

FRANK WORDS ON ELBERT
HUBBARD

Although it is true that long prior to his tragic death in the waters of the Atlantic, off the Irish coast, Elbert Hubbard had ceased to be regarded as a literary man, his commercialism having superseded his earlier aspirations, he must be given credit for arousing in the breasts of thousands of the groundlings a desire to imbibe culture, says Samuel Clover of the Graphic, and continues: Unfortunately, having gained the ear of a wide market he proceeded to exploit it for his own benefit and in time, of course, wore out his original welcome. His poses, his Byronic collars, his black Windsor ties—which he retailed to yearning seekers after light—and his "limited" editions, bespoke the charlatan to the discriminating. From the lecture platform he turned to the vaudeville circuit, where, perhaps, he felt secure, and when that field of intellectual activity palled he coined many dollars by composing advertising copy for large corporations. He was nothing if not versatile and ever with an eye to the main chance he allowed no good prospect to go by unexplored. The Aurora trademark, in process of time, became one of questionable value in consequence.

There was a period, say twenty years ago, when Hubbard and his Philistine were cordially received in many homes where vivacious literature, expressed in original form, found an admiring audience. But in his efforts to be unconventional Hubbard gradually removed all restraint and deteriorated into plain vulgarity which caused him to lose the good will of hundreds of fine-thinking Americans of both sexes. His attempt to revert to the pre-restorian period of English literature was not countenanced by the self-respecting and the Philistine lost vogue with that class of readers that was its main support in its adolescent days. As it matured it became gross and in the last decade was banished entirely from the library tables of the discerning. His "Message to Garcia," contemporary with the Spanish-American War, symbolized the spirit of daring endeavor, so thoroughly American in its exposition and the brochure received, as it deserved, wide dissemination. For that bit of writing Elbert Hubbard may be forgiven many of his shortcomings and because of it the gaucheries of his trade will eventually be forgotten and only the best of him survive.

There was in the scissors-and-paste genius of East Aurora a queer mixture of brilliancy and brazenry, of capacity and charlatanry. Yet he was a missionary in his way and for the craftsmanship displayed in the books turned out by his printing shop he is entitled to great credit. It created a desire for genuine art in the making of books and to that extent Elbert Hubbard was a propagandist, a pioneer in right lines. If he had been wholly sincere, he might have wrought greater than William Morris, because of his greater opportunity to reach the masses. Alas, that he had the bar sinister on his literary escutcheon. He loved not art for art's sake, but converted it to sordid uses. He had many attractive qualities as a man, but was a bundle of little trickeries. Like his "limited" editions that were only limited to one state, so his fulsome messages to literary acquaintances were but duplicates of similar plaudits expressed to hundreds. We recall receiving from him an early copy of Garcia, which was inscribed "to one who has carried many message to Garcia," and it was prized until the same subtle phrase was found mimeographed in the books of a score of other "carriers." It is not pleasant to write so frankly of one who has paid the great price, but the lesson his career teaches should not be lost on an imitative world.

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