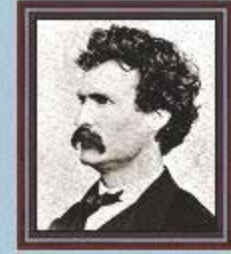




Virginia City
TERRITORIAL ENTERPRISE
1862-1868



Territorial Enterprise, February 18, 1868

MARK TWAIN'S LETTERS FROM WASHINGTON.

NUMBER V.

WASHINGTON, January 11, 1868.

The Political Stink-Pots Opened.

They are opened, and awful is the smell thereof! Millions of politicians have suddenly begun to prate, with unprecedented energy, even for their tribe, and they foul all the air with their corrupt and suffocating breath. It is all about reconstruction. The truth is, that the more Congress reconstructs, the more the South goes to pieces. But Congress is in for it, now, and goes bravely on, hoping at last to get the reconstruction bull where they can hold him. Every morning, after breakfast, Congress passes a brand-new Reconstruction Act; after luncheon they amend it and put some Constitution in it; when it is time to go to dinner, they repeal it, and get ready to start fresh in the morning. If they keep on stacking up talent on reconstruction as they have been doing, they will run out of material before they get their great mission accomplished. You see, they started in to build a good, substantial reconstruction house, but there were some sandy places under it which did not look well. They thought maybe they might not be as risky as they looked, however, and concluded to chance them. But it was not a good idea. The house was hardly built, before one corner began to sink a little, and they had to jackscrew it up and put in an amendment prop. Then another corner began to sink, and they had to put in a similar prop there. Next the chimney began to lean, and they had to prop that mighty quick with a powerful brace; right away the kitchen began to cave in and the gable end to bulge out, and immediately some more jackscrews and braces had to be called into use. It is a nice new house, but some part of it lets down every day, and has to be fixed - till at last we have the curious spectacle of a mansion bright with new paint and dazzling with gilding, looking bleary and bloated, limber and leaning and bulging in all directions, and with unpainted and unsightly spars and braces canted against it and straddling about every which way - an allegorical, elegant gentleman of the first water and most fashionable attire, drunk as a piper, subjugated, demoralized and gone in generally, reeling home on crutches enough for six! Such is the new house, and such the efforts made to save it. And of course it never rains but it pours - in the midst of all this vexation,

along comes the Grand Jury, otherwise the Supreme Court, to examine it, and the owners and builders in fancy already hear the disastrous fiat: "Gentlemen, she won't do; she will have to come down; there is too much sand and not enough Constitution under her!"

I am not writing a political article; I am not trying to write a palatable article; I am merely writing the truth - simply photographing a straight-out fact. Thaddeus Stevens and many other prominent Republicans have said all along that the Reconstruction Acts were "outside the Constitution;" Congress itself has said it. Yet they still go on trying to patch up that old house, with that fatal defect in it, instead of wisely pulling it down and doing all over again and doing it right. The defect looked small at first, and Congress seems to have thought that it could not amount to a great deal - and yet, patch and repair and improve as they will, that little defect invariably obtrudes itself again and disarranges everything. It reminds me of a circumstance. That great Claflin house in New York, sold forty millions of dollars worth of goods in the year 1866. I visited their immense establishment in January '67, to see its wonders, and found the head bookkeeper in a sweat. I asked what the matter was. He said that for two terrible days he and his 48 sub-bookkeepers had been turning themselves gray with anxiety chasing a ten cent piece through a cart load of ledgers - there was a discrepancy of ten cents in the cash account for the year - the awful cash account wouldn't balance! I just said, indignantly, "Well that is about the smallest piece of business I ever heard of! Here, I'll give you ten cents myself. You and Claflin go to bed and get some rest!"

But he smiled a green, despairing, ghastly smile, and shook his head. He said that wasn't the idea. It wasn't the ten cents they cared for, but the terrible truth that that miserable trifle might stand for millions of dollars? Until that defect was hunted out and rectified, they couldn't tell whether they had lost millions or made them. "The cash books," he said, "must balance!"

It is just the idea with reconstruction. There is a trifling discrepancy somewhere, and nothing is safe about the building till it shall be rooted out. There is ten cents worth of Constitution lacking in it some where, and there will be no security, no salvation for it till the thing is rectified. There is no use trying to tinker it up - the builders must go straight through the edifice, and never rest till its accounts balance with the cash book of the Constitution!

I wrote that speech for a Democratic member of Congress, but he couldn't pay me anything but whisky, and so we couldn't trade. I said I would rather confer it on a good Republican newspaper as a fair and honest exhibit of the Democratic side of the most exciting question before the nation, to the end that Republicans might have a chance to read both sides and thereby better inform themselves.

But Congress is worried. A decision rendered by the Supreme Court, rendered some time ago, seemed plainly to indicate that five of the Judges considered the Reconstruction Acts unconstitutional against three who believed the opposite. The famous *McCardle* case threatens to bring the constitutionality of those Acts to a test before the Court right away, and Congress to-day proposes to do what it can to circumvent the disaffected five,

by passing a bill ordaining that the concurrence of six of the Judges shall be necessary to constitute a decision in all cases involving constitutional questions. But unhappily Congress did not make the Supreme Court, and doubtless it will transpire that it has about as much jurisdiction over its affairs as it has over the weather. The Court makes its own rules, and is entirely independent of Congress. Its custom is to decide by a majority vote, and if it chooses, will no doubt continue to do so. If McCardle gains his case, Negro suffrage and the Reconstruction Acts will be dissipated into thin air for the present. No wonder Congress is troubled. It fears that if it can't fix things so as to enable three Judges to out vote five, it will have to go to work and build that Reconstruction House all over again, from cellar to roof. Isn't it a splendid sensation? The principal Republican papers are growling savagely at Congress for getting itself into this scrape by its innocent stupidity.

Republicans, both in an outside claim that though the Reconstruction Acts and the proposed bill to prescribe rules for the Judges are a little unconstitutional, they are necessities - the state of the country demands them; that if the rebels were admitted to power they would hang Union men upon any and every pretext, or upon none at all; that to admit them to power, unreconstructed and unrestrained, would be to acknowledge that the war for the Union was an iniquity, a crime. General Sheridan says he is interested in this business; if the war was wrong, he thinks he is a particularly bad murderer. I suppose he had a chance to be; he was in eighty-four battles, and had a hand in a good deal of killing. He says if he was in the right, he would like it if Congress would go ahead and so decide it; if he was in the wrong, and was only a murderer, he would like to know that, also. He is satisfied of one thing - that he cannot live under rebel rule; and thinks, from at least a military point of view, that the rebel conquered have no right to dictate to the victors - no right to say under what terms they will come in. Congressmen say that everything that stands in the way must go to the wall - if the Supreme Court obstructs the regeneration of rebeldom, it must go, too. This would be good enough reasoning, possibly, but for one thing: the President will veto the bill making rules for the Judges, and it can hardly be passed over his veto. And even if it were, the Court would simply annul it, and then, no doubt, go on and annul the Reconstruction Acts by the liberation of McCardle. A telegraphic report to-day says that General Meade has suspended the Governor and Treasurer of Georgia from office, and this has created great rejoicing among Republicans here. So the political cauldron boils. Let her boil.

It is believed that Secretary Stanton will be reinstated in the War Office within a few days, whether the President likes it or not. Congress is on its mettle now - Stanton, the President, Treasury frauds, reconstruction - it has a good deal of business on its hands, but it is fighting furiously at last. Even Wendell Phillips ought to be satisfied now. How the cauldron does boil. Let her boil.

Stewart's Speech.

It is the fashion, now, to write speeches. Congressman Brooks said at the Press Banquet, last night, that the day of eloquence is over in America - killed by newspapers, telegraphs, and phonographers. No man has a chance to carefully write out a speech for

publication, now, after it has been delivered. It is forever too late - the short-handers have got it, the telegraph has flashed it to the ends of the earth, the daily press has petrified it into print with all its imperfections before the words were cold upon his lips. He said that Webster and Clay could not be orators, now - their crude extemporaneous efforts would appall them in print, and they would fall into the safer new fashion, and write cold, glittering, chastely worded sentences that could warm no listener into enthusiasm when he heard them.

Mr. Stewart has written, and written carefully, an elaborate speech upon the mining interests of the Pacific coast. It is by far the best and the ablest effort of the kind that ever has seen the light in this region. If he never does anything else to be proud of while he lives, this ought to be sufficient to satisfy him. It ought to be sufficient to kill him, too. For I never knew a man to do his constituents a great service, or do his whole duty by them honestly and well, that they didn't put him on the shelf and send some ass to represent them that was of no use whatever under God Almighty's Heaven but to get up and "blat" about niggers and politics and American flags and other bosh that he didn't know any more about than a bull knows about mathematics. California has shelved Conness, and served him right. He worked too hard for her interests - he was too faithful to his trust - he was too good and too tireless a servant.

Mr. Stewart is the only man that ever stood in either house of Congress that knows all about mines and mining - knows it from A to Zed - knows it in all its needs, in all its possibilities, in all its details. He knows what laws are wanted to nurture, and protect, and endow it with prosperity, and he knows how to frame them. He sees into his subject with a surer and a clearer vision than any man on this coast - it would be safe to say, or upon yours either. I was satisfied of this before. I know it now, after reading his speech. But it will do this for him - it will show his constituents that they have sent a man here who knows his business to a fraction, and is exactly the man they need here to keep Congress from eternally impoverishing them by passing absurd laws to cripple mining and disgust every man engaged in it, and then you will send some brainless idiot here - some quacking numskull - some bladder of wind that some browsing elephant, in the inscrutable providence of God, ought to step on and burst. That is what you will do. If I were in Nevada next fall I wouldn't want anything better than to take stump for Stewart and "norate" it to you. Can a man put a bill through the Congress like Stewart's that freed your mines from Government ownership and opened the markets of the world for their sale - dare a man to do so priceless a service as that for his people and ever hope to see the United States again? Not while republics are ungrateful, I reckon, and a clattering tongue with a piece of an idiot hung to it can be found in his place. You are hearing me toot my horn!

MARK TWAIN.

[photocopy available in Mark Twain Papers, University of California, Berkeley, CA]