

A Message to Garcia

ELBERT HUBBARD penned his classic essay “A Message to Garcia” in one hour after a dinnertime discussion with his family. At dinner, Hubbard's son Bert claimed that the true hero of the Spanish-American war was Rowan—a messenger who braved death by carrying a note behind the lines to Garcia, the leader of the insurgents.

The essay originally ran in Hubbard's magazine The Philistine in February 1899. Inspired by its message, George Daniels of the New York Central Railroad asked permission to reprint and distribute 500,000 copies. Prince Hilakoff, Director of Russian Railways, read one of Daniel's reprints and had it translated into Russian. “A Message to Garcia” was distributed to every one of his railroad employees.

The Russian military then picked up the ball: each Russian soldier sent to the Japanese front was given a copy. The Japanese found the essay in the possession of the Russian prisoners and subsequently had it translated into Japanese. By order of the Mikado, a copy was given to each member of the Japanese government.

Ultimately, forty million copies of “A Message to Garcia” were published.

In all this Cuban business there is one man who stands out on the horizon of my memory like Mars at perihelion. When war broke out between Spain and the United States, it was very necessary to communicate quickly with the leader of the Insurgents. Garcia was somewhere in the mountain vastnesses of Cuba—no one knew where. No mail or telegraph could reach him. The President must secure his co-operation, and quickly.

What to do! Someone said to the President, “There's a fellow by the name of Rowan will find Garcia for you, if anybody can.”

Rowan was sent for and given a letter to be delivered to Garcia. How “the fellow by name of Rowan” took the letter, sealed it up in an oilskin pouch, strapped it over his heart, in four days landed by night off the coast of Cuba from an open boat, disappeared into the jungle, and in three weeks came out on the other side of the island, having traversed a hostile country on foot, and having delivered his letter to Garcia, are things I have no special desire now to tell in detail.

The point I wish to make is this: McKinley gave Rowan a letter to be delivered to Garcia; Rowan took the letter and did not ask, “Where is he at?” There is a man whose form should be cast in deathless bronze and the statue placed in every college in the land. It is not booklearning young men need, nor instruction about this or that, but a stiffening of the vertebrae which will cause them to be loyal to a trust, to act promptly, concentrate their energies; do the thing—“carry a message to Garcia!”

General Garcia is dead now, but there are other Garcias. No man who has endeavored to carry out an enterprise where many hands were needed, but has been well-nigh appalled at times by the imbecility of the average man—the inability or unwillingness to concentrate on a thing and do it. Slipshod assistance, foolish inattention, dowdy indifference, and half-hearted work seem the rule; and no man succeeds, unless by hook or crook, or threat, he forces or bribes other men to assist him; or mayhap, God in His goodness performs a miracle, and sends him an angel of light for an assistant. You, reader, put this matter to a test: You are sitting now in your office—six clerks are within your call. Summon any one and make this request: “Please look in the encyclopedia and make a brief memorandum for me concerning the life of Corregio.”

Will the clerk quietly say, “Yes, sir,” and go do the task?

On your life, he will not. He will look at you out of a fishy eye, and ask one or more of the following questions:

- Who was he?
- Which encyclopedia?
- Where is the encyclopedia?
- Was I hired for that?
- Don't you mean Bismarck?
- What's the matter with Charlie doing it?
- Is he dead?
- Is there any hurry?
- Shan't I bring you the book and let you look it up yourself?
- What do you want to know for?

And I will lay you ten to one that after you have answered the questions, and explained how to find the information, and why you want it, the clerk will go off and get one of the other clerks to help him find Garcia—and then come back and tell you there is no such man. Of course I may lose my bet, but according to the Law of Averages, I will not.

Now if you are wise you will not bother to explain to your “assistant” that Corregio is indexed under the C's, not in the K's, but you will smile sweetly and say, “Never mind,” and go look it up yourself.

And this incapacity for independent action, this moral stupidity, this infirmity of the will, this unwillingness to cheerfully catch hold and lift, are the things that put pure socialism so far into the future. If men will not act for themselves, what will they do when the benefit of their effort is for all? A first mate with knotted club seems necessary; and the dread of getting “the bounce” Saturday night holds many a worker in his place.

Advertise for a stenographer, and nine times out of ten those who apply can neither spell nor punctuate—and do not think it necessary to.

Can such a one write a letter to Garcia?

“You see that bookkeeper?” said the foreman to me in a large factory.

“Yes, what about him?”

“Well, he's a fine accountant, but if I'd send him to town on an errand, he might accomplish the errand all right, and, on the other hand, might stop at four saloons on the way, and when he got to Main Street, would forget what he had been sent for.”

Can such a man be entrusted to carry a message to Garcia?

We have recently been hearing much maudlin sympathy expressed for the “downtrodden denizen of the sweat shop” and the “homeless wanderer searching for honest employment,” and with it all often go many hard words for the men in power.

Nothing is said about the employer who grows old before his time in a vain attempt to get frowsty ne'er-do-wells to do intelligent work; and his long patient striving with “help” that does nothing but loaf when his back is turned. In every store and factory there is a constant weeding-out process going on. The employer is constantly sending away “help” that have shown their incapacity to further the interests of the business, and others are being taken on. No matter how good times are, this sorting continues, only if times are hard and work is scarce, this sorting is done finer—but out and forever out, the incompetent and unworthy go. It is the survival of the fittest. Self-interest prompts every employer to keep the best—those who can carry a message to Garcia.

I know one man of really brilliant parts who has not the ability to manage a business of his own, and yet who is absolutely worthless to anyone else, because he carries with him constantly the insane suspicion that his employer is oppressing, or intending to oppress, him. He cannot give orders, and he will not receive them. Should a message be given him to take to Garcia, his answer would probably be, “Take it yourself.”

Tonight this man walks the streets looking for work, the wind whistling through his threadbare coat. No one who knows him dare employ him, for he is a regular firebrand of discontent. He is impervious to reason, and the only thing that can impress him is the toe of a thick-soled No. 9 boot.

Of course I know that one so morally deformed is no less to be pitied than a physical cripple; but in your pitying, let us drop a tear, too, for the men who are striving to carry on a great enterprise, whose working hours are not limited by the whistle, and whose hair is fast turning white through the struggle to hold the line in dowdy indifference, slipshod imbecility, and the heartless ingratitude which, but for their enterprise, would be both hungry and homeless.

Have I put the matter too strongly? Possibly I have; but when all the world has gone a-slumming I wish to speak a word of sympathy for the man who succeeds—the man who, against great odds, has directed the efforts of others, and, having succeeded, finds there's nothing in it: nothing but bare board and clothes.

I have carried a dinner pail and worked for a day's wages, and I have also been an employer of labor, and I know there is something to be said on both sides. There is no excellence, per se, in poverty; rags are no recommendation; and all employers are not rapacious and high-handed, any more than all poor men are virtuous.

My heart goes out to the man who does his work when the “boss” is away, as well as when he is home. And the man who, when given a letter for Garcia, quietly takes the missive, without asking any idiotic questions, and with no lurking intention of chucking it into the nearest sewer, or of doing aught else but deliver it, never gets “laid off,” nor has to go on strike for higher wages. Civilization is one long anxious search for just such individuals. Anything such a man asks will be granted; his kind is so rare that no employer can afford to let him go. He is wanted in every city, town, and village—in every office, shop, store and factory. The world cries out for such; he is needed, and needed badly—*the man who can carry a message to Garcia*.