

Two-Gun Journalism In New Orleans

BY

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Apologia



TO PUBLISH my tale of murder and mayhem in the staid pages of the *Proceedings* of this ancient and honorable society is, to say the least, somewhat anomalous; yet I think I can show a good and sufficient reason for doing so.

Bibliography always reminds me of the paper tape with massed figures that issues from computing machines. It is useful, necessary, a wonderful tool, but—cold, impersonal, and totally lacking in human appeal. This is why I prefaced my *Bibliography of the French Newspapers of Louisiana* with an account of the journalists who published them in an effort to preserve all their salt and savor.

I intended to do the same with the English language newspapers, but Clarence Brigham's bibliography was so encyclopedic, that it would have been supererogation. I had, however, collected many tales of these gladiatorial editors from old newspapermen who had known them and taken part in their brawls. These I now offer you as a kind of verbal photograph album to place beside Brigham's mathematical and monumental check list of the newspapers they created.





THE VIEUX CARRE of New Orleans fell into senescent slumber as American drive and energy transformed the swamps above Canal Street into a thriving city, humming with commerce. To serve the needs of the active business men who poured in from the North, newspapers sprang up which differed from the Creole journals, not only in language, but in every other way in which Frenchmen differ from Americans.

In the Creole press, whose editors were often graduates of French universities, the accent was upon culture. Many of its readers, also educated abroad, were thoroughly familiar with Gallic civilization; so, to please their patrons, these journals carried long and sound criticism of opera and concerts, of art and drama. They even serialized good French novels, for in those days international copyright did not exist.

These amenities of life had no such appeal to sons of a pioneer race intent upon making their fortunes; so, instead of rhapsodizing on the voice of some diva fresh from Paris, the English language press played up the price of hogs, cotton, and sugar, specializing in the news that affected business. Its editors were often promoted printers, who had neither the educational nor cultural background of the Creole-French journalists. They were, however, if anything, more deadly dangerous. Essentially men of action, it was about as suicidal to arouse their enmity as to split a stick of dynamite with an axe. Although irascible and as ready to back their opinion with pistol as with pen, they were not mere gun thugs. Many of them had a delicate sense of honor, and even the worst lived up to the code of

their day, never killing an adversary except in duel or after due notice given of an intention to shoot on sight.



It was a period when fearless courage, a vitriolic pen, and accurate aim seemed necessary qualifications for success in journalism and, as one old-timer picturesquely phrased it: "Only a diet of roast pelican stuffed with firecrackers could have produced such men."



It was a bibulous era, and most journalists were heavy drinkers. On the *Times-Democrat* there was an unwritten law that the old hands could get "pie-eyed" as often as they wished, because they had proved time and again that, drunk or sober, they could do their work. Charles Whitney, however, the city editor, was most annoyed when a young Irish graduate of a Dublin University he had taken on as a reporter disappeared after payday, and showed up forty-eight hours later still so drunk he was useless. When the same performance was repeated at the next payday, Whitney summoned one of his men and told him to take the wild Irishman over to Father X and have him sign the pledge.

The priest was at home but, before he administered the oath, he asked the erring reporter from what part of Ireland he had come. When he found it was County Clare, his own birth place, the good padre treated him like a long lost brother and, in his enthusiasm at the reunion, brought out a bottle of the "craythur" in which to drink the health of the Emerald Isle. Some hours later the young reporter reeled into the office "full as a sausage." The city editor, very angry, greeted him with: "What do you mean by getting drunk just after I sent you out to take the pledge?"

Wavering pompously, the young Irishman stuttered: "Mr. W-W-Whitney, thas' p-perfectly imposhible for me to

be drunk. Here 'sh my shined pledgsh," and he planked his little blue card down on the desk.



Notwithstanding their foibles these journalists were an enterprising and resourceful tribe, as two journeyman printers, Francis Asbury Lumsden, and John Wilkins Kendall, proved when they launched in 1837 a four-sheet newspaper in a one-story frame building at 38 Gravier Street. They had no capital and a bare minimum of equipment, so they called their paper *The Picayune* because it was small and sold for half the price of its rivals. The two men did all the reporting, printing, editorial writing, and bookkeeping—the latter so sketchy that even years later when the paper had grown to imposing proportions, the partners continued to help themselves from the till without accounting for it whenever they needed money.

When it became noised abroad that, contrary to custom, they had not provided a back exit for escape, their reputations were made and they began to prosper.

The first issue contained a cynical little paragraph that reflected perfectly the contemporary attitude towards duelling. It ran:

A duel took place yesterday afternoon which resulted in the deaths of the principals, each firing through the other's body. This is pretty sharp shooting and we think very fair play—at least neither can say it was otherwise.

In spite of these puny beginnings, the *Picayune*, just ten years after it was born, carried out one of the most enterprising schemes known to American newspaper history.



When the Mexican War broke out in 1847, the only telegraph line in the United States extended from Washington to Baltimore. Railroads had been constructed in the north but, south of Washington, the bulk of the mail was carried by stage coach, and it took fourteen to twenty days for a letter from New Orleans to reach Baltimore. Kendall saw his opportunity and, securing assistance from the *Baltimore Sun* and certain important merchants who wished to obtain quicker financial news, he established a pony-express between New Orleans and Washington. Then he went west to the Mexican front, making arrangements to extend his equine courier system as he traveled. By the use of this "horse-telegraph," the *Picayune* scooped the world with the news of General Taylor's operations in Mexico, and Kendall's articles, relayed on, were regularly published in the northern papers before the military reports reached Washington—much to the annoyance of officialdom.

So, when the Treaty of Peace with Mexico was signed and the *Picayune* representative placed his story on the specially chartered steamship, *New Orleans*, the United States officer in command at Vera Cruz arbitrarily detained her until the government boat, *Iris*, carrying the official reports, had gotten a two-day head start, which was considered ample time to ensure the earlier arrival of the government dispatches. As soon as the *New Orleans* was released, she tied down her safety valve and pushed her engines almost to the bursting point. Passing the *Iris* in mid-ocean, she arrived in New Orleans long before the other boat got to Mobile. An account of the signing of the treaty, together with its text, was printed in the *Picayune* and, forwarded by pony-express, appeared in the *Baltimore Sun* before the official dispatches reached Washington.



Another enterprising incident occurred when the President issued a special message, which was to be sent to Mobile and thence by boat to New Orleans. The *Picayune* dispatched a fast vessel, equipped with type and printers, to Mobile. The message was set up on the return trip to New Orleans and the forms were rushed to the presses as soon as the vessel touched the dock—a manoeuvre which permitted the *Picayune* to put the message on the streets long before the other newspapers.

Only once did the paper stop publication, and that was during the Civil War. In 1864, the *New York World and Journal of Commerce*, published a false presidential "Thanksgiving Proclamation," recommending fasting and prayer, and the calling to the colors of 400,000 more men in order to end the war. Although the *Picayune* reprinted this in perfect good faith, General Banks, then in command of surrendered New Orleans, ordered the editors arrested. The paper narrowly escaped confiscation and publication was suspended from May 23, 1864, to January 1865.



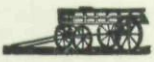
A. M. Holbrook and Co. took over the *Picayune* and, in the early '70's, resold it to a group of 240 businessmen, for \$100,000. They imported Richard H. Rhett of South Carolina as editor, and paid him \$10,000 a year—the largest salary ever given a Southern newspaper man up to that time. But whether his selection was due primarily to his reputation as a cold blooded duellist, or a vitriolic editorial writer, it would be difficult to say.

In those days the judiciary scorned contempt proceedings, and settled all such questions off the bench; so, when Rhett published an editorial criticizing a decision of Judge Cooley, that bellicose jurist immediately challenged him. The editor promptly accepted and killed the judge at the first discharge.

Strangely enough, it was under this hard-bitten fire-eater that George W. Cable came to the paper as a cub reporter. He was a frail, shy little man, with sharp eyes peeping over a luxuriant brown beard like a mouse hiding in hay. The two men made a most incongruous pair—Rhett domineering and profane, Cable meek and so fanatically Presbyterian that he refused to travel on Sunday. This he carried to such an extreme that once, when he was staying in New York, and wanted to hear Henry Ward Beecher preach, he spent Saturday to Monday in Brooklyn in order to avoid crossing the ferry on the Sabbath.

The conditions under which he and the other reporters worked were, to say the least, peculiar. In those days the *Picayune* occupied a long loft with a cubby hole cut off one end as a city office, and it was Rhett's pleasant habit to stand in its doorway, three or four times a week, and fire at a target set up at the other end of the general room, to keep his hand in. That bullets whizzed over the heads of working reporters gave him no concern. In fact, he considered the smell of gunpowder good training for future editors. Even so it must have been difficult for pacific Cable to compose articles on such sins as Sunday bull-baiting and mule-racing, while his chief was turning the office into a shooting gallery. It was probably some outburst of "Duelsome Dick," as he called Rhett, that made Cable gravely discuss in his column, which he signed "Drop Shot," the great number of deaths caused annually by the blowing up of steamboats and to end with the statement: "We only wish we could give the casualties resulting from explosions of fighting editors."

As was to be expected, Cable did not last long and finally lost his job because, regarding the theatre as an instrument of the devil, he refused to review a dramatic performance.



It seemed to be the fate of the *Picayune* to have editors who would have been howling successes in Tombstone, Arizona, when the mark of a man was two guns and a quick draw. Colonel C. Harrison Parker, editor in the '80's, was no exception. A rambunctious person, his favorite amusement, when in his cups, was to enter a bar-room flourishing an enormous revolver, and proceed to wreck the furniture and glassware in sheer exuberance of spirits. No one ever interfered, for he was as unpredictable and dangerous as a Ford car with a drunken driver.

He once wrote a scathing editorial voicing his suspicions of the manner in which Major Edward A. Burke, then State Treasurer, was disposing of a certain issue of obligations, familiarly known as "Baby Bonds" on account of their small denominations.

The Major was a picturesque character, born in Louisville, Kentucky, who, starting life as a telegraph operator, had become a superintendent of division of the Texas and New Orleans Railroad. Enlisting in the Civil War, he emerged penniless, but with a record for distinguished service. He won and lost several fortunes on the cotton market, and finally landed in New Orleans with thirty dollars in cash and twelve suits of handsome clothes. The only job he could find was a laborer's in a stone yard at a dollar a day but, by the end of the year, he became manager and a power in politics; and, in 1878, was elected State Treasurer. The next year he acquired control of the *Democrat*.

Such a man was not likely to let Parker's charges go unanswered, so he asked John Augustin, a Creole journalist and an authority on the duelling code, to act as one of his seconds and deliver his challenge to the *Picayune* editor.

According to the rules Parker had choice of weapons and his seconds insisted on rifles at a hundred paces. Augustin knew this meant certain death for his principal, for Burke

was a notoriously bad shot, while Parker, since boyhood, was able to hit a squirrel in the eye on the top of the highest tree. So Augustin tried his best to have some other weapon substituted and, when he saw he was making no headway, he adjourned the conference. At the next meeting, Augustin announced that, although according to the code, the choice of weapons was Colonel Parker's, the right to name the distance was Major Burke's, and he would insist upon fighting at five paces if rifles were used.

Parker's seconds, much perturbed, exclaimed, "But that would be murder!"

"Exactly," replied Augustin calmly, "but at a hundred paces my man would have been murdered, so why shouldn't both be killed?"

Finally they compromised on pistols, but it was only after a long search that a suitable pair could be found. Then another difficulty arose. The only available bullets were too small, and rolled out of the barrels until some one had the bright idea of wedging them into the shells with paper.

The duellists, seconds and two surgeons drove to a quiet spot near the Old Barracks. Everything was done with proper solemnity and decorum; the principals stood apart while the seconds met and, after bowing to each other, conferred in low voices, measured off the terrain, and loaded the pistols. The duellists, dressed in black with no vestige of white visible, took their positions, standing sideways so they'd present as small a target as possible.

It was not at all surprising, in view of the wobbly bullets, that the first shots went wild. Augustin, after consulting his principal, said to the other seconds, "If Colonel Parker will admit Major Burke's courage and honesty, there need be no further exchange of fire."

They replied, "Colonel Parker wishes us to state that he never doubted Major Burke's courage, but that, as to his honesty, he has expressed his opinion in the columns of the *Picayune*, and has learned nothing since that in any way changes his opinion."

There was a second exchange of shots, and this time Burke was wounded in a part of his anatomy that, to a soldier, would have spelled a lasting disgrace, and which prevented him for many a day thereafter from sitting down with comfort.



Prior to the duel, Major Burke acquired the *Democrat* under circumstances that threw a peculiar light on the journalistic shenanigans of those days. It was founded in 1875 by a group of men who resented that most of the state's newspapers were controlled by the Louisiana Lottery or the "Scalawags"—the renegade Southerners who allied themselves with "Black Republicanism" in the hope of spoils. These founders felt the necessity for a Democratic paper to fight what they called "Republican rule at the point of the bayonet."

Their first editor, Richard Tyler, the son of the President, proved too mild; so the owners looked for an honest-to-God fighting man, and found him in Major H. J. Hearsey, an ex-Confederate soldier who made a great reputation in his conduct of the *Shreveport Times* in its struggle against the "Carpet Baggers." Indeed the Major's influence in Shreveport was so unlimited that, years later, Governor Warmoth, meeting him in a saloon, said, "Major, you shouldn't write those editorials attacking the Czar of Russia."

"Why?," asked the Major, puzzled.

"Because," replied the Governor, "You're just as much of a despot as he is. They tell me that when you used to

publish an editorial in the *Shreveport Times*, indicating any man as a menace to the community, he promptly disappeared and was never heard of again. You signed as many a death warrant as ever the Czar did."

In appearance and manner, Hearsey was the perfect protagonist of the "Southern Colonel." His clothes and his gray beard, something between a trim Vandyke and the luxuriant Whitman variety, were always scrupulously neat; and, although every night of his adult life he was intoxicated, his speech never thickened nor did his floriated manners ever become less punctilious. At a certain point in his potations, his friends always put him on one of the little mule drawn street cars. When it arrived at his corner, if he were able, he got out under his own steam and steered a scoloped course home. But if he were not, the driver always deserted his car and, with the help of some passenger, carried him a half block and deposited him on his doorstep, after carefully ringing the bell.

Notwithstanding this, each morning early the Major was at his post, bright and chipper as a schoolboy, dashing off editorials in a handwriting so terrible that he himself was stumped when the only typesetter who could read it at all, was forced to come and ask him the meaning of some sentence. Notwithstanding their illegibility, these editorials were trenchant, erudite and flayed alive the victim at whom they were aimed.



Hearsey's first campaign was a fierce attack upon the Louisiana Lottery. He aroused all the decent element to such a pitch that they forced the Legislature to terminate its franchise.

But the Lottery was not so easily beaten. By a judicious use of slush fund and influence, it persuaded the next Legislature to pass an act permitting the Lottery to continue

doing business during the unexpired portion of its franchise, which was some twelve years.

Having won this victory, the Lottery looked around for means to draw Major Hearsey's teeth.

The *Democrat* had a large sum of money in warrants, which it had received from the State in payment for public printing. As they were selling under par, Hearsey, rather than liquidate at a loss, put them up at various banks as collateral for loans.


It was a strange coincidence that, just at this time, a foreigner brought an action in the Federal Courts claiming the issuance of the warrants illegal. The case was heard before Judge Billings, who decided in his favor. Immediately the *Democrat's* warrant collateral shrunk to zero, the loans were called and Major Hearsey, driven to the wall, was forced to sell the paper to Major Burke, who had been hand in glove with the Lottery crowd.

Almost immediately after the *Democrat* had changed hands, Judge Billings reversed himself and the warrants jumped back to their former value. If, as has been said, the whole scheme was engineered by the Lottery people to transform an opposition paper into a friendly one and to punish an enemy, it was a peculiarly heartless plot, for all the school teachers and underpaid municipal employees received their salaries in warrants and the maneuver ruined them.

But if Burke thought he had put a quietus on Hearsey, he didn't know his man. Within a year Major Hearsey had started a new paper—the *States*. At first it was a tiny four-page sheet and was printed on an old-fashioned, flat-bed press, the motive power of which was supplied by a Negro, old and blind but willing and muscular. The paper jumped into immediate popularity and, luckily for its continued success, the Major took in a shrewd young business

man, Robert Ewing. Hearsey, left to himself, would have ruined any journal, as he considered financial matters beneath the notice of a Southern gentleman. Whenever his old Confederate friends asked for assistance, he endorsed their notes with the *State's* name and no one on the staff ever heard of it until the note was protested and the newspaper had to pay.

Ewing proved a hustler and, in spite of strong competition, soon secured the contract for the municipal printing. But finally the city government became so outrageously corrupt that the *States*, although a Democratic paper, found itself in the anomalous position of attacking the very political ring that had awarded it the printing plum.

 Peter J. Kernan, a shoe-string journalist, thought he saw an opportunity in this situation. He was an artist at getting something for nothing and had started a newspaper on brass and a plugged nickel. After buying as much equipment as possible on credit, he transferred the paper to a dummy, changed its name, and presto! he had a brand new publication minus the debts of the old. By this legerdemain the *Chronicle* became the *Sunday Sun*, which was metamorphosed into the *Telegram*, which in turn was changed into the *Daily Truth*. He was not above a little polite "squeezing." If some solid business man showed a customer from the back parishes the lupanars of the city, Kernan always seemed to discover it, and if the unlucky gentleman did not come across with a handsome order for advertising space, the *Sunday Sun* ran a story under big headlines that Mr. Soanso, the well-known merchant, was seen leading a Merry Gang into Mahogany Hall; that being the felicitous name of a notorious house run by Julie Elliot, a two-hundred pound octeroon with a penchant for smoking

“Jackson Square” cigars. Finally the paper became so notorious a scandal monger that little girls sang in the streets:

“Sally, Sally, what you done?

You got yore name in the *Sunday Sun*.”

Possibly the most audacious thing Kernan ever perpetrated happened in a political campaign in which he opposed the *Picayune's* candidate. Early election morning, before time for the polls to open, Kernan got out a whole edition of a newspaper made to look exactly like the *Daily Picayune*, except that the heading was spelled “*Daisy Picayune*.” The leading article was an abject admission that the candidate backed by the *Picayune* had lost the election, and it was published in the hope of influencing the type of voter who always wants to be on the winning side.

Kernan seeing, as I have already said, an opportunity in the *State's* attack on the inner ring of its own party, joined with the *Times-Democrat* in demanding an investigation of the award of the city printing. The City Council met to hear the evidence and Ewing and his associate, Pinckney Smith, had no sooner arrived than a *State's* reporter came sidling up to whisper, “Are you two armed? They’ve got the whole force of the *Times-Democrat* here and they’re all heeled.”

Ewing looked around and, while he couldn’t see any guns, he noticed that Henry Baker, brother of Page Baker, editor-in-chief of the *Times-Democrat*, was carrying a walking stick as thick as a man’s wrist.

The reporter suggested that as one of the City Councilmen who lived across the river, had not yet arrived, he could waylay him at the ferry and tell him to go home. Then, as there wouldn’t be a quorum, the meeting would have to go over. This was done.

On the adjourned day the hall was full and Ewing arrived with a "Tranter" so big he had to wear it in a shoulder holster. The meeting progressed calmly and all the evidence was in favor of the *States*, when some boob, wanting to hear his own voice, got up and said, "We have a distinguished citizen here, who has not yet been heard from: Major Hearsey should give us his opinion."

The Major didn't know the first thing about the contract or indeed about any of the business affairs of the paper, but he did know and despise Kernan, so he got to his feet and made Kernan look like a first cousin of the devil with a pass straight to hell. At one particularly insulting accusation, Kernan shouted, "That's a lie!" and started over to strike Hearsey, who was only half his size. Ewing jumped forward, jerked out his gun and pulled the trigger point blank at Kernan, but the Tranter missed fire. Almost at the same instant Judge Farrar threw himself between the two men shouting, "Stop! Stop!"



The audience broke and ran: the doors were clogged with men fighting to get out. Kernan threw up his hands and, still afraid that Ewing would shoot, turned his back and pulled the coat tails away from the seat of his pants to show he was unarmed.

After things had calmed down, someone said, "Where's Page Baker?"


Farrar, standing near, answered in his loud booming voice, "In his *sanctus sanctorum* on the fourth floor of the *Times-Democrat* building, where he will always be found in troublous moments. You could have played billiards on his coat tails as he went."

Hearing this, Henry Baker came over to Farrar and said, "I want you to know, suh, that Page Baker is not a coward."

"Well, that's the first time I ever heard it," replied Farrar.

The next morning Page Baker waited several hours in front of Farrar's office and, when the Judge finally appeared, stuck a tiny thirty-eight revolver into his huge paunch, shouting, "Apologize or I'll shoot."

With a dramatic gesture, Farrar threw back the lapels of his coat and boomed out, "Shoot then, you — — coward!" Of course, this was the one thing that made it perfectly impossible for Baker to fire even if he had really intended to, so Farrar turned his back on him and stalked into his office vowing to jail him for criminal assault.

 The day after the hearing at which the trouble had started, Kernan came out with a vituperative editorial against Ewing, in which the most polite thing he called him was a white-livered coward.

Ewing countered by sending word he'd shoot on sight and spent the next two days gunning for Kernan, but that wiley gentleman walked to and from his office with his wife on his arm and, as she sat beside his desk all day, Ewing's only chance was a duel. He appointed as his seconds, Thomas Marshall, a journalist, and John C. Wycliffe, an attorney who regarded the rules of the Code as far more binding upon a gentleman's conduct than the Ten Commandments.

When Kernan received the challenge, he replied he would have to think the matter over, but that, if he did fight, he would insist on sawed-off shotguns at twelve paces.

Of Course, Ewing realized that these conditions could only spell a quick end for both parties, but nevertheless he told his seconds to accept them for he knew that even if he died, he would at least have the satisfaction of taking Kernan with him.

When Marshall and Wycliffe, looking very impressive in his perennial frock coat returned for an answer, Kernan announced stubbornly that he wouldn't fight.

"What reason do you give, sir? My principal is surely a gentleman and a man of honor?"

"I don't think it's right to fight," replied Kernan.

"Why not, sir?", asked Wycliffe, honestly amazed at the enormity of such a statement.

"None of your damn business," burst out Kernan, exasperated.

"But, sir," urged Wycliffe, "I feel forced to tell you for your own good that this is not in accord with the Code."

"To Hell with the Code!" was all his answer.

While Wycliffe urged Kernan to fight, Marshall kept pulling his coat tails, trying to make him leave before Kernan could change his mind, but Wycliffe paid no attention. Ewing's life meant nothing compared with the importance of having every detail of the precious code complied with, and he continued to press the point.

"But, my dear sir," he insisted, "you must realize we will be forced to publish your refusal in fairness to our principal, and that you will be deserted by your friends, sir, branded a coward, sir, be spat upon by all decent men, sir," etc., etc., at great length. But the stubborn man was impervious to argument and the fight never occurred.

Kernan came off best in the end, however, for some years later he sold a paper to Ewing for forty thousand dollars and agreed not to engage in the newspaper business for five years. The day before Ewing was to take possession, Kernan looted the whole building and carried off everything that could be moved, even to the electric wiring. Only an old press, too big to be budged, was left. Then Kernan had the gall to open up a new paper in the name of a dummy

across the street and was very successful in stealing the old paper's circulation.



But Kernan couldn't hold a candle to Dominick C. O'Malley, the most hard-bitten, disreputable but picturesque figure in the annals of New Orleans journalism. His was the perfect education for the forming of an accomplished blackleg. When only seventeen, he pled guilty to the larceny of some pig-iron in Chicago and was committed to the Cleveland, Ohio, reformatory. About 1878 he drifted down to New Orleans and worked on the levee as a laborer. Later he utilized the encyclopedic knowledge of the ways of crooks, which he had obtained in his Ohio "college," and set himself up as a private detective. His devious career was very successful, for he was fearless, resourceful and perfectly unmoral, and was able to operate on a shoe-string by the simple expedient of persuading the *Item* reporters to do all his sleuthing for nothing as they quartered the city for news. If he had been told that he had spent the first nine days of his life with his eyes shut while his "pappy and mammy" were running rabbits, he would have been the last one to have either denied or resented the aspersion, for, with a certain engaging but cynical frankness, he once remarked, "I ain't got even a enemy that can say a — — thing about me that's worse than the truth." Nevertheless there was one thing he drew the line at, he never went back on a friend, and he was so generous with his money that he would steal a dollar to give some down-and-out wretch.

He had a bland, round Irish face, a magnificent pair of "coffee-strainer" mustaches and his hair, plastered down on his forehead, turned up at the end in a little wave—a fashion popular with the barkeeps of the '90's. His wrist had been so badly slashed in a fight that his left hand hung practically useless, but this did not interfere with his being a deadly shot with his right. But it did make him so apprehensive that he only gave the tips of his fingers in shaking hands so he could pull away quickly if he were attacked.

His detective business continued to prosper; he supplied the street railway company with perjured testimony with which to defend negligence suits; he fixed cases for raided gambling houses and places of ill fame; got dismissed policemen back on the force; went bond for criminals and did the "lobbying" for the Louisiana Lottery. At last he became so audacious he thought he could get away with murder and took a spot shot at John Vaquelin in the very halls of the Criminal Courts building. His enemies became so numerous he was forced to wear a bullet proof waistcoat and he never went out without being armed. He was such a bird of ill omen that one evening as he stood in front of a jewelry store on Canal Street, its Jewish proprietor came out and apologetically said, "Please, Mr. O'Malley, would you mind moving down the street a bit? I've just put in a new plate glass window and I ain't had time to insure it."

The Irishman obligingly complied, but only just in time, because within twenty minutes somebody did take a shot at him.

But with all his shrewdness, O'Malley went too far in the matter of the Mafia, a branch of which had sprung up in New Orleans and was indulging in all the little sins dear to the heart of the Mafiosi, such as bombing, murder, extortion, white slavery, and other pastimes. D. C. Hennessy,

then chief of police, had made a special study of Italian crime and, after a particularly savage outrage, he said publicly that he was going to expose the workings of the Mafia and drive it out of New Orleans. This declaration signed his death warrant and, on the night of October 15, 1890, as he was going home, a gang of Italians opened fire on him from across the street with sawed off shotguns. Although six shots took effect, he managed to stagger on and return their fire. One or two of the murderers ran out from cover and fired at him again. The Chief died that night in the hospital and the doctors found over a hundred rusty nails and odd-shaped pieces of metal in his body.

Hennessy, a native of New Orleans, was very popular, so his killing, on top of all the other Italian outrages, set the city seething. The Grand Jury met and handed down nineteen indictments.

The Mafia leaders employed O'Malley, at a huge salary, to help free their members. As a consequence of his efforts, some of the indictments were immediately dismissed and only nine of the accused were actually brought to trial. During the course of the proceedings, certain witnesses testified that they had seen the shooting from across the street and had recognized some of the defendants. The lawyers for the defense arranged with the judge to send the jury to the scene of the crime, at night, to see for themselves whether, under existing lighting conditions, it was possible to recognize anyone across the street. O'Malley, forewarned, plotted with the engineer of the power plant to cut down the dynamos during the jury's visit. As a consequence the electric lights burned so dimly that the jury went away convinced the witnesses had lied. Notwithstanding the prosecution's strong case, six of the defendants were acquitted and the jury disagreed as to the remaining three.

Cuthbert, a detective, had testified at the trial that O'Malley had hidden the Italians in an effort to prevent their arrest and had approached various politicians in their behalf.



The next day O'Malley warned Cuthbert through the newspapers that he would shoot on sight. When the two men met on Common Street, O'Malley beat him to the draw and killed him.

The people of New Orleans were firmly convinced that a grave miscarriage of justice had occurred; that the jury had acquitted the defendants, partly because they had been terrorized by threats of reprisals and partly because they had been bribed by O'Malley with money supplied by the Mafia, and these ideas were given even more credence when the foreman of the jury fled. O'Malley was indicted for bribery, the whole city boiled and all the decent citizens believed the Mafia had shown itself to be above the law. On the Saturday succeeding the conclusion of the trial, an orderly mob, composed of the most respected men in the city, armed with guns and ropes, met at the foot of Clay's monument on Canal Street. After impassioned speeches made by three or four important persons, the crowd marched on the Parish prison, broke their way in, shot some of the Italians in their cells and others in the women's quarters where they had tried to hide, while the last two were dragged out to Congo Square and hung on lamp posts.

Later in the day, in the midst of a crowd in Lafayette Square, O'Malley overheard a man with a rope in his hand say, "We'll hang O'Malley with this when we catch him."

This broke O'Malley's nerve and he sneaked away to Page Baker's office in the *Times-Democrat* building. Throwing his revolver on the desk, he said huskily, "Baker, you know I'm no coward. Old as I am, I'd fight any man with

any weapon he chose, but I can't face that mob with a rope. I know you don't like me, but for God's sake, save me!"

Baker hesitated a moment and then, pointing to a door, said, "Get into that closet, you son of a bitch."¹

A few minutes later some of the leaders of the mob burst in and asked, "Where do you think that bastard, O'Malley went to? We've combed the town, but can't find him anywhere. We expected to be able to bring you a damn good story of his hanging long ago."

"Well," said Baker, "I saw him only a little while ago."


"Where? Where?," they chorused.

"Right in this room," he replied, and, picking up his hat, he continued, "I guess I'll go out with you boys and try to find him."

They all trooped out. Baker chuckling as he thought of what a scare he had given the man in the closet, who must have heard every word.

To give O'Malley time to escape, Baker stayed away three hours. When at last he returned he was surprised to find him still in the closet in a blue funk. After dark O'Malley managed to get away and hide on the roof of one of the taller buildings for a few days until he was able to leave town.

The lynching of the Mafia members caused a diplomatic break between the United States and Italy and each power withdrew its ambassadors. A Grand Jury completely exonerated the lynchers and our Government paid Italy an indemnity of one hundred and twenty-five thousand francs, which closed the incident.

 After a few months O'Malley brazenly returned and prospered so well in his detective business that in 1894 he was able to pay \$2,704.00 for the *Item*. This little paper

¹I would hesitate to use this phrase, foreign as it is to my vocabulary, were it not for a Presidential precedent.

was started as a cooperative venture in 1877 by eleven journeyman printers who had lost their jobs by the failure of the *Republican*. During its second year, Lafcadio Hearn joined its staff at the munificent salary of ten dollars a week, and soon transformed it from a hidebound little daily, publishing only items of local interest, into a readable journal with a real literary flavor. He had a very poor opinion of the other New Orleans papers, said the press was corrupt and did not own its own soul, and wrote his friend, Henry Krehbiel, not to send any contributions in, for it would be like giving Chateau Margaux to a dog or feeding a buzzard on Charlotte Russe. Hearn did so much for the paper, was columnist, book reviewer, dramatic critic, editorial writer, translator and even cartoonist, that when he left in 1881 to join the staff of the *Times-Democrat*, the *Item* went steadily down hill until O'Malley bought it.

By a judicious mixture of salaciousness, politics and borderline blackmail, O'Malley managed to put the paper back on its feet. He discovered that being a journalist was of great assistance to him as a detective, especially when he was retained to get two disreputable dance halls out of a certain business block. His technique showed the simplicity of real genius. He merely stationed reporters at each hall to make a list of all the visitors of any social importance. Then every afternoon some such paragraph would appear in the *Item* as: "Mrs. Soanso would be most interested to know that her husband was seen leaving the dance hall with Dutch Sadie at three o'clock this morning, both appeared to be enjoying themselves." The joints soon lost their best paying clients under this "pitiless blaze of publicity" and were forced to move away.

With such methods, O'Malley naturally continued to make enemies. At least one of them was game enough to fight back. When the *Item* owner published a cartoon

showing Governor Foster leading a little dog labelled "Colonel C. Harrison Parker," the pugnacious Colonel lay in wait for O'Malley at the head of Commercial Alley, and, when O'Malley came out of his office accompanied by the notorious gambler "Parson" Davis, Parker ran towards him across a bridge of boards laid over a sewer excavation, firing as he went. O'Malley returned the volley and jumped behind a telegraph pole, but not before he had been hit in the groin; while Parker received a bullet in his pistol hand that came out at his shoulder. As soon as the fusillade started, "Parson" Davis ran down the street as fast as he could, his right hand raised in the air as he shouted, "Give back! Give back!" No one ever knew whether he did this to save his face for deserting a friend or whether he was really trying to keep innocent by-standers out of the line of fire. If the latter, he was not very successful for a poor little newsboy limped off with a stray bullet in his heel.

O'Malley was always running into trouble. Once up in Baton Rouge he happened to meet Louis Claire in the street. This New Orleans gambler believed that O'Malley had double-crossed him so, without any preliminaries, he started in to kill him then and there. Claire got O'Malley down and was just drawing his knife to finish the job when Brumby, a local politician, happened along and, not recognizing either combatant, pulled Claire off. When Brumby discovered whose life he had saved, he was so mortified he fled to the nearest saloon and stayed drunk for a week.

All the other editors hated O'Malley so heartily that they would have died rather than help the *Item* out of a tight place. So, when his paper ran out of newsprint, O'Malley, knowing it was useless to try to borrow any, telephoned the warehouse where a rival paper stored its extra stock and said he was Mr. Rapier of the *Picayune* and that he was going to send his men over for a drayload to get out an extra

edition. As soon as the paper arrived at the *Item* office, O'Malley stripped off and burnt all the coverings by which it could be identified.

Rapier discovered the theft and telephoned him to return the paper or he would come over and get it himself.

O'Malley replied blandly that he did not know what Rapier was talking about, but gave warning that if he took any paper he could not positively identify as the property of the *Picayune*, he would sue him for heavy damages.

The next morning O'Malley's newsprint arrived by freight, and he called up Rapier to say he was mortified to discover that his men had gotten some of the *Picayune's* paper "by mistake," and he would be glad to replace it immediately from his own stock.

O'Malley finally became such a thorn in the side of various politicians and newspapermen by his outrageous personal and political attacks that they banded together and secured the election, as chief of police, of a tough hombre named Edward S. Whitaker, on the understanding that he would see that O'Malley was bumped off. At least that was what many believed and what O'Malley himself later publicly charged.

It is said that the Chief made several attempts to keep his promise, but the *Item* editor was so wiley he always escaped. These attacks only ceased when a friend went to Whitaker and said, "Why you damn fool, don't you know that O'Malley, living, is your salary insurance and that the day you kill him the bunch that elected you will give you the bum's rush?"



Unlikely as it seemed, O'Malley actually died in his bed some years later, but not until he had sold the *Item* for a hundred thousand dollars (a nice little profit for the eight years he owned it) and had spent the last

decade of his life engaged in the peaceful trade of wholesale fish mongering.



This Whitaker who had tried to kill O'Malley was a queer Dick. Nephew of a judge on the Criminal Bench and member of the bar himself, he volunteered in the Spanish War and became captain in one of the immune regiments that saw service in Cuba. On his return he made his first reputation as a bad man to tackle. A notorious gunman, with the "high falutin'" name of William R. de Poincy, tried to shoot him in the street and Whitaker, bare-handed, took his gun away and beat him over the head with it.

In spite of his personal courage, nobody could have made a worse chief of police. He was a dissolute drunkard with a mean, uncertain temper that often led him to order a policeman to arrest somebody in the street, just because he didn't happen to like his face. Racing was his passion and every afternoon, dressed in the most foppish way, he drove out to the track behind a fine horse.

Finally he became so notorious that the newspapers were forced to attack him. The *World* caricatured him in ballet skirts and high black boots with a spyglass strapped to back trying to mount a horse. When he saw it, Whitaker became livid and, ordering six detectives to follow him, he marched his army to the office of the *World* and opened fire on its editor; but, as Joe Lévêque had the presence of mind to dive under his desk, he escaped unscathed.

The next morning all the newspapers carried the rather ambiguous scarehead, "Whitaker shoots up the *World*."



This same Lévêque, who dodged Whitaker's bullets, later published the *Harlequin* and hit upon a most ingenious and

fantastic idea. Wishing to be particularly excoriating, he crowded on a single page of his paper forty or fifty pictures of a man he detested, and the word "Liar!", in the editor's own handwriting was scrawled across the face of every portrait.

Now, alas, all these valorous and vituperative, dangerous and devil-may-care newspapermen, like their Gallic confrères, have followed the long trail of the dinotherium. Two-gun journalism is dead in New Orleans, and possibly it's just as well, for, in spite of their pepper and picturesqueness, these old editors were a bit like "purple cows"—you would much "rather see than be one."



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