

Samuel Mercer Clark

A little more than one hundred years ago, in a pioneer community near Keosauqua in Van Buren County, there lived a zealous and courageous Methodist minister — Reverend Samuel Clarke — who at an early date had migrated from Virginia. His father was George Henry Clarke, a native of Ireland, who had come to America in 1777 and was serving as a soldier in the American army at the surrender of Yorktown. The minister's mother was Jane Mercer of Virginia. Before coming to Iowa, the young minister had married Elizabeth Reynolds, a member of a Maryland-Pennsylvania family whose genealogy touched much of the history of the American Revolution and the War of 1812.

This sturdy and distinctive family tree bore, as the seventh child, Samuel Mercer Clarke, who was born in Van Buren County on October 11, 1841. The young man later dropped the final "e" from his family name and even abbreviated his Christian name to Sam. M., but he retained always that abundant supply of "patriotism, poetry, humor, pride, shrewdness, belligerency and force of character" that had come down to him from a

long line of worthy ancestors and had been cultivated and developed under the guidance of his watchful pioneer father, the sturdy follower of John Wesley.

Samuel M. Clark was educated in the country schools of Van Buren County and at Des Moines Valley College at West Point in Lee County, but his education continued through the years of his maturity. He read the best of literature, the deepest of philosophy, the broadest of history; he read "omnivorously and continuously". In this manner he assimilated an immense amount of information, learning, and culture. "His text books were the writings of the wise of all ages and the actions of the wise and unwise of his own time." He read nature as he read books, and he was familiar with birds, trees, and shrubs. The majesty of a great river gave him inspiration. "His mind gathered riches from all things, as a bee gathers honey."

Clark became interested in politics at an early age. He was not yet nineteen when he made a political speech for Abraham Lincoln in 1860. He learned early, too, that politics has its disappointments and its broken pledges. He had worked hard for the election of a county official, with the promise that he would be appointed as a deputy, but when he went to town to receive confirmation of the promised appointment, he found that it had

been given to another. His future seemed to be ruined, and he went back to the farm. But not for long. An ambitious, aggressive, and responsible young man was not to be permanently restrained or limited by a broken promise. He decided that there was but one thing to do with an unfortunate circumstance, and that was to forget it. He would lift himself above his difficulties.

With this resolve, Sam. Clark entered the law office of George S. Wright of Keosauqua and began the study of law. A little later, he volunteered for service in the Civil War, but was rejected because of his frail physique. He was a giant intellectually, but all his life he was handicapped by physical conditions. In 1863, he moved to Keokuk and entered the law office of John W. Rankin and George W. McCrary. In June, 1864, he was admitted to the bar, "but he preferred the philosophic serenity of the arts to the contentious turmoil of the law" and it was a day of triumph for young Clark, when, soon after he was admitted to the bar, he was invited to become associated with James B. Howell on the editorial staff of the Keokuk *Gate City*. Soon he was associate editor and when Mr. Howell was named United States Senator in 1870 Clark assumed all the editorial duties, and became editor-in-chief and part owner of the *Gate City*.

Early in his editorial career, Clark distinguished himself as a maker of phrases and as a lucid, effective, and able columnist. Illustrative of his abilities along this line were five editorials in the *Gate City*, descriptive of the Upper Mississippi River, written in June and July, 1868. After paying high tribute to "the officers of the good steamer *Itasca*", and to the congenial companions that he met, Mr. Clark described scenes and incidents along the way, as only Clark could describe them. Past Fort Madison and Burlington, and Muscatine and Davenport, with whatever attractions they and the country and the river between them offered, the *Itasca* went. "It was past mid-afternoon, Friday", Clark continued, "as our boat passed through the railroad bridge at Clinton. There the sun came out cheerily and brightly as though glad enough to see the face of the earth — and she looked up cheerily and brightly, smiling through tears, as though glad enough to get out of her moods and to see the face of the sun, never caring that he was at the same time coquetting with a score or more of other planets . . . Clinton and Lyons are upon the Iowa side, three or four miles apart . . . You take in both towns and the whole of the plateau at one sweep of the eye; it is a site for one large town, not for two little ones, and in the future when the large town shall

be there, Clinton and Lyons, the upper and lower suburbs of it, will find only matter for amusing recollection in their present serious rivalry."

Then on northward along the Father of Waters. "The memory of that evening boat-ride, approaching Dubuque is so pleasant to us, that if with our blunt lead pencil we could reproduce the tranquil beauty of the river, as we caught glimpses of it through opening vistas of green trees, where it ran miles above us amid low wooded islands, with the constantly attending green cliffs to the one hand; the clouds silver, and purple and gold, in the rays of the sun that had disappeared to us, and painting the waters in a line ahead of us with the mild reflection of their own various hues — if we could reproduce this in pencil-picture most distantly resembling the scene itself we would delay your approach to Dubuque."

Thus with word pictures, Mr. Clark continued to describe the Upper Mississippi — "a river with a pedigree", a river which "has written in the rock tables along shore its geological history."

Onward up the river! "Saint Paul", Clark said, "is a pretty little city of twenty thousand inhabitants, or thereabouts", built upon "a bed of the handsomest building stone, apart from marble, to be found in this country" — a new city "of wood or stone, or seldomer brick with no torn down, old

or racked buildings anywhere about it." Mr. Clark looked with disapproval upon the name which had been selected for the capital city, with all its newness and beauty. "Why call it Saint Paul", he questioned. "A very respectable, godly and much esteemed ancient" was the Apostle Paul, he said, but "is that any reason why Minnesota, abounding, as it does, in its Indian vocabulary, with the softest, and prettiest and most euphonious of native names" should call its capital city for any Saint, "ancient or modern"?

By the time Clark had returned to Keokuk, readers of the *Gate City* were no longer in doubt about the beauties of the Upper Mississippi. Nor was there any doubt about the ability of Sam. M. Clark to portray in word pictures the beauties which he saw all about him. He was widely recognized as a man of rare ability in his chosen field.

But Clark was more than a maker of phrases. He was a man of courage and conviction, not failing to express his views on local or national issues. In politics, he was a staunch Republican, yet party politics, as such, was not the determining factor in his attitude on public affairs. "Personal differences there will be", he said, "some will be Republicans and some will be Democrats; there will be adherents of different creeds and policies, but all should be champion for each and each for all, the

right to that diversity of belief, and the work of all should be to make the government the most beneficent possible, for North and South, for East and West, alike". Again he said: "I think the true end of government is to help every soul to live the best and noblest life possible to it. To help every man and woman to do this, they must be left free."

He believed that governments must be progressive and that their benefits should be of long duration. "All Progress is along one line", he said, "and God has a single purpose through it all. The battles you have fought, the victories you have won, are not for yourselves alone, nor for the present time, but for all peoples and every generation. They are an indispensable term in the world's future development. That future cannot be other than your debtor. Your faithfulness and constancy to Human Rights . . . shall further the coming of that time:

"When the war drum throbs no longer, and
the battle flags are furled

In the Parliament of man — the Federation
of the world;

When the common sense of most shall hold
the fretful realms in awe,

And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in
universal law."

Clark's editorial work on the *Keokuk Gate City* covered a period of thirty-two years from 1868 to the end of his career, in August, 1900. Happy is the man who finds his chief joy in his work. This was eminently true of Mr. Clark. "Able and always interesting in the discussion of politics, economics, education, science, art, poetry, philosophy and mythology, he made his page a banquet of food for the mind." He was bold, original, and independent in his thinking and writing, a journalist rather than a newspaper publisher. Much of his writing was done at home and men are said to have worked for the paper for some time without seeing him at the office.

One of his biographers has said: "He must have read Ruskin's 'Sesame and Lilies' for he was a literary miner, digging for the meanings of words". Some of his editorial admirers called him "the master stylist of the Iowa press". Others frequently referred to him as the Dean of Iowa Editors, and one young editorial writer expressed the view that he "would gladly give five years of his life to be able to think and to write like Sam Clark".

Mr. Clark was domestically inclined. A lover of the quietude and serenity of home, he married Kate Avery Farrar, a native of New York, in Keokuk, June 3, 1868. Their married life is re-

ported to have been one of "blissful happiness", and Mr. Clark never quite recovered from the sadness of her death on November 2, 1885. To this union one child — Arthur Farrar Clark — was born, to inherit the richness and blessings that come from a happy home and many friends.

Interested always in public welfare, Samuel Mercer Clark devoted much time and energy to his duties as a good citizen. He prized most highly the work which he did as a member of the Keokuk Board of Education for twenty-one years, 1877-1898, serving as president of the board for fourteen years. In 1883 he received every vote cast for his position on the board. He was a firm believer in the beneficent power of the public school, and followed every phase of its activity.

Always active in Republican politics, he was three times chosen a member of the Iowa delegation to national convention, serving in 1872, 1876, and 1880. It is said that he attended every Republican State convention except one, from 1864 to 1900, and that he frequently played a major role in writing the Republican State platforms.

In 1889, he was United States Commissioner of Education at the Paris Exposition. From 1895 to 1899, Mr. Clark was a member of Congress, representing the first Iowa district in the fifty-fourth and fifty-fifth Congresses. During this time, he

did excellent work as a member of the committees on education, and post offices and post roads. He also served as postmaster at Keokuk for several terms.

Mr. Clark was sometimes called an agnostic, but he himself told a young man who was with him shortly before he died: "I claim to be a believer. The life of Jesus has been an inspiration to me; but because my mind could not grasp the dogmas that were put before it, I have been fenced by them without the enclosure. My Christianity is satisfactory to me, and if my end should come I go satisfied. This has been a beautiful world, and though I have suffered much, I go satisfied." His religion was to live the good life among his fellows each day.

Clark died on August 11, 1900, at the age of fifty-eight, far short of the goal of three score years and ten, but the amount of his work was noteworthy, and his editorial record is a rich heritage for Iowa editors of today. "With a body delicate and pain-racked like that of Robert Louis Stevenson, he possessed a similar golden mind and the same indomitable spirit. Triumphant over his physical handicaps, he made his life and labor inspiring to us all."

JACOB A. SWISHER