

The Easy Chair

In those early newspaper days, news was incidental. The editorial policy was the important thing. Subscribers took the paper because they agreed with its editorial policy. The news was an extra bonus. Through the years news grew in importance, but it was the editorials that counted.

Charley Marvin was blissfully happy when writing editorials. He figured the editorial department should have a name, and so his opinions began appearing under the title "The Easy Chair." The Easy Chair was not a rocking chair, not even a platform rocker like the one he loved to relax in at home when he had the time. It was a worn swivel chair which creaked when he turned and had to be used with some degree of caution lest it flop over under the impulse of sudden movement. But Marvin liked it and there he sat when scribbling notes or pounding out stories and editorials.

Marvin never had ambitions to become a distinguished writer. He was content to be a country editor. However, many of his writings were widely copied and won him a wide and favorable reputation. He loved a scrap and was thrilled when he could do battle with any or all newspapermen in the area. Instead of his serious editorials, his-

torical articles, and other writings, it was a simple story which brought him national attention, written idly while on a vacation in Ohio.

One of the fringe benefits editors received in those days was railway passes for themselves and their families. Marvin's annual free ride took him back to Ohio to visit his old home on Alum Creek. The oak tree, he had planted in the front yard as a boy, had grown inches each year. Now he could sit in its shade and wait for inspiration. But none came, not even an idea. An editor without an idea is in a sad frame of mind. He wandered down to the old creek, sat down on the bank, and racked his brain for an idea for that overdue letter to his paper.

Then he heard the croaking of a big bullfrog who disputed his possession of the spot on the bank. At last Marvin pulled scratch paper out of his pocket and scribbled a fantastic story of the big bullfrog whose croak was loud as thunder.

For weeks afterward the story was copied by papers from Maine to California. "How silly," was Marvin's comment. "Why couldn't they copy something worthwhile." One admirer sent him a gigantic green frog made of iron. It arrived by prepaid express. The frog was 14 inches high and bore this note, which was tied around its neck, "Could this be your frog?" The big iron frog sat in Marvin's living room for years.

Sometimes trouble walked in the door. Like the

day Mrs. Jones came raging into the office threatening to sue the *Sentinel*. Her face was red and her voice shook. She pointed an angry finger at Marvin. He wondered whether to seek refuge under the table or rush for the nearest exit.

"What's the matter?"

"You made me the laughing stock of the town. You — — —"

"Why don't you tell me what it's all about?"

"This!" She thrust a torn page from the *Sentinel* angrily into Marvin's face. "Just read this."

Marvin read this announcement:

"Mrs. Jones will have her pants on display in her garden Tuesday afternoon. Friends are invited to call and admire them."

"My PANTS!" wailed Mrs. Jones.

Marvin tried to explain that it was just a mistake. "The L had been left out of plants."

But Mrs. Jones could not be consoled. She left the office wailing, "MY PLANTS, my beautiful plants."

Marvin went home for the rest of the day.

Interesting stories did not walk into the *Sentinel* office every day. Marvin and his assistants hunted for news throughout the *Sentinel* territory. Marvin made his towns by bicycle. Farragut and Essex were about six miles away — a nice ride on good days. He claimed the exercise kept him in fine condition. Clarinda, the county seat, was farther away — 19 miles — and he made it weekly

in the caboose of an early morning freight train, returning by passenger train in the evening.

These weekly trips to other towns did not quite cover the field. News was needed from other communities in Page and Fremont counties, which the *Sentinel* called its territory. Country correspondents were the answer. They were not hard to find. Every community had a woman, or sometimes a man, who was delighted to send in a weekly letter telling of the doings of the neighbors. They were paid at the end of the month for the string of news sent in.

Some of the correspondents were excellent, but there were problems, too. In fact, country correspondents were the bane of Marvin's life. They wrote poems of appreciation for every little thing done by friends and neighbors and ended every description of a party with the statement, "A good time was had by all." Sometimes a correspondent would take a sly dig at someone, and the paper would lose several good subscribers.

Some lacked a news sense. There was the big wedding that the correspondent was told to report in full. The next week's letter came in with no mention of it. A telephone call was in order.

"Why didn't you write up the Smith wedding?"

"Oh, there wasn't any news about it. The groom didn't show up. Guess he changed his mind."

You never can tell what will happen around

a newspaper office. Some strange people drift in. There was the red-faced man who came in one morning with a big smile on his face and approached Editor Marvin.

"You want a news item?"

Marvin reached for his note pad and pencil.

"I got the smallpox."

Marvin jumped a foot, knocking his papers to the floor. "You get out of here!" His savage tone frightened the man, and he fled out the door.

The hastily summoned constable raced after the man and overtook him three blocks away. The man was right. He did have smallpox but felt pretty good and decided there was no reason to stay home.

After a peaceful week, Marvin was alone in the office one day when a gray-haired man came in and tossed his battered straw hat on the table. Marvin scented a story — a stranger in town.

"Guess I'll go to work here a few days."

"What — what did you say?"

"Guess you don't know me?"

"Guess I don't," Marvin agreed.

"I'm Dixie Dunbar."

Marvin gulped in surprise.

"Yeah. I met you five years ago when you were on the *Marshalltown Times-Republican*. Fine office you got here."

Dixie Dunbar discovered an apron behind the door and slipped it on. "Got some copy?"

Marvin produced a sheet of copy and handed it to the visitor who promptly went to work setting type.

Dixie Dunbar was the last of the tramp printers, and it was his proud boast that he had worked in every printing office in the United States. Nobody ever disputed his claim. He had a photographic memory and never forgot a face or a name. Three days later Dunbar hung up the apron. "I guess I'll move on now." Marvin paid him three dollars, and Dixie nonchalantly caught the afternoon freight to Hamburg.

Dunbar was not the only surprise employee. One day in came a seedy looking individual who wrote on a pad that he was deaf and dumb, but a good printer and needed a job. Marvin, always sympathetic with fellows down on their luck, hired him.

The new man worked steadily every day for three weeks without making a sound. Foreman McUllough and the girls in the composing room discussed him freely, as they were confident he could not hear their comments. The fourth week he came to work one morning and greeted the foreman, "Hello, Cully." From that time on he talked incessantly.

Even Marvin was surprised one evening when two Chicago reporters, a man and a woman, representing rival papers, showed up at his office.

"We got a tip," the man explained, "that John

D. Rockefeller's father is living around here under an assumed name."

Marvin did not think so.

"You've read Ida Tarbell's *History of the Standard Oil Company*?"

"Yes."

"We think Rockefeller's father lives around here some place. Do you know anybody that fits the description?"

Marvin did not. The three discussed every old-timer that Marvin could suggest. Only one was of the right age and background. It was Uncle Johnny Phipps, who lived with his son on a farm near Farragut.

Marvin was skeptical, but the male reporter engaged a livery team to drive out to the Phipps farm at 8:00 o'clock the next morning. When nearly there he met the lady reporter coming back.

Uncle Johnny Phipps was not Rockefeller's father. That story was just a rumor started by an ambitious reporter. But Uncle Johnny became a celebrity in his own right. When he was 100 years old he joined the Elks Lodge in Shenandoah. Three years later he went with the Shenandoah Elks to Red Oak to help install their new lodge. He marched in the parade as sprightly as the youngest member.

For many years an unusual character turned up at the *Sentinel* office every few months. He was a storybook character come to life — an

old-time peddler, who was humped from years of traveling through the country with a heavy pack on his back. His name was Olson and he had come from Sweden as a young man and had traveled the road ever since. He was known as Charley Five Drops because of his habit of taking just five drops of liquor in his drink.

Charley had no regular home. When he came to the Shenandoah vicinity, he built himself a tiny shack of discarded packing boxes on some vacant and unwanted land. He cooked his own meals and read by the light of a lantern.

What did he read? Greek and Latin classics! He carried his books in his pack. When weariness would overcome him, he would sit on a curb, his pack beside him. Opening the pack, he would take out a book, Cicero's orations, perhaps, and for an hour would read intently, oblivious to curious passers-by.

He never told where he obtained his fine education. Often during his travels he wrote to Charley Marvin, whom he admired greatly. The letters were beautifully written, with polished language and a fine, flawless script such as an artist might use.