

# DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 11, NO. 199.

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, JANUARY 15, 1911.

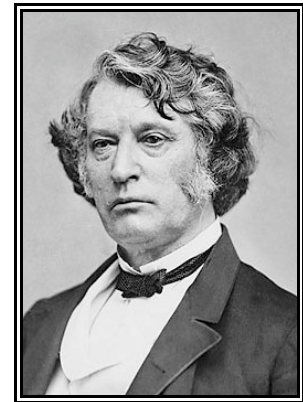
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EDITORIAL

## CHARLES SUMNER.

By DANIEL DE LEON

**I**T was as it should be that on the hundredth anniversary of Charles Sumner celebrations were held in his honor, and speeches pronounced, essays read, and articles written rendering homage to his memory. On all these occasions the loftiness of the mans purposes, his culture, the bravery of his convictions were extolled in language not at all excessive. An historic figure such as Sumner's may well be burnt incense to at a season when the man's leading virtues—exalted purposes and moral bravery— are conspicuously absent in the Halls of Legislation which his presence once adorned, and are at a discount, generally, in a community whose ideals and methods ripen the Lorimers, the Drs. Cook, and the Robinoviches.



CHARLES SUMNER  
(1811-1874)

That the eminent virtues of Sumner should be glorified—that is as it should be. Our generation, called to grapple with momentous problems, stands in need of the Sumner virtues. None more readily than the Socialist joins in the glorification. For the identical reason, to the Socialist falls the duty to point out certain characteristics of the illustrious and lamented Massachusetts Senator which, at epochs like the present, epochs vastly graver than the epoch in which he lived and labored, would go far to neutralize his virtues, and may even work positive harm.

Of these characteristics two are most prominent. Of the one, incidental mention was made here and there; of the other no mention at all.

The characteristic of which incidental mention was made was man's extraordinary vainglory. This blemish in Sumner's character wrought only inconvenience to himself, it wrought no evil consequences to the cause of Emancipation which he espoused. Nevertheless, from among the cardinal sins at

critical epochs in a people's history vainglory may not be omitted. What serious consequences may arise therefrom Bret Harte left a striking, however humorous, illustration of in his "Story of a Mine,"—the then Senator Sumner being evidently the personage upon whose vainglory the heroine of the plot wrought successfully. The "Story of a Mine," like all of Bret Harte's western stories, has a substantial foundation in history. When problems of the caliber that the present Social Question throws up are on the tapis, then other heroes or heroines, engaged in plots of vaster moment, would find vainglory a fulcrum, not for humorous, but for tragic consequences.

Equally serious with this blemish, if not more so, in the solution of the Social Question was Sumner's ideology. So fantastic was this feature in Sumner's character that it blinded him wholly to the source of men's actions. It blinded him so totally that, to put it strongly, yet none too strong, he expected sociologic pears from sociologic bramble bushes; and when, instead of the delicious fruit he reckoned with, his fingers were pricked to bleeding, he verged on demoralization. He then acted like a ship in a storm whose bearings are at fault. This was sadly illustrated on the occasion of England's decided friendship for the Confederacy.

Sumner's fantastic ideology caused him to hold that the good and noble needed but to be stated in order to be accepted. He knew nothing of the material basis of Right and Wrong. Slavery he opposed with signal bravery and eloquence as a Wrong. He little realized the material foundation that caused the one-time Right to change into a Wrong in his manufacturing New England, and thereby to produce the sociologic atmosphere that he breathed and that shaped his thoughts. As a consequence he concluded that England's attitude against Slavery was an "effort of virtue." The error caused him to expect enthusiastic support for the North from England. When, on the contrary, a set of material causes, working in a direction opposite to those that had caused England to champion Anti-Slavery, enlisted her interests in the slave-holding Confederacy, and thereby enlisted her sympathy for a Slavocratic against an Abolitionist Government in America,—when that happened Sumner was at first dumbfounded and discouraged, and, when he found his voice again, he became irrational, and impolitic in his violence. The nature of the then issue in the land saved the United States from a calamity that Sumner's

visionariness would otherwise have drawn upon the country.

Not Sumner's virtues only, his defects and vices also should be studied by the militant in the Socialist Movement, so that he may emulate the one, and carefully guard and fortify himself against the other.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.  
Uploaded December 2011

[slpns@slp.org](mailto:slpns@slp.org)