

THRILLING LIVES

THE GUN POINTER

By WILLIAM ALLEN JOHNSTON

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It is said that Theodore Roosevelt, throughout his second presidential term, kept in a drawer of his desk a typewritten naval report which he read frequently and always offered in evidence whenever any question arose bearing upon the fighting strength of Uncle Sam's navy.

We are very apt, in these days of submarines and submersibles, of torpedoes and destroyers, of Dreadnoughts and flying squadrons, to forget that men still play a part in warfare, a very important one, despite the highly scientific and effective point to which armaments have been advanced.

When England launches a new battle leviathan we learn all about its destructive equipment, its speed, its armor plate, its every mechanical advantage, its guns, but we hear very little, if anything at all, about the men behind those guns.

This little document in the president's desk was altogether human in text, untechnical in character. It spoke, not of a battleship, but of a man—a man who saved a battleship; and it confirmed a strong belief in the president that in real warfare it is the fighters who count and not altogether the equipment we give them.

This document was called forth in the regular order of departmental business, is brief in character and is simply the report of an explosion on the Missouri signed by the commander, Captain Cowles. But the president read something between the lines and saw beyond the pages, and he labeled it "What Monssen Did for the Missouri"; and Captain Cowles was moved at the end of the report to depart from the usual dry tone and say this of Monssen's deed, that it was "most darddevil in its absolute defiance of death itself."

And this is the story:

On the morning of April 13, 1904, the Missouri steamed out of the white harbor of Pensacola for target practice in the bay. Decks were shining, rails glistening in the clear sunlight and the squads of white jacketed sailors moved with all the mechanical precision of the guns themselves at the latter were loaded, rammed, tilted, swung, discharged. Everything was orderly, shipshape—when, suddenly, a puff of smoke and a yellow flame burst out of the after turret, followed closely by a peculiar muffled report.

A Fateful Sound

There was no mistaking that sullen "boom." It meant an explosion of powder—but vastly more than that, for beneath the turret was the handling room where the shells and powder sacks were passed up, and to either side were the racks where these explosives are stored—the powder magazine, containing tons of the annihilating stuff, enough to work havoc against the entire fleet, enough to blow to atoms the battleship and the 600 human souls aboard her! The powder magazines—and just over them fire, licking flames and dropping sparks!

There was a death knell in that "boom!" that struck home to every heart. Each man knew just what it meant.

It is said that the presence of a submarine, that unseen horror, carrying a deadly torpedo in its nose, will disturb the morale of the best crew, men who will face a battleship's broadside with a grin. But what must be the effect of a sleeping volcano amidships, the crater of which may be opened by a single spark, the blast of which means instant and complete obliteration?

One would imagine a panic—think of the scene in a theater that follows a fool's cry of "Fire!"—but there was not the semblance of it. Indeed, there was no change whatever, save, perhaps, here and there a stiffening of shoulders, a widening of eyes, a sharp tenseness in the orders.

Silently and swiftly the crew took their stations. Fire and collision quarters were sounded. The flood cocks were opened. The ship was swung right about face and headed for the white beach.

A few seconds of suspense followed. They must have seemed hours. An officer tells me that his ears rang—he thought of it afterward—as he waited morbidly, fiercely, for that crack of doom.

The water—through the wide open flood cocks—swiftly filled the lower magazines. That was something gained. For a moment they breathed easier; then came the quick realization that it could never rise to the 12 inch starboard magazine—the one just under the turret—not, at least, before the flame came down. The flame would beat it—must beat it. Ah! there it was already. They saw it spurt out from the top. It was a matter of seconds now.

A squad of men charged the magazines with pails of water—never a drop of which filtered through. There was the scuttle. That would admit water. But if they opened it the draught would give the fire the one thing it needed and more power than water buckets could meet, and master. The fire hose might do, but it would take too long to bring it up.

Fearless Monssen

One man, Chief Gunner's Mate Monssen, was thinking of all this. His photograph shows him with arms folded and cap almost concealing his eyes, which are fearless and thoughtful. His lips are thin and set in a straight, wide line. He's the type of man who sees and knows a great deal more than he talks about, who is vastly different in repose, and in action—in other words, the kind of man who not only rises independently to an emergency, but who, alone or with others, can face a hopeless one, day in and out, till the die is cast.

In his own mind he knew that there was but one way to save that magazine, and that was for a man to go through the scuttle, close the door after him and fight the fire with his hands. He knew the interior so well that he could work there in the dark. It was a one man job. He was chief gunner's mate. He was a man; it was his duty. He decided this very quickly and quietly, without any emotion whatsoever, and then he ran to the scuttle and pulled himself up.

The scene must have been a remarkable one; its like could not be viewed elsewhere. Intense, horrible, momentous as the situation was, there was no ado whatever made over it. Discipline was in no wise relaxed. To an observer it would have seemed an ordinary incident of fire drill.

Such scenes—even of far less significance—on land often incite pandemonium supreme, hysteria, applause, terror.

Here there was no outburst whatever, for the simple reason that audience and actor were of one and the same caliber, or, at least, governed by iden-

tically the same morale. Men simply stopped at their work, officers stood in calm suspense and a man wiggled his way head first through an 18 inch scuttle and into, veritably, the jaws of death.

As he closed the scuttle door behind him every eye was fixed upon the starboard magazine, every mind was measuring time—in seconds and fractions of seconds. There were but a few left now, and in that steelbound box of fire a man, single handed, was all that interposed between the destiny of a battleship and each of their 600 lives.

Those nearest the turret saw through the glass of the scuttle a man's head bobbing up and down to the smoke wreaths. That was all—and they waited.

What they did not see was a man blinded and gasping, slapping the fire off boxes with his naked hands. His face blackened and the flesh blistered and peeled and hung in strips from his fingers. Beneath him the water rose by inches, but the flames from overhead swooped down by feet. He must fight them back—here, there, all about him. He must hold them with his maimed hands till the water rose and quenched them, lapping them off the powder boxes.

A minute passed, then another. The scuttle glass was shrouded gray with smoke; the man's bobbing head was hidden, they could see nothing. And then came a muffled order in Monssen's calm tones—"Open the door!"

His Miraculous Escape

"Open the door!" The fight was won. Monssen squeezed his shoulders through—more slowly than he had entered—and very carefully he pulled him out of the narrow scuttle and supported him as he stumbled away to the surgeon's room. No fuss was made. Discipline was unchanged. Fire and collision work were on and speedily the incident was closed. Save for the official report of Captain Cowles the world at large might never have heard the story. A half hour later the battleship Texas, every man on her knowing well the Missouri's miraculous escape from total annihilation, went through target practice and made an excellent record.

Such was the work that Monssen did—and would do again, if the occasion arose, in the same calm, deliberate way, and such was the morals of the crew, standing coolly at attention in the presence of what seemed inevitable death to one and all—and of that other crew who aimed their guns with cool precision while the magazines of a sister ship were still thick with smoke.

Three years later, while the battleship Indiana lay in dock at League island navy yard, every man in the crew volunteered eagerly to go into the magazine and carry out over 80 tons of blistering hot shells and powder boxes.

Spontaneous combustion caused a fire in the coal bunkers which are immediately adjacent to the 12 inch and 6 inch magazines. The bulkhead became so heated that, when the men entered, the powder boxes nearest it were smoking, and the big projectiles (weighing over half a ton each) were scorching hot.

Boatswain Amato, who first discovered the danger,

Beneath Him the Water Rose by Inches, but the Flames From Overhead Swooped Down by Feet

called the men nearest him into service and reported to the ship's commander.

"Is the boat in danger?" the latter asked.

"No, sir," said Amato, "not with this crew," and the work of carrying out the many boxes, each of them like an ember ready to flash without an instant's warning, and the seventy-odd shells, each a potential instrument of instant death, proceeded as quietly and swiftly as a regular gun or deck drill. Then the incident was summarily closed. Several thousand persons, visited the Indiana during the ensuing week, and not one of them learned of it. Only the commander's report and the navy department's commendation of the nine men who entered the magazine brought the matter to light.

Asked about it, one of the men said briefly: "Nothing to it. We carried out the shells and powder like any man of the crew would do in the face of danger—if you insist on calling it so."

And another requested sincerely: "Please do not make us heroes when all of the 200 men aboard would have done the same thing if we hadn't beaten them to it."

Just Before the Accident

It is a singular coincidence that just two years after the Missouri accident and on the same day of the year, April 13, there was a frightful explosion in the turret of the Kearsarge, then at target practice off Manzanillo bay.

Two successful runs had been made, during which the four guns in the forward turret had all been fired and the ship was turning off range.

One gun, a big 13 inch piece, had remained unloaded when the firing ceased and the turret crew were withdrawing the charges, while Lieutenants Hudgins and Grachme, turret officer and umpire, respectively, stood near them discussing the day's practice.

Such a gun has a load of 260 pounds, consisting of four sections of powder, each weighing 65 pounds. The sections are loaded by automatic rammers operated by electric power and situated directly back to the guns.

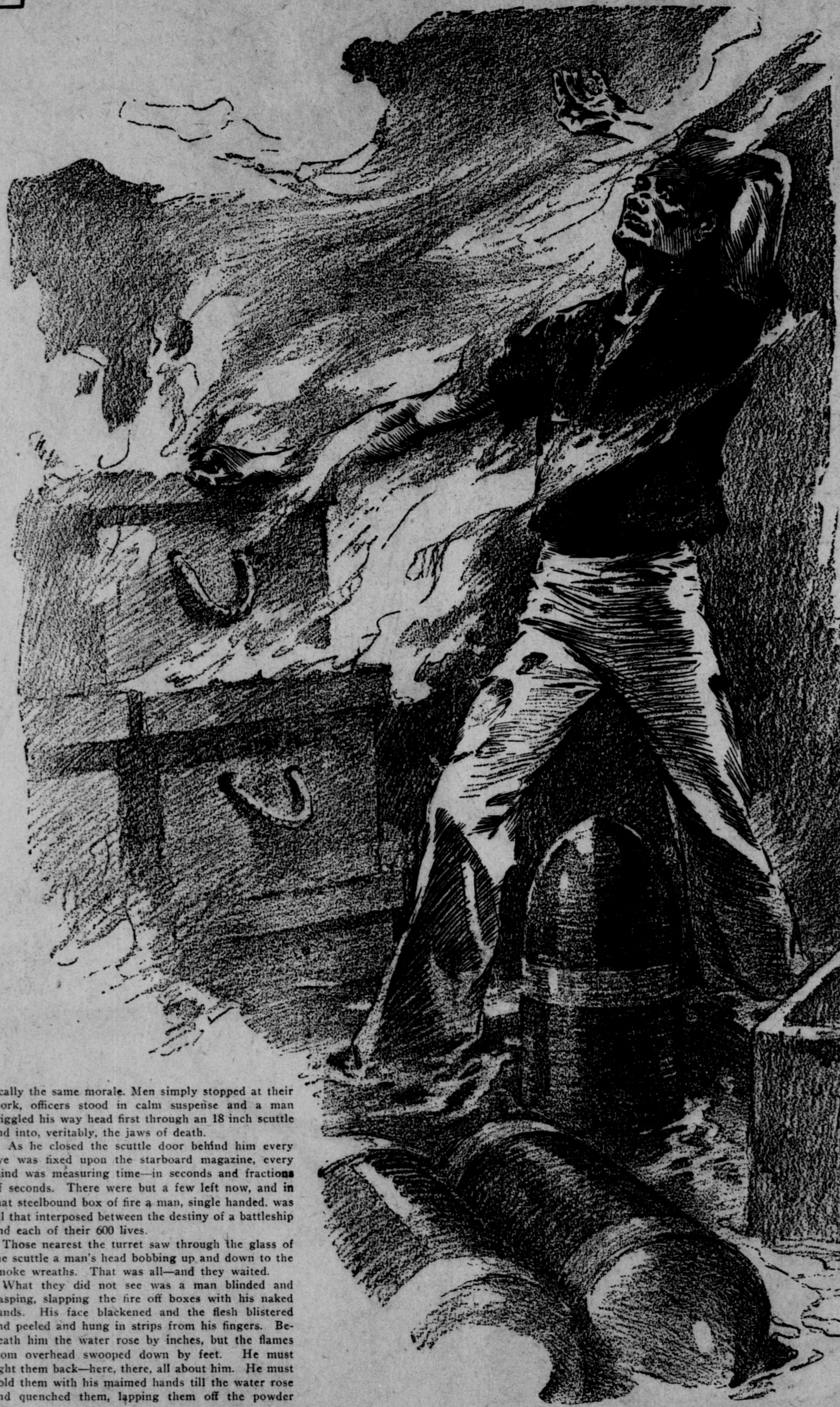
Three of the powder sections had been removed and laid in a row between the butt of the gun and the rammer behind, and the gun pointer was in the act of removing the last section when his tongue came in contact with the electric switch of the rammer and short circuited it. There followed a "buzz," a play of blue sparks and a piece of molten metal dropped straight down and pierced the core of a powder section.

"Boom!" again that peculiar muffled sound so soft this time that not a soul on the ship heard it, and there was no intimation of the terrible havoc wrought within till a strange black object, a man and yet not a man in appearance, crawled out of the top of the turret and called for help.

He was J. A. Kurster, turret captain, and he stayed there at his post till the fire was put out and the rescue begun, directing the work calmly till his voice faltered and he sank head down, saying over and again, "Goodby, Kearsarge!" He died in agony that night, six hours later.

The fire hose was instantly brought into play, but before the flames had died out in the turret a rescuing party led by Gunner McHugh dashed into the round steel clad chamber, stifling with smoke and foul with gases as it was.

A ghastly sight met them. Stricken where they had stood at their posts and so blackened and burned as to be almost unrecognizable, lay six gun pointers, dead. As many more were mutely writhing in their agony. Lieutenants Grachme and Hudgins, still conscious, but fatally burned, coolly directed the removal of these men, resisting their own rescue till the last



L. A. SHAPER

gun pointer had been carried out. They died several hours later, these two officers, after refusing all surgical aid till the men had been attended to. As to their heroism in the turret, the care they took of the men under them, even to the point of interposing their own bodies between them and the flames, it was well told in the delirium of W. King, ordinary seaman and gun pointer. At intervals and in extreme desperation he cried out, "Mr. Hudgins, you are saving me, but burning yourself!" The danger was by no means over with the rescue in the turret—not for a single living soul on board. In fact, identically the same situation prevailed as on the Missouri when Monssen closed himself in the fiery starboard magazine.

Below the Flaming Turret

This time it was George Brennan, ordinary seaman, who jumped into the handling room, below the flaming turret, and closing all the exits coolly stamped out the falling sparks and brands and closed tight the powder tanks.

Two other men, Midshipmen Hall and Connor, youngsters merely with a month at sea to their record, graduates not of war but of a training school that makes warriors, stood calmly at their stations here leading out the hose to the eight inch handling room; and over in this room, directing the nozzle amid a shower of sparks and in the face of what seemed certain death, stood another knot of men comprising Boatswain's Mate J. Herrick, Chief Master at Arms Magnussen, Machinist's Mate Wilson, Seaman Weber, Keith and Dougherty and Ordinary Seaman Egan and Schrieber.

Here, as in other similar cases on the New York, the Raleigh, the Connecticut, the Indiana and the Missouri, was an intermingling of men of all stations, each enlisted and trained for a certain kind of work, but all in a time of danger that means death doing one and the same thing, their duty, doing it coolly, too, and with all the regularity of their daily tasks.

This is the spirit the president found in the matter of fact report of Monssen's work on the Missouri, and it would seem that we might stop and consider it, too, for a time at least, amid the discussion of new naval appropriations and the thickness of armor plate below the water line.

In Japan they have a little book of rules for human conduct called "bushido." In reading it—just a section will do—one has a ready explanation of those patient, rank thinning night sorties the Japanese soldiery made against Fort Arthur, of their terrible but smiling deaths upon the frozen steppes of Korea, and

of a thousand and one other remarkable incidents of the Russian Japanese war.

Their strange philosophy teaches them to love death, say other nations, but it doesn't. They are the best soldiers in the world, says every one, but they are not.

What they are the "bushido" has made them, most of all; and what the "bushido" teaches is simply, do your duty.

That's what Monssen did, and Brennan, and the midshipmen and the higher officers, the filed reports of which constitute our own "bushido"—and after all it is a maxim, admitting of so many interpretations in so many different walks of life, in peace as well as war, that it becomes the one best, all sufficient one for every human soul of us—Do your duty!

Fake Evidence to Order

WITHIN a few days a very conspicuous divorce case has furnished an excellent example of the wealth of evidence which may be collected for such trials. The layman in such matters doubtless often wonders at the number of witnesses which spring up on every hand, especially when persons of great wealth or social position are involved.

"The manufacture of fake evidence has come to be a fine art in New York," remarked a prominent criminal lawyer the other day. "An unscrupulous lawyer can buy witnesses by the dozen from scores of different occupations, who will testify anything you please, and do it at a surprisingly reasonable figure. I do not mean to say that lawyers of any standing buy them, but the supply nevertheless is large. Nor do the lawyers have to look for it. It is brought ready made to their doors. Let a big divorce suit come up and the lawyers are at once besieged with offers by these accommodating witnesses."

"The witness supply is especially large, as might be expected, in the Tenderloin. If a bellboy is needed to identify the defendant, an elevator man to swear that the victim was out of bounds, a maid or a caddy to give the most damaging evidence from personal observation, they may be found here by the score. It is surprising how familiar a large class of such people have become with legal usage, and how skillful in manufacturing just such fake testimony. They come to us absolutely unsought with schemes of testimony worthy of a very clever lawyer."