best guesser in American politics. Lincoln appointed him Justice of the Supreme Court in 1862. The greater part of his active life was passed on the bench, where he was accustomed to have the last word and to delivering opinions rather than defending them, which is not a good preparation for the deliberations of the Senate.

He was an inveterate compromiser and composer of strife, which led Conkling to allude to him in debate as "the largest wholesale and retail dealer in political soothing syrup the world had ever known."

Later, in the discussion of the same measure, Davis interrupted Conkling by way of correction or anticipation, which Conkling resented by quoting *ore rotundo* two lines from one of Watts' hymns:

"He knows the words that I would speak
 Ere from my opening lips they break."

To Davis' elephantine attempt to smooth over his break by some far-fetched eulogy, Conkling replied:

"Praise undeserved is censure in disguise."

The stenographer did not recognize the quotation, so that one of Alexander Pope's most polished lines stands as an original, extemporaneous phrase of Mr. Conkling's.

It seems incredible that a personage of such vast and unusual powers, who for twenty years was a most prominent actor in the great drama of public affairs, who filled so large a space in the thought of the people, who was caricatured, lampooned, praised, and reviled without stint or measure, should have faded so absolutely from the memory of men. Even to those of his contemporaries who survive, he has already become a gorgeous reminiscence.

Patriotic, arrayed always for truth, right, and justice, his name is identified with no great measure, and his life seems not so much an actual battle with hostile powers as a splendid scene upon the stage, of which the swords are lath, the armor tinsel, the bastions and ramparts painted screens, the wounds and blood fictitious; on which victories and defeats are feigned, with sheet-iron thunder, and tempests of peas and lycopo-dium—and the curtain falling to slow music, while the audience applauds and departs.

William Maxwell Fvarts came to the Senate in 1885, at the age of sixty-seven. He was a candidate in 1861, and waited twenty-four years for the realization of his ambition. The interval was opulent in noble achievements at the bar, in statesmanship, in oratory, and the highest civic and social activities.

He was Attorney-General of the United States under Andrew Johnson and his counsel on his impeachment. He represented the Government before the Geneva tribunal of arbitration on the *Alabama* claims. He was the leading attorney for President Hayes, in behalf of the Republican party, before the Electoral Commission, and Secretary of State from 1877 to 1881.

He was a scholar without pedantry, and a man of the world in the highest sense, without cynicism or frivolity.

There is always a dull suspicion in leaden, opaque, and barren minds that wit, brilliancy, and imagination, and the coruscations of the intellect are incompatible with great mental power and solidity of judgment.

Mr. Evarts refuted this fallacy, for in addition to his triumphs as a lawyer, in politics, and as a practical man of affairs, he was altogether the most brilliant and versatile talker of his time.

The characteristic of his conversation was a genial and humorous urbanity. He never wounded or stung. He seldom told stories or related anecdotes. His wit was like a spring that makes the meadows green. He appreciated what was best in society, art, literature, and life, and had the keenest interest in the virtues and foibles of humanity. His manner was refined and suave. He never posed, nor monopolized, nor strained for effect; and as he never hurt self-love by irony, nor vanity by ridicule and satire, so he never shocked the devout by profanity, nor offended the modest with impudicity.

Probably the *mot* of Mr. Evarts most widely flung concerns the apochryphal feat told of George Washington in "jerk-ing" a silver dollar across the Rappahannock.

The story goes that a party of tourists, visiting the haunts of Washington in Virginia, came to the spot, where the anecdote was related by some local antiquary, to illustrate the prodigious strength of the man whom Providence made childless that he might become the Father of His Country.

Aside from the unlikelihood that the thrifty George would throw a silver dollar over the river when a pebble would have done as well, the distance was so great that the skeptics were incredulous, and another legend seemed on the edge of being destroyed, when Mr. Evarts came to its rescue with the suggestion that "a dollar went much farther in those days than now."

The explanation is so simple and so satisfactory that the wonder is that it occurred to no one before.

Among the guests at a dinner to Daniel Webster in New York was Dr. Benjamin Brandreth, the inventor of a celebrated pill known by his name. Mr. Evarts united these two great men in a volunteer toast to "Daniel Webster and Benjamin Brandreth, the pillars of the Constitution."

Objections had been filed with the Judiciary Committee to the confirmation of a nomination on account of the dissolute habits of the appointee. When the case came up for consideration, the chairman called for affidavits. The clerk produced a number from the files. Consulting his docket, Mr. Edmunds thought there were more, and others were found. A search disclosed another batch that had been overlooked or mislaid.

"The papers in this case," said Mr. Evarts, "appear to be more dissipated, if possible, than the candidate."

Mr. Evarts was a *bon vivant*, an inveterate diner-out, and a giver of most elaborate and artistic dinners himself. To a

lady who expressed surprise that one of such slender frame and fragile physique could endure so many feasts with their varying viands and different wines, he replied that it was not so much the different wines that gave him trouble as the indifferent ones.

President Hayes was a total abstainer—at home. Scoffers said he only drank the "O. P. brands." His state dinners, otherwise very elegant and costly, were served without wines. The only concession to conviviality was the Roman punch, flavored with Jamaica rum. Evarts was accustomed to allude to this course as "the life-saving station."

Rising to address informally the guests at a Thanksgiving dinner, he began: "You have been giving your attention to a turkey stuffed with sage. You are now about to consider a sage stuffed with turkey."

When he was Secretary of State in the Cabinet of President Hayes, the struggle for places in the diplomatic service was very active. As he was leaving the elevator at the close of a very busy day, he said the conductor since noon had "taken up a very large collection for foreign missions"; and when asked what had been done, he replied: "Many called, but few chosen."

As an orator, Mr. Evarts was not limpid. But he confounded the critics who condemned his long sentences by saying that, so far as his observation went, the people who objected to long sentences belonged to the criminal classes.

General Grant was popularly supposed to be habitually grave, reserved, and taciturn, but on occasion was very vivacious in conversation, with a keen sense of dry, quiet humor.

One evening, after a stag dinner at the White House, the company assembled in the library to smoke. Talk fell upon the happiest period of life—childhood, youth, manhood, age. Grant listened, but said nothing till asked for his opinion.

"Well," he replied, after a pause, "I believe I would like to be born again," which indicated that he had found existence enjoyable all the way through.

One of Grant's Secretaries of the Navy was George M. Robeson, of New Jersey, for whom Senator Carpenter, of Wisconsin, a great jurist and advocate, conceived a violent dislike. His mildest definition of Robeson was that he was "a great lawyer among sailors, and a great sailor among lawyers."

Some one took Thurman to task for having referred rather contemptuously to the beneficiaries of a certain measure as "things."

"Things!" replied Thurman, testily, "why, we are all things—" "To all men," interrupted Mr. Edmunds, before he could finish his sentence, and the discussion ended.

Holman, of Indiana, for many years waged vigilant and unrelenting war on amendments to appropriation bills, which gave him the name of "The Watchdog of the Treasury." He was very strong in his district, and had an unusually long service, which gave him great power and influence in the House by his knowledge of the rules and practice.

Toward the end of his term an amendment was offered in which a near relative was much interested. The familiar "I object" was not heard, and the amendment went through with his support; whereupon a member sitting near exclaimed:

"'Tis sweet to hear the honest watchdog's bark
 Bay deep-mouthed welcome as we draw near home!"

Nothing brighter and more apt has been said in either house of Congress since the inauguration of Washington.