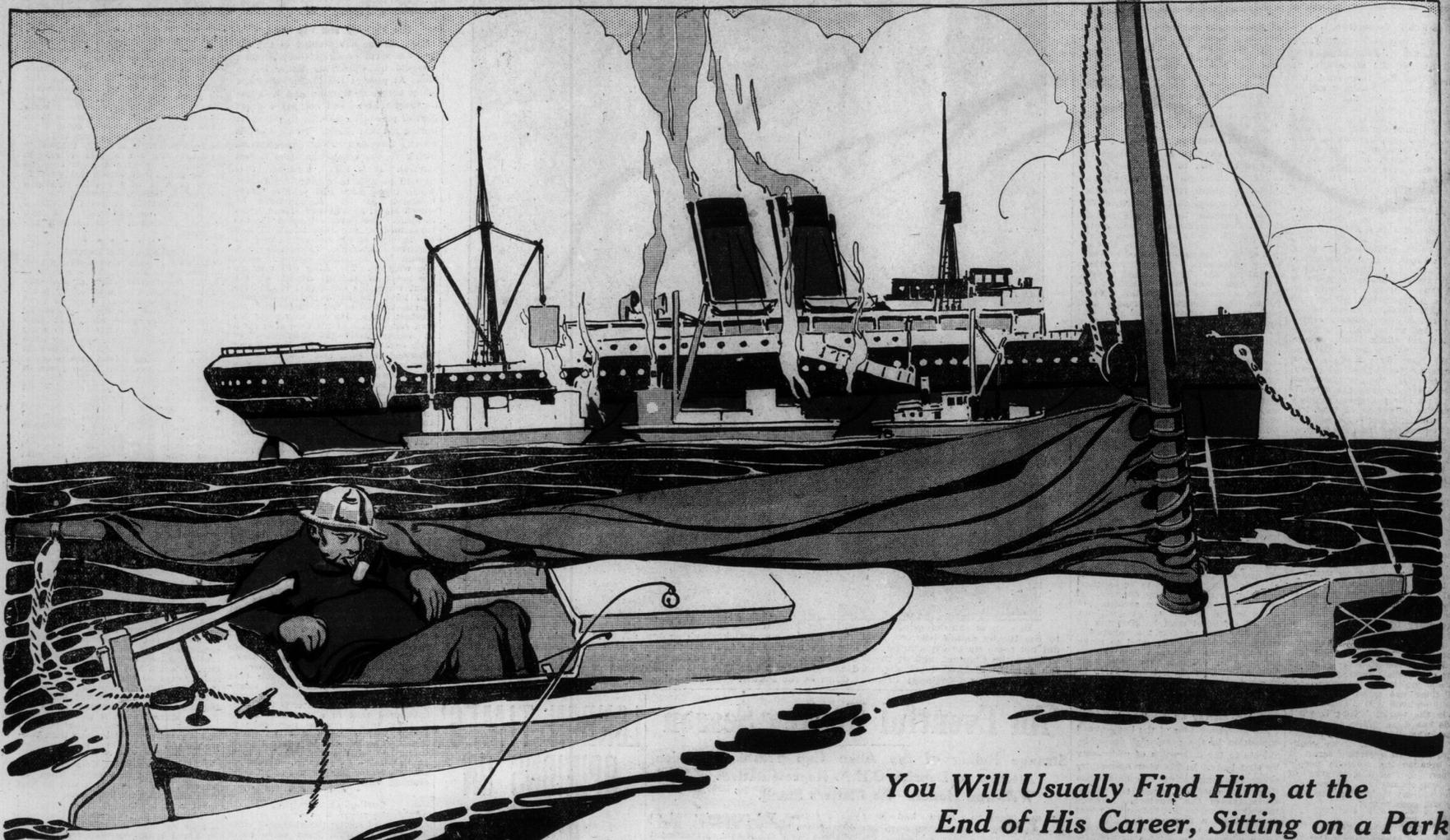


THE MAN WHO LETS WELL ENOUGH ALONE



You Will Usually Find Him, at the End of His Career, Sitting on a Park Bench and Wondering Where His Next Meal Is Coming From

serve beyond the needs of the day, it is time to offer an argument on the other side.

Things were well enough no doubt, from the general point of view when the American continent was occupied by savage natives, whose only occupation was in growing a little corn in haphazard fashion, and whose chief diversion was in taking each other's scalps. The people of the old world looked out at the Western sea and shuddered to think what would become of the foolish mariner whose ship should venture forth upon it so far that at last it must slip over the edge of the world and into space.

Now and then a venturesome mariner announced his intention of sailing west merely to "see what was there." Instantly his friends bade him to let well enough alone and not to risk his own life nor that of an ignorant crew in doing something that had never been done before.

But the thirst for gold, always a moving factor in progress, at last grew so strong that it even defied superstition.

A Genoese sailor, convinced that the world was round and that by going west he would eventually come to the golden East, made up his mind that he was not going to let well enough alone.

His argument that he would be able to bring back untold treasure to enrich the Spanish throne at last resulted in his getting the money needed for the outfitting of a pitiful little fleet.

The result of the journey west that followed was the discovery of the American continent. Columbus did not let well enough alone, and because he did not he became one of the very greatest figures in the history of the world.

Now and then in a community that has been governed for years in the interests of a handful of greedy monopolists arises a man who asks to know why such a thing should be.

He sees not only vice and crime but legitimate business paying tribute to a corruptionist boss, who in turn is employed by bigger corruptionists, who wear thick cloaks of respectability.

When he suggests that it would be a good idea to overturn these conditions and begin

again on a basis of honesty he is told that the wise man lets well enough alone.

The lawyers and the agents of the corruptionists and their supporters sometimes even in pulpits point out that the city has been enjoying an era of prosperity.

"Why disturb it?" they demand. "Why interfere with solid prosperity and turn to something that is untried and unknown?"

Occasionally one of the inquirers has intelligence and, what is more important in that kind of a cause, high courage.

He refuses to let well enough alone. He goes to work quietly and earnestly to let the people know the actual facts. He refuses to be "taken into camp" by the men who want to stop his activities. And in the end he wins, cleans up the city and gets the people some few of their rights. Unfortunately, there is that in human nature which prompts even the beneficiary of a municipal housecleaning to get indifferent by and by. Soon the bosses get back into power, and until the same man starts a new movement or passes his work along to another man, the people continue to smile placidly while their pockets are picked.

When men pause in their fight to keep their heads out of water to ask themselves what they are really fighting for they usually answer:

"For contentment."

Each man hopes to end his days in peace and tranquillity—to retire, perhaps to a farm, perhaps to a city; there, as Goldsmith says:

"To husband out life's candle to its close
And keep the flame from wasting by repose."

But it is human, and particularly American, to be in a hurry about everything, and there are many who forget that contentment and youth are not meant to keep company.

For the old man to let well enough alone is well. If he has earned his days of rest he has no need to struggle longer; if he has not earned them there is no help. He is past the time for fighting. Under sixty, however, let-

ting well enough alone is criminal folly.

Edison, born with an astonishing amount of restless energy, might have let well enough alone and continued to be an excellent telegraph operator. He knew that well enough was not well enough as far as electrical achievement was concerned.

He disregarded the advice of his associates not to meddle with what he did not understand, and meddled actively with electricity for many years. Neither he nor any other mortal as yet really understands electricity, but they have come to understand many things that it can do, and the world has vastly profited.

Cromwell had the temerity even to meddle with that ancient superstition—the divine right of kings. He did not succeed in curing his fellow countrymen of it permanently, but he did put the fear of their subjects into all British monarchs forever, and sowed the seeds that grew vigorously afterward in American soil.

The world is possibly merciful and sympathetic for the weak, but it has neither mercy nor sympathy for the strong.

There will come a day when the aged will be cared for, when the heroism of a mother in bearing children will be rewarded as well as the lesser heroism of the man who goes out to get shot at by the enemies of his country.

But there never will come a time when strength will not be expected to take care of itself, where peace and contentment will be given to any man who is not willing to fight for them.

What has been accomplished in liberty, in mechanical progress, in art, in literature, has been accomplished because of contentment and not because of letting well enough alone. Even the genius must fight with his desire to shirk his duty before he can give the world the benefit of his genius.

Had Keats let well enough alone he would have ended his young life as an apothecary's clerk. Washington would have won no higher distinction than that of a surveyor.

Contentment is the natural reward of toil, but, like everything else worth while, it is only to be gained by contentment.

of some heart that was more contentious would sit by and comfortably toast his shins by the fire.

The beauties of peace and rest are beyond question, but they are seldom obtainable without a fight. Most human beings progress by contention, by intelligent meddling with matters the world has long regarded as settled, and by the resultant warfare with the "conservatives," who want to let well enough alone.

You will discover that when a person of intelligence advances the argument that well enough ought to be let alone he is getting rather more than his share. A fat hog, with his feet in a trough, grunting savagely to frighten away the queue of little, pathetic pigs that stand lined up near by, is one of the most confirmed of conservatives.

But presently there appears a lean and hungry razor-back—a porcine Cassius, who is not quite so sure about the utility of letting things alone. There are a few preliminary grunts, a little active crowding, and presently the old order has been overturned. Well enough is not let alone. Beside the thinner razor-back at the trough is room for some of the little pigs. The displaced hog stands gloomily in the near neighborhood lamenting that things are not as they were, and wondering darkly what is to become of hogdom in the future when his divine right has been so wantonly called into question.

Perhaps it is wise, from his point of view, for the man who has the best of everything to preach the doctrine of letting well enough alone. But when you hear it preached by the failure, the ne'er do well, the man who, despite his best efforts, can never get money enough to

It was Thomas Moore, or some other apostle of contentment, who wrote:

"I knew by the smoke that so gracefully curled

Above the green elms that a cottage was near,
And I thought that if peace could be found in the world

A heart that was humble might look for it here."

If the poet had journeyed beyond the green elms to the cottage he might possibly have found peace—the peace of utter stupidity. More likely he would have discovered fully as much bickering and wrangling as on any street in a London slum.

Without knowledge of the particular cottage he has thus immortalized, it is difficult to say whether or not it would appeal to a "heart that was humble." Yet it may be imagined that before the fire was built that sent the smoke curling about the green elms there was a dispute as to who should build it; another dispute about who should bring up the wood to keep it going, and a third dispute about who should clear away the ashes after it was out. And we can well believe that the proprietor of the heart that was humble would in the end do all these things, while the owner

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