

Sketches New and Old, Part 2. eBook

Sketches New and Old, Part 2. by Mark Twain

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SKETCHES NEW AND OLD

by Mark Twain

Part 2.

Answers to correspondents—[Written about 1865.]

“Moral statistician.”—I don’t want any of your statistics; I took your whole batch and lit my pipe with it. I hate your kind of people. You are always ciphering out how much a man’s health is injured, and how much his intellect is impaired, and how many pitiful dollars and cents he wastes in the course of ninety-two years’ indulgence in the fatal practice of smoking; and in the equally fatal practice of drinking coffee; and in playing billiards occasionally; and in taking a glass of wine at dinner, *etc., etc., etc.* And you are always figuring out how many women have been burned to death because of the dangerous fashion of wearing expansive hoops, *etc., etc., etc.* You never see more than one side of the question. You are blind to the fact that most old men in America smoke and drink coffee, although, according to your theory, they ought to have died young; and that hearty old Englishmen drink wine and survive it, and portly old Dutchmen both drink and smoke freely, and yet grow older and fatter all the time. And you never by to find out how much solid comfort, relaxation, and enjoyment a man derives from smoking in the course of a lifetime (which is worth ten times the money he would save by letting it alone), nor the appalling aggregate of happiness lost in a lifetime your kind of people from not smoking. Of course you can save money by denying yourself all the little vicious enjoyments for fifty years; but then what can you do with it? What use can you put it to? Money can’t save your infinitesimal soul. All the use that money can be put to is to purchase comfort and enjoyment in this life; therefore, as you are an enemy to comfort and enjoyment, where is the use of accumulating cash? It won’t do for you say that you can use it to better purpose in furnishing a good table, and in charities, and in supporting tract societies, because you know yourself that you people who have no petty vices are never known to give away a cent, and that you stint yourselves so in the matter of food that you are always feeble and hungry. And you never dare to laugh in the daytime for fear some poor wretch, seeing you in a good humor, will try to borrow a dollar of you; and in church you are always down on your knees, with your eyes buried in the cushion, when the contribution-box comes around; and you never give the revenue officer: full statement of your income. Now you know these things yourself, don’t you? Very well, then what is the use of your stringing out your miserable lives to a lean and withered old age? What is the use of your saving money that is so utterly worthless to you? In a word, why don’t you go off somewhere and die, and not be always trying to seduce



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people into becoming as “ornery” and unlovable as you are yourselves, by your villainous “moral statistics”? Now I don’t approve of dissipation, and I don’t indulge in it, either; but I haven’t a particle of confidence in a man who has no redeeming petty vices, and so I don’t want to hear from you any more. I think you are the very same man who read me a long lecture last week about the degrading vice of smoking cigars, and then came back, in my absence, with your reprehensible fireproof gloves on, and carried off my beautiful parlor stove.

“*Young author.*”—Yes, Agassiz does recommend authors to eat fish, because the phosphorus in it makes brain. So far you are correct. But I cannot help you to a decision about the amount you need to eat—at least, not with certainty. If the specimen composition you send is about your fair usual average, I should judge that perhaps a couple of whales would be all you would want for the present. Not the largest kind, but simply good, middling-sized whales.

“*Simon Wheeler,*” Sonora.—The following simple and touching remarks and accompanying poem have just come to hand from the rich gold-mining region of Sonora:

To Mr. Mark Twain: The within parson, which I have set to poetry under the name and style of “He Done His Level Best,” was one among the whitest men I ever see, and it ain’t every man that knowed him that can find it in his heart to say he’s glad the poor cuss is busted and gone home to the States. He was here in an early day, and he was the handiest man about takin’ holt of anything that come along you most ever see, I judge. He was a cheerful, stirnn’ cretur, always doin’ somethin’, and no man can say he ever see him do anything by halvers. Preachin was his nateral gait, but he warn’t a man to lay back a twidle his thumbs because there didn’t happen to be nothin’ do in his own especial line—no, sir, he was a man who would meander forth and stir up something for hisself. His last acts was to go his pile on “Kings-and” (calkatin’ to fill, but which he didn’t fill), when there was a “flush” out agin him, and naterally, you see, he went under. And so he was cleaned out as you may say, and he struck the home-trail, cheerful but flat broke. I knowed this talonted man in Arkansaw, and if you would print this humbly tribute to his gorgis abilities, you would greatly obleegee his onhappy friend.

*Hedone his level best
Was he a mining on the flat—
He done it with a zest;
Was he a leading of the choir—
He done his level best.*

*If he’d a reg’lar task to do,
He never took no rest;*



Or if 'twas off-and-on-the same—
He done his level best.

If he was preachin' on his beat,
He'd tramp from east to west,
And north to south-in cold and heat
He done his level best.



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He'd yank a sinner outen (Hades),**
And land him with the blest;
Then snatch a prayer'n waltz in again,
And do his level best.

**Here I have taken a slight liberty with the original *Ms.* "Hades" does not make such good meter as the other word of one syllable, but it sounds better.

He'd cuss and sing and howl and pray,
And dance and drink and jest,
And lie and steal—all one to him—
He done his level best.

Whate'er this man was sot to do,
He done it with a zest;
No matter what his contract was,
he'd do his level best.

Verily, this man was gifted with "gorgis abilities," and it is a happiness to me to embalm the memory of their luster in these columns. If it were not that the poet crop is unusually large and rank in California this year, I would encourage you to continue writing, Simon Wheeler; but, as it is, perhaps it might be too risky in you to enter against so much opposition.

"*Professional beggar.*"—*No*; you are not obliged to take greenbacks at par.

"*Melton Mowbray,*" Dutch Flat.—This correspondent sends a lot of doggerel, and says it has been regarded as very good in Dutch Flat. I give a specimen verse:

The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming with purple and gold;
And the sheen of his spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.**

**This piece of pleasantry, published in a San Francisco paper, was mistaken by the country journals for seriousness, and many and loud were the denunciations of the ignorance of author and editor, in not knowing that the lines in question were "written by Byron."

There, that will do. That may be very good Dutch Flat poetry, but it won't do in the metropolis. It is too smooth and blubbery; it reads like butter milk gurgling from a jug. What the people ought to have is something spirited—something like "Johnny Comes



Marching Home.” However keep on practising, and you may succeed yet. There is genius in you, but too much blubber.

“*St. Clair Higgins.*” Los Angeles.—“My life is a failure; I have adored, wildly, madly, and she whom I love has turned coldly from me and shed her affections upon another. What would you advise me to do?”

You should set your affections on another also—or on several, if there are enough to go round. Also, do everything you can to make your former flame unhappy. There is an absurd idea disseminated in novels, that the happier a girl is with another man, the happier it makes the old lover she has blighted. Don’t allow yourself to believe any such nonsense as that. The more cause that girl finds to regret that she did not marry you, the more comfortable you will feel over it. It isn’t poetical, but it is mighty sound doctrine.



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“ARITHMETICUS.” Virginia, Nevada.—“If it would take a cannon-ball 3 and $\frac{1}{3}$ seconds to travel four miles, and 3 and $\frac{3}{8}$ seconds to travel the next four, and 3 and $\frac{5}{8}$ to travel the next four, and if its rate of progress continued to diminish in the same ratio, how long would it take it to go fifteen hundred million miles?”

I don't know.

“*Ambitious learner*,” Oakland.—Yes; you are right America was not discovered by Alexander Selkirk.

“*Discarded lover*.”—“I loved, and still love, the beautiful Edwitha Howard, and intended to marry her. Yet, during my temporary absence at Benicia, last week, alas! she married Jones. Is my happiness to be thus blasted for life? Have I no redress?”

Of course you have. All the law, written and unwritten, is on your side. The intention and not the act constitutes crime—in other words, constitutes the deed. If you call your bosom friend a fool, and intend it for an insult, it is an insult; but if you do it playfully, and meaning no insult, it is not an insult. If you discharge a pistol accidentally, and kill a man, you can go free, for you have done no murder; but if you try to kill a man, and manifestly intend to kill him, but fail utterly to do it, the law still holds that the intention constituted the crime, and you are guilty of murder. Ergo, if you had married Edwitha accidentally, and without really intending to do it, you would not actually be married to her at all, because the act of marriage could not be complete without the intention. And ergo, in the strict spirit of the law, since you deliberately intended to marry Edwitha, and didn't do it, you are married to her all the same—because, as I said before, the intention constitutes the crime. It is as clear as day that Edwitha is your wife, and your redress lies in taking a club and mutilating Jones with it as much as you can. Any man has a right to protect his own wife from the advances of other men. But you have another alternative—you were married to Edwitha first, because of your deliberate intention, and now you can prosecute her for bigamy, in subsequently marrying Jones. But there is another phase in this complicated case: You intended to marry Edwitha, and consequently, according to law, she is your wife—there is no getting around that; but she didn't marry you, and if she never intended to marry you, you are not her husband, of course. Ergo, in marrying Jones, she was guilty of bigamy, because she was the wife of another man at the time; which is all very well as far as it goes—but then, don't you see, she had no other husband when she married Jones, and consequently she was not guilty of bigamy. Now, according to this view of the case, Jones married a spinster, who was a widow at the same time and another man's wife at the same time, and yet who had no husband and never had one, and never had any intention of getting married,

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and therefore, of course, never had been married; and by the same reasoning you are a bachelor, because you have never been any one's husband; and a married man, because you have a wife living; and to all intents and purposes a widower, because you have been deprived of that wife; and a consummate ass for going off to Benicia in the first place, while things were so mixed. And by this time I have got myself so tangled up in the intricacies of this extraordinary case that I shall have to give up any further attempt to advise you—I might get confused and fail to make myself understood. I think I could take up the argument where I left off, and by following it closely awhile, perhaps I could prove to your satisfaction, either that you never existed at all, or that you are dead now, and consequently don't need the faithless Edwitha—I think I could do that, if it would afford you any comfort.

“Arthur Augustus.”—No; you are wrong; that is the proper way to throw a brickbat or a tomahawk; but it doesn't answer so well for a bouquet; you will hurt somebody if you keep it up. Turn your nosegay upside down, take it by the stems, and toss it with an upward sweep. Did you ever pitch quoits? that is the idea. The practice of recklessly heaving immense solid bouquets, of the general size and weight of prize cabbages, from the dizzy altitude of the galleries, is dangerous and very reprehensible. Now, night before last, at the Academy of Music, just after Signorina had finished that exquisite melody, “The Last Rose of Summer,” one of these floral pile-drivers came cleaving down through the atmosphere of applause, and if she hadn't deployed suddenly to the right, it would have driven her into the floor like a shinglenail. Of course that bouquet was well meant; but how would you like to have been the target? A sincere compliment is always grateful to a lady, so long as you don't try to knock her down with it.

“Young mother.”—And so you think a baby is a thing of beauty and a joy forever? Well, the idea is pleasing, but not original; every cow thinks the same of its own calf. Perhaps the cow may not think it so elegantly, but still she thinks it nevertheless. I honor the cow for it. We all honor this touching maternal instinct wherever we find it, be it in the home of luxury or in the humble cow-shed. But really, madam, when I come to examine the matter in all its bearings, I find that the correctness of your assertion does not assert itself in all cases. A soiled baby, with a neglected nose, cannot be conscientiously regarded as a thing of beauty; and inasmuch as babyhood spans but three short years, no baby is competent to be a joy “forever.” It pains me thus to demolish two-thirds of your pretty sentiment in a single sentence; but the position I hold in this chair requires that I shall not permit you to deceive and mislead the public with your plausible figures of speech. I know a female baby, aged eighteen



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months, in this city, which cannot hold out as a “joy” twenty-four hours on a stretch, let alone “forever.” And it possesses some of the most remarkable eccentricities of character and appetite that have ever fallen under my notice. I will set down here a statement of this infant’s operations (conceived, planned, and earned out by itself, and without suggestion or assistance from its mother or any one else), during a single day; and what I shall say can be substantiated by the sworn testimony of witnesses.

It commenced by eating one dozen large blue-mass pills, box and all; then it fell down a flight of stairs, and arose with a blue and purple knot on its forehead, after which it proceeded in quest of further refreshment and amusement. It found a glass trinket ornamented with brass-work —smashed up and ate the glass, and then swallowed the brass. Then it drank about twenty drops of laudanum, and more than a dozen tablespoonfuls of strong spirits of camphor. The reason why it took no more laudanum was because there was no more to take. After this it lay down on its back, and shoved five or six, inches of a silver-headed whalebone cane down its throat; got it fast there, and it was all its mother could do to pull the cane out again, without pulling out some of the child with it. Then, being hungry for glass again, it broke up several wine glasses, and fell to eating and swallowing the fragments, not minding a cut or two. Then it ate a quantity of butter, pepper, salt, and California matches, actually taking a spoonful of butter, a spoonful of salt, a spoonful of pepper, and three or four lucifer matches at each mouthful. (I will remark here that this thing of beauty likes painted German lucifers, and eats all she can get of them; but she prefers California matches, which I regard as a compliment to our home manufactures of more than ordinary value, coming, as it does, from one who is too young to flatter.) Then she washed her head with soap and water, and afterward ate what soap was left, and drank as much of the suds as she had room for; after which she sallied forth and took the cow familiarly by the tail, and got kicked heels over head. At odd times during the day, when this joy forever happened to have nothing particular on hand, she put in the time by climbing up on places, and falling down off them, uniformly damaging her self in the operation. As young as she is, she speaks many words tolerably distinctly; and being plain spoken in other respects, blunt and to the point, she opens conversation with all strangers, male or female, with the same formula, “How do, Jim?”



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Not being familiar with the ways of children, it is possible that I have been magnifying into matter of surprise things which may not strike any one who is familiar with infancy as being at all astonishing. However, I cannot believe that such is the case, and so I repeat that my report of this baby's performances is strictly true; and if any one doubts it, I can produce the child. I will further engage that she will devour anything that is given her (reserving to myself only the right to exclude anvils), and fall down from any place to which she may be elevated (merely stipulating that her preference for alighting on her head shall be respected, and, therefore, that the elevation chosen shall be high enough to enable her to accomplish this to her satisfaction). But I find I have wandered from my subject; so, without further argument, I will reiterate my conviction that not all babies are things of beauty and joys forever.

"ARITHMETICUS." Virginia, Nevada.—"I am an enthusiastic student of mathematics, and it is so vexatious to me to find my progress constantly impeded by these mysterious arithmetical technicalities. Now do tell me what the difference is between geometry and conchology?"

Here you come again with your arithmetical conundrums, when I am suffering death with a cold in the head. If you could have seen the expression of scorn that darkened my countenance a moment ago, and was instantly split from the center in every direction like a fractured looking-glass by my last sneeze, you never would have written that disgraceful question. Conchology is a science which has nothing to do with mathematics; it relates only to shells. At the same time, however, a man who opens oysters for a hotel, or shells a fortified town, or sucks eggs, is not, strictly speaking, a conchologist—a fine stroke of sarcasm that, but it will be lost on such an unintellectual clam as you. Now compare conchology and geometry together, and you will see what the difference is, and your question will be answered. But don't torture me with any more arithmetical horrors until you know I am rid of my cold. I feel the bitterest animosity toward you at this moment—bothering me in this way, when I can do nothing but sneeze and rage and snort pocket-handkerchiefs to atoms. If I had you in range of my nose now I would blow your brains out.

TO RAISE POULTRY

—[Being a letter written to a Poultry Society that had conferred a complimentary membership upon the author. Written about 1870.]



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Seriously, from early youth I have taken an especial interest in the subject of poultry-raising, and so this membership touches a ready sympathy in my breast. Even as a schoolboy, poultry-raising was a study with me, and I may say without egotism that as early as the age of seventeen I was acquainted with all the best and speediest methods of raising chickens, from raising them off a roost by burning lucifer matches under their noses, down to lifting them off a fence on a frosty night by insinuating the end of a warm board under their heels. By the time I was twenty years old, I really suppose I had raised more poultry than any one individual in all the section round about there. The very chickens came to know my talent by and by. The youth of both sexes ceased to paw the earth for worms, and old roosters that came to crow, "remained to pray," when I passed by.

I have had so much experience in the raising of fowls that I cannot but think that a few hints from me might be useful to the society. The two methods I have already touched upon are very simple, and are only used in the raising of the commonest class of fowls; one is for summer, the other for winter. In the one case you start out with a friend along about eleven o'clock' on a summer's night (not later, because in some states — especially in California and Oregon—chickens always rouse up just at midnight and crow from ten to thirty minutes, according to the ease or difficulty they experience in getting the public waked up), and your friend carries with him a sack. Arrived at the henroost (your neighbor's, not your own), you light a match and hold it under first one and then another pullet's nose until they are willing to go into that bag without making any trouble about it. You then return home, either taking the bag with you or leaving it behind, according as circumstances shall dictate. N. B.—I have seen the time when it was eligible and appropriate to leave the sack behind and walk off with considerable velocity, without ever leaving any word where to send it.

In the case of the other method mentioned for raising poultry, your friend takes along a covered vessel with a charcoal fire in it, and you carry a long slender plank. This is a frosty night, understand. Arrived at the tree, or fence, or other henroost (your own if you are an idiot), you warm the end of your plank in your friend's fire vessel, and then raise it aloft and ease it up gently against a slumbering chicken's foot. If the subject of your attentions is a true bird, he will infallibly return thanks with a sleepy cluck or two, and step out and take up quarters on the plank, thus becoming so conspicuously accessory before the fact to his own murder as to make it a grave question in our minds as it once was in the mind of Blackstone, whether he is not really and deliberately, committing suicide in the second degree. [But you enter into a contemplation of these legal refinements subsequently not then.]

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When you wish to raise a fine, large, donkey voiced Shanghai rooster, you do it with a lasso, just as you would a bull. It is because he must choked, and choked effectually, too. It is the only good, certain way, for whenever he mentions a matter which he is cordially interested in, the chances are ninety-nine in a hundred that he secures somebody else's immediate attention to it too, whether it day or night.

The Black Spanish is an exceedingly fine bird and a costly one. Thirty-five dollars is the usual figure and fifty a not uncommon price for a specimen. Even its eggs are worth from a dollar to a dollar and a half apiece, and yet are so unwholesome that the city physician seldom or never orders them for the workhouse. Still I have once or twice procured as high as a dozen at a time for nothing, in the dark of the moon. The best way to raise the Black Spanish fowl is to go late in the evening and raise coop and all. The reason I recommend this method is that, the birds being so valuable, the owners do not permit them to roost around promiscuously, they put them in a coop as strong as a fireproof safe and keep it in the kitchen at night. The method I speak of is not always a bright and satisfying success, and yet there are so many little articles of vertu about a kitchen, that if you fail on the coop you can generally bring away something else. I brought away a nice steel trap one night, worth ninety cents.

But what is the use in my pouring out my whole intellect on this subject? I have shown the Western New York Poultry Society that they have taken to their bosom a party who is not a spring chicken by any means, but a man who knows all about poultry, and is just as high up in the most efficient methods of raising it as the president of the institution himself. I thank these gentlemen for the honorary membership they have conferred upon me, and shall stand at all times ready and willing to testify my good feeling and my official zeal by deeds as well as by this hastily penned advice and information. Whenever they are ready to go to raising poultry, let them call for me any evening after eleven o'clock.

EXPERIENCE OF THE McWILLIAMSES WITH MEMBRANOUS CROUP

[As related to the author of this book by Mr. McWilliams, a pleasant New York gentleman whom the said author met by chance on a journey.]

Well, to go back to where I was before I digressed to explain to you how that frightful and incurable disease, membranous croup,[Diphtheria D.W.] was ravaging the town and driving all mothers mad with terror, I called Mrs. McWilliams's attention to little Penelope, and said:

"Darling, I wouldn't let that child be chewing that pine stick if I were you."

“Precious, where is the harm in it?” said she, but at the same time preparing to take away the stick for women cannot receive even the most palpably judicious suggestion without arguing it, that is married women.



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I replied:

“Love, it is notorious that pine is the least nutritious wood that a child can eat.”

My wife’s hand paused, in the act of taking the stick, and returned itself to her lap. She bridled perceptibly, and said:

“Hubby, you know better than that. You know you do. Doctors all say that the turpentine in pine wood is good for weak back and the kidneys.”

“Ah—I was under a misapprehension. I did not know that the child’s kidneys and spine were affected, and that the family physician had recommended—”

“Who said the child’s spine and kidneys were affected?”

“My love, you intimated it.”

“The idea! I never intimated anything of the kind.”

“Why, my dear, it hasn’t been two minutes since you said—”

“Bother what I said! I don’t care what I did say. There isn’t any harm in the child’s chewing a bit of pine stick if she wants to, and you know it perfectly well. And she shall chew it, too. So there, now!”

“Say no more, my dear. I now see the force of your reasoning, and I will go and order two or three cords of the best pine wood to-day. No child of mine shall want while I—”

“Oh, please go along to your office and let me have some peace. A body can never make the simplest remark but you must take it up and go to arguing and arguing and arguing till you don’t know what you are talking about, and you never do.”

“Very well, it shall be as you say. But there is a want of logic in your last remark which —”

However, she was gone with a flourish before I could finish, and had taken the child with her. That night at dinner she confronted me with a face a white as a sheet:

“Oh, Mortimer, there’s another! Little Georgi Gordon is taken.”

“Membranous croup?”

“Membranous croup.”

“Is there any hope for him?”



“None in the wide world. Oh, what is to be come of us!”

By and by a nurse brought in our Penelope to say good night and offer the customary prayer at the mother’s knee. In the midst of “Now I lay me down to sleep,” she gave a slight cough! My wife fell back like one stricken with death. But the next moment she was up and brimming with the activities which terror inspires.

She commanded that the child’s crib be removed from the nursery to our bedroom; and she went along to see the order executed. She took me with her, of course. We got matters arranged with speed. A cot-bed was put up in my wife’s dressing room for the nurse. But now Mrs. McWilliams said we were too far away from the other baby, and what if he were to have the symptoms in the night—and she blanched again, poor thing.

We then restored the crib and the nurse to the nursery and put up a bed for ourselves in a room adjoining.

Presently, however, Mrs. McWilliams said suppose the baby should catch it from Penelope? This thought struck a new panic to her heart, and the tribe of us could not get the crib out of the nursery again fast enough to satisfy my wife, though she assisted in her own person and well-nigh pulled the crib to pieces in her frantic hurry.



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We moved down-stairs; but there was no place there to stow the nurse, and Mrs. McWilliams said the nurse's experience would be an inestimable help. So we returned, bag and baggage, to our own bedroom once more, and felt a great gladness, like storm-buffed birds that have found their nest again.

Mrs. McWilliams sped to the nursery to see how things were going on there. She was back in a moment with a new dread. She said:

"What can make Baby sleep so?"

I said:

"Why, my darling, Baby always sleeps like a graven image."

"I know. I know; but there's something peculiar about his sleep now. He seems to—to—he seems to breathe so regularly. Oh, this is dreadful."

"But, my dear, he always breathes regularly."

"Oh, I know it, but there's something frightful about it now. His nurse is too young and inexperienced. Maria shall stay there with her, and be on hand if anything happens."

"That is a good idea, but who will help you?"

"You can help me all I want. I wouldn't allow anybody to do anything but myself, anyhow, at such a time as this."

I said I would feel mean to lie abed and sleep, and leave her to watch and toil over our little patient all the weary night. But she reconciled me to it. So old Maria departed and took up her ancient quarters in the nursery.

Penelope coughed twice in her sleep.

"Oh, why don't that doctor come! Mortimer, this room is too warm. This room is certainly too warm. Turn off the register-quick!"

I shut it off, glancing at the thermometer at the same time, and wondering to myself if 70 was too warm for a sick child.

The coachman arrived from down-town now with the news that our physician was ill and confined to his bed. Mrs. McWilliams turned a dead eye upon me, and said in a dead voice:

"There is a Providence in it. It is foreordained. He never was sick before. Never. We have not been living as we ought to live, Mortimer. Time and time again I have told you



so. Now you see the result. Our child will never get well. Be thankful if you can forgive yourself; I never can forgive myself.”

I said, without intent to hurt, but with heedless choice of words, that I could not see that we had been living such an abandoned life.

“Mortimer! Do you want to bring the judgment upon Baby, too!”

Then she began to cry, but suddenly exclaimed:

“The doctor must have sent medicines!”

I said:

“Certainly. They are here. I was only waiting for you to give me a chance.”

“Well do give them to me! Don’t you know that every moment is precious now? But what was the use in sending medicines, when he knows that the disease is incurable?”

I said that while there was life there was hope.

“Hope! Mortimer, you know no more what you are talking about than the child unborn. If you would—As I live, the directions say give one teaspoonful once an hour! Once an hour!—as if we had a whole year before us to save the child in! Mortimer, please hurry. Give the poor perishing thing a tablespoonful, and try to be quick!”



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“Why, my dear, a tablespoonful might—”

“Don’t drive me frantic! . . . There, there, there, my precious, my own; it’s nasty bitter stuff, but it’s good for Nelly—good for mother’s precious darling; and it will make her well. There, there, there, put the little head on mamma’s breast and go to sleep, and pretty soon—oh, I know she can’t live till morning! Mortimer, a tablespoonful every half-hour will—Oh, the child needs belladonna, too; I know she does—and aconite. Get them, Mortimer. Now do let me have my way. You know nothing about these things.”

We now went to bed, placing the crib close to my wife’s pillow. All this turmoil had worn upon me, and within two minutes I was something more than half asleep. Mrs. McWilliams roused me:

“Darling, is that register turned on?”

“No.”

“I thought as much. Please turn it on at once. This room is cold.”

I turned it on, and presently fell asleep again. I was aroused once more:

“Dearie, would you mind moving the crib to your side of the bed? It is nearer the register.”

I moved it, but had a collision with the rug and woke up the child. I dozed off once more, while my wife quieted the sufferer. But in a little while these words came murmuring remotely through the fog of my drowsiness:

“Mortimer, if we only had some goose grease—will you ring?”

I climbed dreamily out, and stepped on a cat, which responded with a protest and would have got a convincing kick for it if a chair had not got it instead.

“Now, Mortimer, why do you want to turn up the gas and wake up the child again?”

“Because I want to see how much I am hurt, Caroline.”

“Well, look at the chair, too—I have no doubt it is ruined. Poor cat, suppose you had—”

“Now I am not going to suppose anything about the cat. It never would have occurred if Maria had been allowed to remain here and attend to these duties, which are in her line and are not in mine.”



“Now, Mortimer, I should think you would be ashamed to make a remark like that. It is a pity if you cannot do the few little things I ask of you at such an awful time as this when our child—”

“There, there, I will do anything you want. But I can’t raise anybody with this bell. They’re all gone to bed. Where is the goose grease?”

“On the mantelpiece in the nursery. If you’ll step there and speak to Maria—”

I fetched the goose grease and went to sleep again. Once more I was called:

“Mortimer, I so hate to disturb you, but the room is still too cold for me to try to apply this stuff. Would you mind lighting the fire? It is all ready to touch a match to.”

I dragged myself out and lit the fire, and then sat down disconsolate.

“Mortimer, don’t sit there and catch your death of cold. Come to bed.”



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As I was stepping in she said:

“But wait a moment. Please give the child some more of the medicine.”

Which I did. It was a medicine which made a child more or less lively; so my wife made use of its waking interval to strip it and grease it all over with the goose oil. I was soon asleep once more, but once more I had to get up.

“Mortimer, I feel a draft. I feel it distinctly. There is nothing so bad for this disease as a draft. Please move the crib in front of the fire.”

I did it; and collided with the rug again, which I threw in the fire. Mrs. McWilliams sprang out of bed and rescued it and we had some words. I had another trifling interval of sleep, and then got up, by request, and constructed a flax-seed poultice. This was placed upon the child's breast and left there to do its healing work.

A wood-fire is not a permanent thing. I got up every twenty minutes and renewed ours, and this gave Mrs. McWilliams the opportunity to shorten the times of giving the medicines by ten minutes, which was a great satisfaction to her. Now and then, between times, I reorganized the flax-seed poultices, and applied sinapisms and other sorts of blisters where unoccupied places could be found upon the child. Well, toward morning the wood gave out and my wife wanted me to go down cellar and get some more. I said:

“My dear, it is a laborious job, and the child must be nearly warm enough, with her extra clothing. Now mightn't we put on another layer of poultices and—”

I did not finish, because I was interrupted. I lugged wood up from below for some little time, and then turned in and fell to snoring as only a man can whose strength is all gone and whose soul is worn out. Just at broad daylight I felt a grip on my shoulder that brought me to my senses suddenly. My wife was glaring down upon me and gasping. As soon as she could command her tongue she said:

“It is all over! All over! The child's perspiring! What shall we do?”

“Mercy, how you terrify me! I don't know what we ought to do. Maybe if we scraped her and put her in the draft again—”

“Oh, idiot! There is not a moment to lose! Go for the doctor. Go yourself. Tell him he must come, dead or alive.”

I dragged that poor sick man from his bed and brought him. He looked at the child and said she was not dying. This was joy unspeakable to me, but it made my wife as mad as if he had offered her a personal affront. Then he said the child's cough was only caused by some trifling irritation or other in the throat. At this I thought my wife had a



mind to show him the door. Now the doctor said he would make the child cough harder and dislodge the trouble. So he gave her something that sent her into a spasm of coughing, and presently up came a little wood splinter or so.

“This child has no membranous croup,” said he. “She has been chewing a bit of pine shingle or something of the kind, and got some little slivers in her throat. They won’t do her any hurt.”



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“No,” said I, “I can well believe that. Indeed, the turpentine that is in them is very good for certain sorts of diseases that are peculiar to children. My wife will tell you so.”

But she did not. She turned away in disdain and left the room; and since that time there is one episode in our life which we never refer to. Hence the tide of our days flows by in deep and untroubled serenity.

[Very few married men have such an experience as McWilliams’s, and so the author of this book thought that maybe the novelty of it would give it a passing interest to the reader.]

MY FIRST LITERARY VENTURE

I was a very smart child at the age of thirteen—an unusually smart child, I thought at the time. It was then that I did my first newspaper scribbling, and most unexpectedly to me it stirred up a fine sensation in the community. It did, indeed, and I was very proud of it, too. I was a printer’s “devil,” and a progressive and aspiring one. My uncle had me on his paper (the Weekly Hannibal journal, two dollars a year in advance —five hundred subscribers, and they paid in cordwood, cabbages, and unmarketable turnips), and on a lucky summer’s day he left town to be gone a week, and asked me if I thought I could edit one issue of the paper judiciously. Ah! didn’t I want to try! Higgins was the editor on the rival paper. He had lately been jilted, and one night a friend found an open note on the poor fellow’s bed, in which he stated that he could not longer endure life and had drowned himself in Bear Creek. The friend ran down there and discovered Higgins wading back to shore. He had concluded he wouldn’t. The village was full of it for several days, but Higgins did not suspect it. I thought this was a fine opportunity. I wrote an elaborately wretched account of the whole matter, and then illustrated it with villainous cuts engraved on the bottoms of wooden type with a jackknife—one of them a picture of Higgins wading out into the creek in his shirt, with a lantern, sounding the depth of the water with a walking-stick. I thought it was desperately funny, and was densely unconscious that there was any moral obliquity about such a publication. Being satisfied with this effort I looked around for other worlds to conquer, and it struck me that it would make good, interesting matter to charge the editor of a neighboring country paper with a piece of gratuitous rascality and “see him squirm.”

I did it, putting the article into the form of a parody on the “Burial of Sir John Moore”—and a pretty crude parody it was, too.

Then I lampooned two prominent citizens outrageously—not because they had done anything to deserve, but merely because I thought it was my duty to make the paper lively.

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Next I gently touched up the newest stranger—the lion of the day, the gorgeous journeyman tailor from Quincy. He was a simpering coxcomb of the first water, and the “loudest” dressed man in the state. He was an inveterate woman-killer. Every week he wrote lushy “poetry” for the journal, about his newest conquest. His rhymes for my week were headed, “To *Mary in H—I*,” meaning to Mary in Hannibal, of course. But while setting up the piece I was suddenly riven from head to heel by what I regarded as a perfect thunderbolt of humor, and I compressed it into a snappy footnote at the bottom—thus: “We will let this thing pass, just this once; but we wish Mr. J. Gordon Runnels to understand distinctly that we have a character to sustain, and from this time forth when he wants to commune with his friends in h—I, he must select some other medium than the columns of this journal!”

The paper came out, and I never knew any little thing attract so much attention as those playful trifles of mine.

For once the Hannibal Journal was in demand—a novelty it had not experienced before. The whole town was stirred. Higgins dropped in with a double-barreled shotgun early in the forenoon. When he found that it was an infant (as he called me) that had done him the damage, he simply pulled my ears and went away; but he threw up his situation that night and left town for good. The tailor came with his goose and a pair of shears; but he despised me, too, and departed for the South that night. The two lampooned citizens came with threats of libel, and went away incensed at my insignificance. The country editor pranced in with a war-whoop next day, suffering for blood to drink; but he ended by forgiving me cordially and inviting me down to the drug store to wash away all animosity in a friendly bumper of “Fahnestock’s Vermifuge.” It was his little joke. My uncle was very angry when he got back—unreasonably so, I thought, considering what an impetus I had given the paper, and considering also that gratitude for his preservation ought to have been uppermost in his mind, inasmuch as by his delay he had so wonderfully escaped dissection, tomahawking, libel, and getting his head shot off.

But he softened when he looked at the accounts and saw that I had actually booked the unparalleled number of thirty-three new subscribers, and had the vegetables to show for it, cordwood, cabbage, beans, and unsalable turnips enough to run the family for two dears!

How the author was sold in Newark—[Written about 1869.]



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It is seldom pleasant to tell on oneself, but some times it is a sort of relief to a man to make a confession. I wish to unburden my mind now, and yet I almost believe that I am moved to do it more because I long to bring censure upon another man than because I desire to pour balm upon my wounded heart. (I don't know what balm is, but I believe it is the correct expression to use in this connection—never having seen any balm.) You may remember that I lectured in Newark lately for the young gentlemen of the---- Society? I did at any rate. During the afternoon of that day I was talking with one of the young gentlemen just referred to, and he said he had an uncle who, from some cause or other, seemed to have grown permanently bereft of all emotion. And with tears in his eyes, this young man said, "Oh, if I could only see him laugh once more! Oh, if I could only see him weep!" I was touched. I could never withstand distress.

I said: "Bring him to my lecture. I'll start him for you."

"Oh, if you could but do it! If you could but do it, all our family would bless you for evermore—for he is so very dear to us. Oh, my benefactor, can you make him laugh? can you bring soothing tears to those parched orbs?"

I was profoundly moved. I said: "My son, bring the old party round. I have got some jokes in that lecture that will make him laugh if there is any laugh in him; and if they miss fire, I have got some others that will make him cry or kill him, one or the other." Then the young man blessed me, and wept on my neck, and went after his uncle. He placed him in full view, in the second row of benches, that night, and I began on him. I tried him with mild jokes, then with severe ones; I dosed him with bad jokes and riddled him with good ones; I fired old stale jokes into him, and peppered him fore and aft with red-hot new ones; I warmed up to my work, and assaulted him on the right and left, in front and behind; I fumed and sweated and charged and ranted till I was hoarse and sick and frantic and furious; but I never moved him once—I never started a smile or a tear! Never a ghost of a smile, and never a suspicion of moisture! I was astounded. I closed the lecture at last with one despairing shriek—with one wild burst of humor, and hurled a joke of supernatural atrocity full at him!

Then I sat down bewildered and exhausted.

The president of the society came up and bathed my head with cold water, and said: "What made you carry on so toward the last?"

I said: "I was trying to make that confounded old fool laugh, in the second row."

And he said: "Well, you were wasting your time, because he is deaf and dumb, and as blind as a badger!"

Now, was that any way for that old man's nephew to impose on a stranger and orphan like me? I ask you as a man and brother, if that was any way for him to do?

The office bore—[Written about 1869]

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He arrives just as regularly as the clock strikes nine in the morning. And so he even beats the editor sometimes, and the porter must leave his work and climb two or three pairs of stairs to unlock the "Sanctum" door and let him in. He lights one of the office pipes—not reflecting, perhaps, that the editor may be one of those "stuck-up" people who would as soon have a stranger defile his tooth-brush as his pipe-stem. Then he begins to loll—for a person who can consent to loaf his useless life away in ignominious indolence has not the energy to sit up straight. He stretches full length on the sofa awhile; then draws up to half length; then gets into a chair, hangs his head back and his arms abroad, and stretches his legs till the rims of his boot-heels rest upon the floor; by and by sits up and leans forward, with one leg or both over the arm of the chair. But it is still observable that with all his changes of position, he never assumes the upright or a fraudulent affectation of dignity. From time to time he yawns, and stretches, and scratches himself with a tranquil, mangy enjoyment, and now and then he grunts a kind of stuffy, overfed grunt, which is full of animal contentment. At rare and long intervals, however, he sighs a sigh that is the eloquent expression of a secret confession, to wit "I am useless and a nuisance, a cumberer of the earth." The bore and his comrades—for there are usually from two to four on hand, day and night—mix into the conversation when men come in to see the editors for a moment on business; they hold noisy talks among themselves about politics in particular, and all other subjects in general—even warming up, after a fashion, sometimes, and seeming to take almost a real interest in what they are discussing. They ruthlessly call an editor from his work with such a remark as: "Did you see this, Smith, in the Gazette?" and proceed to read the paragraph while the sufferer reins in his impatient pen and listens; they often loll and sprawl round the office hour after hour, swapping anecdotes and relating personal experiences to each other—hairbreadth escapes, social encounters with distinguished men, election reminiscences, sketches of odd characters, *etc.* And through all those hours they never seem to comprehend that they are robbing the editors of their time, and the public of journalistic excellence in next day's paper. At other times they drowse, or dreamily pore over exchanges, or droop limp and pensive over the chair-arms for an hour. Even this solemn silence is small respite to the editor, for the next uncomfortable thing to having people look over his shoulders, perhaps, is to have them sit by in silence and listen to the scratching of his pen. If a body desires to talk private business with one of the editors, he must call him outside, for no hint milder than blasting-powder or nitroglycerin would be likely to move the bores out of listening-distance. To have to sit and endure



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the presence of a bore day after day; to feel your cheerful spirits begin to sink as his footstep sounds on the stair, and utterly vanish away as his tiresome form enters the door; to suffer through his anecdotes and die slowly to his reminiscences; to feel always the fetters of his clogging presence; to long hopelessly for one single day's privacy; to note with a shudder, by and by, that to contemplate his funeral in fancy has ceased to soothe, to imagine him undergoing in strict and fearful detail the tortures of the ancient Inquisition has lost its power to satisfy the heart, and that even to wish him millions and millions and millions of miles in Tophet is able to bring only a fitful gleam of joy; to have to endure all this, day after day, and week after week, and month after month, is an affliction that transcends any other that men suffer. Physical pain is pastime to it, and hanging a pleasure excursion.

JOHNNY GREER

“The church was densely crowded that lovely summer Sabbath,” said the Sunday-school superintendent, “and all, as their eyes rested upon the small coffin, seemed impressed by the poor black boy’s fate. Above the stillness the pastor’s voice rose, and chained the interest of every ear as he told, with many an envied compliment, how that the brave, noble, daring little Johnny Greer, when he saw the drowned body sweeping down toward the deep part of the river whence the agonized parents never could have recovered it in this world, gallantly sprang into the stream, and, at the risk of his life, towed the corpse to shore, and held it fast till help came and secured it. Johnny Greer was sitting just in front of me. A ragged street-boy, with eager eye, turned upon him instantly, and said in a hoarse whisper

“No; but did you, though?”

“Yes.’

“Towed the carkiss ashore and saved it yo’self?”

“Yes.’

“Cracky! What did they give you?”

“Nothing.’

“W-h-a-t [with intense disgust]! D’you know what I’d ‘a’ done? I’d ‘a’ anchored him out in the stream, and said, Five dollars, gents, or you carn’t have yo’ nigger.”

The facts in the case of the great beef contract—[Written about 1867.]



In as few words as possible I wish to lay before the nation what's here, howsoever small, I have had in this matter—this matter which has so exercised the public mind, engendered so much ill-feeling, and so filled the newspapers of both continents with distorted statements and extravagant comments.

The origin of this distressful thing was this—and I assert here that every fact in the following resume can be amply proved by the official records of the General Government.

John Wilson Mackenzie, of Rotterdam, Chemung County, New Jersey, deceased, contracted with the General Government, on or about the 10th day of October, 1861, to furnish to General Sherman the sum total of thirty barrels of beef.

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Very well.

He started after Sherman with the beef, but when he got to Washington Sherman had gone to Manassas; so he took the beef and followed him there, but arrived too late; he followed him to Nashville, and from Nashville to Chattanooga, and from Chattanooga to Atlanta—but he never could overtake him. At Atlanta he took a fresh start and followed him clear through his march to the sea. He arrived too late again by a few days; but hearing that Sherman was going out in the Quaker City excursion to the Holy Land, he took shipping for Beirut, calculating to head off the other vessel. When he arrived in Jerusalem with his beef, he learned that Sherman had not sailed in the Quaker City, but had gone to the Plains to fight the Indians. He returned to America and started for the Rocky Mountains. After sixty-eight days of arduous travel on the Plains, and when he had got within four miles of Sherman's headquarters, he was tomahawked and scalped, and the Indians got the beef. They got all of it but one barrel. Sherman's army captured that, and so, even in death, the bold navigator partly fulfilled his contract. In his will, which he had kept like a journal, he bequeathed the contract to his son Bartholomew W. Bartholomew W. made out the following bill, and then died:

The United states

In account with *John Wilson Mackenzie*, of New Jersey,
deceased, Dr.

To thirty barrels of beef for General Sherman, at \$100, \$3,000
To traveling expenses and transportation 14,000

Total \$17,000
Rec'd Pay't.

He died then; but he left the contract to Wm. J. Martin, who tried to collect it, but died before he got through. He left it to Barker J. Allen, and he tried to collect it also. He did not survive. Barker J. Allen left it to Anson G. Rogers, who attempted to collect it, and got along as far as the Ninth Auditor's Office, when Death, the great Leveler, came all unsummoned, and foreclosed on him also. He left the bill to a relative of his in Connecticut, Vengeance Hopkins by name, who lasted four weeks and two days, and made the best time on record, coming within one of reaching the Twelfth Auditor. In his will he gave the contract bill to his uncle, by the name of O-be-joyful Johnson. It was too undermining for joyful. His last words were: "Weep not for me—I am willing to go." And so he was, poor soul. Seven people inherited the contract after that; but they all died. So it came into my hands at last. It fell to me through a relative by the name of, Hubbard —Bethlehem Hubbard, of Indiana. He had had a grudge against me for a long



time; but in his last moments he sent for me, and forgave me everything, and, weeping, gave me the beef contract.

This ends the history of it up to the time that I succeeded to the property. I will now endeavor to set myself straight before the nation in everything that concerns my share in the matter. I took this beef contract, and the bill for mileage and transportation, to the President of the United States.



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He said, “Well, sir, what can I do for you?”

I said, “Sire, on or about the 10th day of October, 1861, John Wilson Mackenzie, of Rotterdam, Chemung County, New Jersey, deceased, contracted with the General Government to furnish to General Sherman the sum total of thirty barrels of beef—”

He stopped me there, and dismissed me from his presence—kindly, but firmly. The next day called on the Secretary of State.

He said, “Well, sir?”

I said, “Your Royal Highness: on or about the 10th day of October, 1861, John Wilson Mackenzie of Rotterdam, Chemung County, New Jersey, deceased, contracted with the General Government to furnish to General Sherman the sum total of thirty barrels of beef—”

“That will do, sir—that will do; this office has nothing to do with contracts for beef.”

I was bowed out. I thought the matter all over and finally, the following day, I visited the Secretary of the Navy, who said, “Speak quickly, sir; do not keep me waiting.”

I said, “Your Royal Highness, on or about the 10th day of October, 1861, John Wilson Mackenzie of Rotterdam, Chemung County, New Jersey, deceased, contracted with the General Government to General Sherman the sum total of thirty barrels of beef—”

Well, it was as far as I could get. He had nothing to do with beef contracts for General Sherman either. I began to think it was a curious kind of government. It looked somewhat as if they wanted to get out of paying for that beef. The following day I went to the Secretary of the Interior.

I said, “Your Imperial Highness, on or about the 10th day of October—”

“That is sufficient, sir. I have heard of you before. Go, take your infamous beef contract out of this establishment. The Interior Department has nothing whatever to do with subsistence for the army.”

I went away. But I was exasperated now. I said I would haunt them; I would infest every department of this iniquitous government till that contract business was settled. I would collect that bill, or fall, as fell my predecessors, trying. I assailed the Postmaster-General; I besieged the Agricultural Department; I waylaid the Speaker of the House of Representatives. They had nothing to do with army contracts for beef. I moved upon the Commissioner of the Patent Office.

I said, “Your August Excellency, on or about—”



“Perdition! have you got here with your incendiary beef contract, at last? We have nothing to do with beef contracts for the army, my dear sir.”

“Oh, that is all very well—but somebody has got to pay for that beef. It has got to be paid now, too, or I’ll confiscate this old Patent Office and everything in it.”

“But, my dear sir—”

“It don’t make any difference, sir. The Patent Office is liable for that beef, I reckon; and, liable or not liable, the Patent Office has got to pay for it.”

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Never mind the details. It ended in a fight. The Patent Office won. But I found out something to my advantage. I was told that the Treasury Department was the proper place for me to go to. I went there. I waited two hours and a half, and then I was admitted to the First Lord of the Treasury.

I said, "Most noble, grave, and reverend Signor, on or about the 10th day of October, 1861, John Wilson Macken—"

"That is sufficient, sir. I have heard of you. Go to the First Auditor of the Treasury."

I did so. He sent me to the Second Auditor. The Second Auditor sent me to the Third, and the Third sent me to the First Comptroller of the Corn-Beef Division. This began to look like business. He examined his books and all his loose papers, but found no minute of the beef contract. I went to the Second Comptroller of the Corn-Beef Division. He examined his books and his loose papers, but with no success. I was encouraged. During that week I got as far as the Sixth Comptroller in that division; the next week I got through the Claims Department; the third week I began and completed the Mislaid Contracts Department, and got a foothold in the Dead Reckoning Department. I finished that in three days. There was only one place left for it now. I laid siege to the Commissioner of Odds and Ends. To his clerk, rather—he was not there himself. There were sixteen beautiful young ladies in the room, writing in books, and there were seven well-favored young clerks showing them how. The young women smiled up over their shoulders, and the clerks smiled back at them, and all went merry as a marriage bell. Two or three clerks that were reading the newspapers looked at me rather hard, but went on reading, and nobody said anything. However, I had been used to this kind of alacrity from Fourth Assistant Junior Clerks all through my eventful career, from the very day I entered the first office of the Corn-Beef Bureau clear till I passed out of the last one in the Dead Reckoning Division. I had got so accomplished by this time that I could stand on one foot from the moment I entered an office till a clerk spoke to me, without changing more than two, or maybe three, times.

So I stood there till I had changed four different times. Then I said to one of the clerks who was reading:

"Illustrious Vagrant, where is the Grand Turk?"

"What do you mean, sir? whom do you mean? If you mean the Chief of the Bureau, he is out."

"Will he visit the harem to-day?"

The young man glared upon me awhile, and then went on reading his paper. But I knew the ways of those clerks. I knew I was safe if he got through before another New York



mail arrived. He only had two more papers left. After a while he finished them, and then he yawned and asked me what I wanted.

“Renowned and honored Imbecile: on or about—”

“You are the beef-contract man. Give me your papers.”



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He took them, and for a long time he ransacked his odds and ends. Finally he found the Northwest Passage, as I regarded it—he found the long lost record of that beef contract—he found the rock upon which so many of my ancestors had split before they ever got to it. I was deeply moved. And yet I rejoiced—for I had survived. I said with emotion, “Give it me. The government will settle now.” He waved me back, and said there was something yet to be done first.

“Where is this John Wilson Mackenzie?” said he.

“Dead.”

“When did he die?”

“He didn’t die at all—he was killed.”

“How?”

“Tomahawked.”

“Who tomahawked him?”

“Why, an Indian, of course. You didn’t suppose it was the superintendent of a Sunday-school, did you?”

“No. An Indian, was it?”

“The same.”

“Name of the Indian?”

“His name? I don’t know his name.”

“Must have his name. Who saw the tomahawking done?”

“I don’t know.”

“You were not present yourself, then?”

“Which you can see by my hair. I was absent.

“Then how do you know that Mackenzie is dead?”

“Because he certainly died at that time, and have every reason to believe that he has been dead ever since. I know he has, in fact.”

“We must have proofs. Have you got this Indian?”



“Of course not.”

“Well, you must get him. Have you got the tomahawk?”

“I never thought of such a thing.”

“You must get the tomahawk. You must produce the Indian and the tomahawk. If Mackenzie’s death can be proven by these, you can then go before the commission appointed to audit claims with some show of getting your bill under such headway that your children may possibly live to receive the money and enjoy it. But that man’s death must be proven. However, I may as well tell you that the government will never pay that transportation and those traveling expenses of the lamented Mackenzie. It may possibly pay for the barrel of beef that Sherman’s soldiers captured, if you can get a relief bill through Congress making an appropriation for that purpose; but it will not pay for the twenty-nine barrels the Indians ate.”

“Then there is only a hundred dollars due me, and that isn’t certain! After all Mackenzie’s travels in Europe, Asia, and America with that beef; after all his trials and tribulations and transportation; after the slaughter of all those innocents that tried to collect that bill! Young man, why didn’t the First Comptroller of the Corn-Beef Division tell me this?”

“He didn’t know anything about the genuineness of your claim.”

“Why didn’t the Second tell me? why didn’t the, Third? why didn’t all those divisions and departments tell me?”

“None of them knew. We do things by routine here. You have followed the routine and found out what you wanted to know. It is the best way. It is the only way. It is very regular, and very slow, but it is very certain.”



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“Yes, certain death. It has been, to the most of our tribe. I begin to feel that I, too, am called.”

“Young man, you love the bright creature yonder with the gentle blue eyes and the steel pens behind her ears—I see it in your soft glances; you wish to marry her—but you are poor. Here, hold out your hand—here is the beef contract; go, take her and be happy Heaven bless you, my children!”

This is all I know about the great beef contract that has created so much talk in the community. The clerk to whom I bequeathed it died. I know nothing further about the contract, or any one connected with it. I only know that if a man lives long enough he can trace a thing through the Circumlocution Office of Washington and find out, after much labor and trouble and delay, that which he could have found out on the first day if the business of the Circumlocution Office were as ingeniously systematized as it would be if it were a great private mercantile institution.

THE CASE OF GEORGE FISHER

—[Some years ago, about 1867, when this was first published, few people believed it, but considered it a mere extravaganza. In these latter days it seems hard to realize that there was ever a time when the robbing of our government was a novelty. The very man who showed me where to find the documents for this case was at that very time spending hundreds of thousands of dollars in Washington for a mail steamship concern, in the effort to procure a subsidy for the company—a fact which was a long time in coming to the surface, but leaked out at last and underwent Congressional investigation.]

This is history. It is not a wild extravaganza, like “John Wilson Mackenzie’s Great Beef Contract,” but is a plain statement of facts and circumstances with which the Congress of the United States has interested itself from time to time during the long period of half a century.

I will not call this matter of George Fisher’s a great deathless and unrelenting swindle upon the government and people of the United States—for it has never been so decided, and I hold that it is a grave and solemn wrong for a writer to cast slurs or call names when such is the case—but will simply present the evidence and let the reader deduce his own verdict. Then we shall do nobody injustice, and our consciences shall be clear.

On or about the 1st day of September, 1813, the Creek war being then in progress in Florida, the crops, herds, and houses of Mr. George Fisher, a citizen, were destroyed, either by the Indians or by the United States troops in pursuit of them. By the terms of the law, if the Indians destroyed the property, there was no relief for Fisher; but if the

troops destroyed it, the Government of the United States was debtor to Fisher for the amount involved.

George Fisher must have considered that the Indians destroyed the property, because, although he lived several years afterward, he does not appear to have ever made any claim upon the government.

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In the course of time Fisher died, and his widow married again. And by and by, nearly twenty years after that dimly remembered raid upon Fisher's corn-fields, the widow Fisher's new husband petitioned Congress for pay for the property, and backed up the petition with many depositions and affidavits which purported to prove that the troops, and not the Indians, destroyed the property; that the troops, for some inscrutable reason, deliberately burned down "houses" (or cabins) valued at \$600, the same belonging to a peaceable private citizen, and also destroyed various other property belonging to the same citizen. But Congress declined to believe that the troops were such idiots (after overtaking and scattering a band of Indians proved to have been found destroying Fisher's property) as to calmly continue the work of destruction themselves; and make a complete job of what the Indians had only commenced. So Congress denied the petition of the heirs of George Fisher in 1832, and did not pay them a cent.

We hear no more from them officially until 1848, sixteen years after their first attempt on the Treasury, and a full generation after the death of the man whose fields were destroyed. The new generation of Fisher heirs then came forward and put in a bill for damages. The Second Auditor awarded them \$8,873, being half the damage sustained by Fisher. The Auditor said the testimony showed that at least half the destruction was done by the Indians "before the troops started in pursuit," and of course the government was not responsible for that half.

2. That was in April, 1848. In December, 1848, the heirs of George Fisher, deceased, came forward and pleaded for a "revision" of their bill of damages. The revision was made, but nothing new could be found in their favor except an error of \$100 in the former calculation. However, in order to keep up the spirits of the Fisher family, the Auditor concluded to go back and allow interest from the date of the first petition (1832) to the date when the bill of damages was awarded. This sent the Fishers home happy with sixteen years' interest on \$8,873—the same amounting to \$8,997.94. Total, \$17,870.94.

3. For an entire year the suffering Fisher family remained quiet—even satisfied, after a fashion. Then they swooped down upon the government with their wrongs once more. That old patriot, Attorney-General Toucey, burrowed through the musty papers of the Fishers and discovered one more chance for the desolate orphans—interest on that original award of \$8,873 from date of destruction of the property (1813) up to 1832! Result, \$110,004.89 for the indigent Fishers. So now we have: First, \$8,873 damages; second, interest on it from 1832 to 1848, \$8997.94; third, interest on it dated back to 1813, \$10,004.89. Total, \$27,875.83! What better investment for a great-grandchild than to get the Indians to burn a corn-field for him sixty or seventy years before his birth, and plausibly lay it on lunatic United States troops?

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4. Strange as it may seem, the Fishers let Congress alone for five years—or, what is perhaps more likely, failed to make themselves heard by Congress for that length of time. But at last, in 1854, they got a hearing. They persuaded Congress to pass an act requiring the Auditor to re-examine their case. But this time they stumbled upon the misfortune of an honest Secretary of the Treasury (Mr. James Guthrie), and he spoiled everything. He said in very plain language that the Fishers were not only not entitled to another cent, but that those children of many sorrows and acquainted with grief had been paid too much already.

5. Therefore another interval of rest and silent ensued—an interval which lasted four years—viz till 1858. The “right man in the right place” was then Secretary of War—John B. Floyd, of peculiar renown! Here was a master intellect; here was the very man to succor the suffering heirs of dead and forgotten Fisher. They came up from Florida with a rush—a great tidal wave of Fishers freighted with the same old musty documents about the same in immortal corn-fields of their ancestor. They straight-way got an act passed transferring the Fisher matter from the dull Auditor to the ingenious Floyd. What did Floyd do? He said, “*It was proved* that the Indians destroyed everything they could before the troops entered in pursuit.” He considered, therefore, that what they destroyed must have consisted of “the houses with all their contents, and the liquor” (the most trifling part of the destruction, and set down at only \$3,200 all told), and that the government troops then drove them off and calmly proceeded to destroy—

Two hundred and twenty acres of corn in the field, thirty-five acres of wheat, and nine hundred and eighty-six head of live stock! [What a singularly intelligent army we had in those days, according to Mr. Floyd—though not according to the Congress of 1832.]

So Mr. Floyd decided that the Government was not responsible for that \$3,200 worth of rubbish which the Indians destroyed, but was responsible for the property destroyed by the troops—which property consisted of (I quote from the printed United States Senate document):

Dollars	
Corn at Bassett’s Creek,	3,000
Cattle,	5,000
Stock hogs,	1,050
Drove hogs,	1,204
Wheat,	350
Hides,	4,000
Corn on the Alabama River,	3,500
Total,	18,104

That sum, in his report, Mr. Floyd calls the “full value of the property destroyed by the troops.”

He allows that sum to the starving Fishers, *together with interest from 1813*. From this new sum total the amounts already paid to the Fishers were deducted, and then the cheerful remainder (a fraction under forty thousand dollars) was handed to them and again they retired to Florida in a condition of temporary tranquillity. Their ancestor’s farm had now yielded them altogether nearly sixty-seven thousand dollars in cash.



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6. Does the reader suppose that that was the end of it? Does he suppose those diffident Fishers were satisfied? Let the evidence show. The Fishers were quiet just two years. Then they came swarming up out of the fertile swamps of Florida with their same old documents, and besieged Congress once more. Congress capitulated on the 1st of June, 1860, and instructed Mr. Floyd to overhaul those papers again, and pay that bill. A Treasury clerk was ordered to go through those papers and report to Mr. Floyd what amount was still due the emaciated Fishers. This clerk (I can produce him whenever he is wanted) discovered what was apparently a glaring and recent forgery in the paper; whereby a witness's testimony as to the price of corn in Florida in 1813 was made to name double the amount which that witness had originally specified as the price! The clerk not only called his superior's attention to this thing, but in making up his brief of the case called particular attention to it in writing. That part of the brief never got before Congress, nor has Congress ever yet had a hint of forgery existing among the Fisher papers. Nevertheless, on the basis of the double prices (and totally ignoring the clerk's assertion that the figures were manifestly and unquestionably a recent forgery), Mr. Floyd remarks in his new report that "the testimony, particularly in regard to the corn crops, *demands A much higher allowance* than any heretofore made by the Auditor or myself." So he estimates the crop at sixty bushels to the acre (double what Florida acres produce), and then virtuously allows pay for only half the crop, but allows two dollars and a half a bushel for that half, when there are rusty old books and documents in the Congressional library to show just what the Fisher testimony showed before the forgery—viz., that in the fall of 1813 corn was only worth from \$1.25 to \$1.50 a bushel. Having accomplished this, what does Mr. Floyd do next? Mr. Floyd ("with an earnest desire to execute truly the legislative will," as he piously remarks) goes to work and makes out an entirely new bill of Fisher damages, and in this new bill he placidly ignores the Indians altogether puts no particle of the destruction of the Fisher property upon them, but, even repenting him of charging them with burning the cabins and drinking the whisky and breaking the crockery, lays the entire damage at the door of the imbecile United States troops down to the very last item! And not only that, but uses the forgery to double the loss of corn at "Bassett's Creek," and uses it again to absolutely treble the loss of corn on the "Alabama River." This new and ably conceived and executed bill of Mr. Floyd's figures up as follows (I copy again from the printed United States Senate document):



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The United States in account with the legal representatives of George Fisher, deceased.

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1813.--To 550 head of cattle, at 10 dollars,	5,500.00
To 86 head of drove hogs,	1,204.00
To 350 head of stock hogs,	1,750.00
To 100 acres of corn on Bassett's creek,	6,000.00
To 8 barrels of whisky,	350.00
To 2 barrels of brandy,	280.00
To 1 barrel of rum,	70.00
To dry-goods and merchandise in store,	1,100.00
To 35 acres of wheat,	350.00
To 2,000 hides,	4,000.00
To furs and hats in store,	600.00
To crockery ware in store,	100.00
To smith's and carpenter's tools,	250.00
To houses burned and destroyed,	600.00
To 4 dozen bottles of wine,	48.00
1814.--To 120 acres of corn on Alabama River,	9,500.00
To crops of peas, fodder, etc.	3,250.00

Total,34,952.00

To interest on \$22,202, from July 1813	
to November 1860, 47 years and 4 months,	63,053.68
To interest on \$12,750, from September	
1814 to November 1860, 46 years and 2 months, ..	35,317.50

Total, 133,323.18

He puts everything in this time. He does not even allow that the Indians destroyed the crockery or drank the four dozen bottles of (currant) wine. When it came to supernatural comprehensiveness in "gobbling," John B. Floyd was without his equal, in his own or any other generation. Subtracting from the above total the \$67,000 already paid to George Fisher's implacable heirs, Mr. Floyd announced that the government was still indebted to them in the sum of sixty-six thousand five hundred and nineteen dollars and eighty-five cents, "which," Mr. Floyd complacently remarks, "will be paid, accordingly, to the administrator of the estate of George Fisher, deceased, or to his attorney in fact."

But, sadly enough for the destitute orphans, a new President came in just at this time, Buchanan and Floyd went out, and they never got their money. The first thing Congress



did in 1861 was to rescind the resolution of June 1, 1860, under which Mr. Floyd had been ciphering. Then Floyd (and doubtless the heirs of George Fisher likewise) had to give up financial business for a while, and go into the Confederate army and serve their country.

Were the heirs of George Fisher killed? No. They are back now at this very time (July, 1870), beseeching Congress through that blushing and diffident creature, Garrett Davis, to commence making payments again on their interminable and insatiable bill of damages for corn and whisky destroyed by a gang of irresponsible Indians, so long ago that even government red-tape has failed to keep consistent and intelligent track of it.

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Now the above are facts. They are history. Any one who doubts it can send to the Senate Document Department of the Capitol for H. R. Ex. Doc. No. 21, 36th Congress, 2d Session; and for S. Ex. Doc. No. 106, 41st Congress, 2d Session, and satisfy himself. The whole case is set forth in the first volume of the Court of Claims Reports.

It is my belief that as long as the continent of America holds together, the heirs of George Fisher, deceased, will still make pilgrimages to Washington from the swamps of Florida, to plead for just a little more cash on their bill of damages (even when they received the last of that sixty-seven thousand dollars, they said it was only one fourth what the government owed them on that fruitful corn-field), and as long as they choose to come they will find Garrett Davises to drag their vampire schemes before Congress. This is not the only hereditary fraud (if fraud it is—which I have before repeatedly remarked is not proven) that is being quietly handed down from generation to generation of fathers and sons, through the persecuted Treasury of the United States.