

An Old-Time Editorial Dialogue

PROLOGUE

Pied long ago was the type that first carried this exchange of civilities. And many years have passed since the two principals in the wordy duel were laid away to rest, each with his vocabulary at his side. But the ghost of the duel still flutters in the old sheets of the newspaper files. Let the ghost tell its tale.

SCENE

The frontier town of Iowa City, capital of the Territory of Iowa.

TIME

The early forties, when men wore their politics like chips upon their shoulders and established arsenals beneath their coat tails — with reference to the printing office, the good old days when the militant editor got out a weekly four page sheet, with the assistance of an industrious but soiled and unwashable printer's devil, a ditto towel, a dog-eared and now vanished dictionary of classical vituperation, and a "hell box" where the used-up type, exhausted by being made the vehicle of ultra vigorous language, fell into an early grave.

CHARACTERS

WILLIAM CRUM — a young editor of twenty-two years — possessed of a hair-trigger pen and an inkwell full of expletives, a vast admiration for the pil-

lars of the Whig party, and no respect at all for the Democratic editors of the Territory of Iowa. Under his supervision the *Iowa City Standard* upholds the views of William Henry Harrison and Henry Clay and hurls peppery paragraphs at the awful record of the Democrats who happen to hold the whip hand in the Territory.

VER PLANCK VAN ANTWERP — educated at West Point and by courtesy called General — dignified and serious, arrayed in boiled shirt and starched collar and gold spectacles — an old school Democrat of “an age now verging upon the meridian of life.” He, too, is an editor and has in his time pealed out sonorous messages through long columns of the Democratic press.

*Enter MR. CRUM followed some time later by
the GENERAL*

Using the words of one of his exchanges, Mr. Crum soliloquizes:

“There is, somewhere in the Territory of Iowa, one ‘General’ V. P. Van Antwerp, who . . . is much in the habit of making long-winded speeches, as frothy as small beer and as empty as his head.”

Soon he becomes aware that the said General Van Antwerp has arrived at Iowa City and become the editor of the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, and the soliloquy becomes a dialogue. In somewhat over two columns the General makes his announcement and closes with this glowing peroration:

“*To every tenet in the Democratic faith as promulgated by Jefferson, Jackson, Van Buren, and Benton, the four most shining lights among the multitudes of its distinguished advocates, I heartily subscribe; and stand ready now, as I have ever done, to devote my best energies to their support.*

“In those tenets I have been taught from early childhood, with it instilled and impressed upon my mind, to consider their effects upon the destinies of mankind as second in importance to naught else save the Christian religion itself; and, resting firmly under this belief, regardless of the consequences, or of the course of others, and come what may, adversity or prosperity, gloom or glory, weal or woe, I shall continue, while God spares my life, to do battle in the good and glorious cause!”

Mr. Crum falls upon this bit of oratory with great glee and satire: “an inaugural, and signed by *My Lord Pomposity, Ver Planck himself*”; and with alternate quotations and jeers he pokes fun at his new rival, “this West Point dandy in gold spectacles!”

The General is aroused, and in his second issue proclaims that “any charge in the slightest degree implicating our character, will not be suffered to pass by unheeded.

“But in regard to the wretched demagogical slang, which is the sole aliment upon which a certain class of men subsist, we laugh to scorn both it and its authors, confident that they can no more affect us,

with those whose respect we value, than would the Billingsgate of the fisherwomen, in whose school they were bred, and whose style they copy."

Crum is happy. He heads his columns with the quotation from Van Antwerp in regard to "any charge in the slightest degree implicating our character", and then proceeds to make charges which would seem to come within the category indicated. He arraigns his record as a printer of the legislative records and says, when it stirs the General to wrath:

"That little 'Thumdomadal' [a term Van Antwerp had applied to Crum] might point its finger of condemnation to his false Democracy, and hold up to public gaze his rotten and corrupt political form, which shone through the veil of *assumed* dignity like rotten dog-wood in pitch-darkness; but let it touch his pocket, although replenished from the People's money, and hyena-like growls will issue in rabid fury, and in maniac-like distraction, from his troubled spirit. The jackall, an indigenous animal of Africa, noted for his want of sagacity and his innate predatory disposition, it is said will yell most furiously to his fraternal flock at a distance, whilst he is in the poultry coop of the farmer committing his usual havocs, and thereby rouse to his own great danger the farmer and the neighborhood, who repair to the coop and relieve the poultry of their fell destroyer. So it is with this West Point jackall, in relation to the public printing." He ends by saying that the military gentleman has not learned any

branch of the merchanic arts "and has therefore taken to the trade of LYING".

But Van Antwerp is inclined to stand upon his dignity. He answers one outburst of the *Standard* by saying, "of course our sheet shall not be polluted by replying to it." And again the doughty General remarks:

"We would be the last to reproach the memory of the mother who bore him in an unlucky hour, with the frailties of her worthless son. Here we take leave of him before the public forever."

"It would be ungenerous, after the heavy battery has been silenced, the guns spiked and the carriages broken, to transfix the trembling, blackened form of the inoffensive powder-monkey. When the *larger hound* bays still deeper in the forest the *feeble cur* will receive very little attention."

Meanwhile other editors have interjected a word or two into the dialogue and been editorially cuffed by Crum or the General. The *Burlington Gazette*, hurrying to the rescue of Democracy, observes:

"The public are generally ignorant of the fact, that, under the title of the 'Iowa City Standard,' a sickly, little blue sheet, of the thumbpaper size, by courtesy called newspaper is weekly issued at the seat of government; yet it is even so."

Then after commenting on the insignificance of the *Standard*, the editor falls back upon the popular canine metaphor:

"It will do well enough on proper occasions to

notice the federal mastiffs; but the curs, whose vocation it is to do the barking, should be passed by with neglect akin to that usually extended to their canine prototype."

The "cur" turns aside only long enough to utter this philosophic bark: "The mere shadow of a man who clandestinely presides over the editorial department of the Burlington Gazette, *attempts* to be very severe upon us for our notices of that Bombastes Furioso of the Reporter. Now, we consider the humid vaporings of this, or any other, individual, who so far descends from the dignity of a man as to follow, puppy like, at the heels of Ver Planck Van Antwerp, as too contemptible to notice".

Upon the editor of the *Bloomington Herald* he wastes even less attention.

"The editor of the above print is greatly troubled about the editorials of the Standard. Get out of the way, man! You are not worth the ammunition that would kill you off."

A little later, however, he gives voice to his contempt for the whole array of Democrats.

"Why in the name of all that is sensible, don't the Loco-foco papers here and hereabouts, shut up shop — retire — back out — or float down the Mississippi on a shingle?— Such another unmitigated set of vegetables we imagine could not be raked up in any other quarter of the land. Here is the 'Iowa Capitol Reporter'—bless your soul,—with a title that rolls over ones tongue like the tones

of a big bass drum; a bloated, empty, echoing thing, that hasn't been guilty of propagating an original idea for the last three months And then there is the 'Bloomington Herald,' a little fiddling fice-dog affair, to which the 'Reporter' tosses parched peas and pebble stones, to be flung back at us. That establishment never had an idea at all Next we have the 'Territorial Gazette,' with seven editors and two ideas—both unavailable. But the Hawkeye must attend to that concern.—Then there is the 'Sun'—a little poverty stricken affair, 'no bigger as mine thumb'—at Davenport. It was for a long time published on a half sheet, and now it is a size less than that Again we repeat, what do they live for? Is it because their friends won't be at the cost of a coffin? Die, bankrupts—die. You are 'stale, flat and unprofitable'—worse than cold corn dodger without salt."

The duel of words at Iowa City becomes constantly more spirited. The proud aloofness of the General gradually gives way before the constant and wasp-like attacks of William Crum. Especially does he become wrought up by a charge that he rolled about in a coach that should go to pay his debts. The reference to the debts makes comparatively little impression; but the coach, that is a different matter. With great vigor the exponent of Democracy denies that he ever rolled in a coach except perhaps at the invitation of some friend or in a common stage coach. Likewise the charge that he is in the habit of wear-

ing silk gloves disturbs him. He never wears silk gloves, he maintains, except at public balls or parties; and even these are knit by a member of his family, out of common saddlers silk.

One can imagine him writhing uncomfortably, and nervously adjusting his cravat and his gold spectacles as he reads these terrible charges. Piqued by William Crum's constant use of the term "My Lord Pomposity" and other such nicknames, he retorts by characterizing the editor of the *Standard* as "Silly Billy" and "the last crum of creation".

Both men in the heat of the controversy lose sight of the rules of grammar.

"We were not aware," says Van Antwerp, "until the last *Standard* appeared, that it looked suspicious for any one to visit the capitol as often as they seen fit."

And Crum bursts forth in answer to an item in the *Reporter*:

"The black hearted villain who composed it knew that it was a lie when he done so."

Finally the stings of his twenty-two year old opponent so enrage Ver Planck Van Antwerp that he throws dignity to the winds. The "slang-whanging and blackguard articles of 'The Standard'" have made a demand "of *anybody* who may at this time answer for the editorship" of the *Reporter*. And in elephantine fury he replies:

"Now we tell the puppy who wrote that article that he knows, as every body else knows here, who

are the Editors of this paper; and that they are ready at all times to answer any 'demand' (?) that he or his fellows may think proper to make of them But how is it with regard to the vagabond concern that thus alludes to them? Who is the author of the mass of putridity, and villainous scurrility, that is weekly thrown before the public through the columns of that blackguard sheet?

"That it is not its nominal proprietor, the *gawkey* boy Crum, who is a pitiful tool in the hands of others, and incapable of framing together correctly three consecutive sentences, is of course notorious to every body here; as is the additional fact that it does not proceed from the other milk-and-water creature *recently imported into the concern*"

And he charges wildly along, in his wrath stumbling into language that is not here printable.

But it is the General's swan song. About a month later his name disappears from the head of the sheet. Now and again in the history of early Iowa we see his form stalking through other rôles, but his duel with "Silly Billy" Crum is over.

That young man remains, triumphant, but perhaps, too, a little disconcerted at the removal of his friend the enemy, for not again will he find a foe who will make so admirable a target for his jests, his epithets, and his satire. Pen in hand he moves off stage to the right seeking whom he may attack.

CURTAIN

JOHN C. PARISH