

The following excerpt is from
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My first encounter with Colonel Stingo, like Boswell’s with Dr. Johnson, was not the result of accident but sought. At a fight in January, 1946, I asked a boxer’s press agent if he knew who Stingo was, and he said he didn’t but would find out from the *Enquirer’s* ring writer, a fellow named Billy Stevens. He went off, and came back to my seat in a couple of minutes with a slip of paper that said on it, “Jimmy Macdonald, Hotel Dixie.” I called the Dixie on the morrow and on several succeeding days, but the hotel operator kept saying my party didn’t answer. I left my name and telephone number on each occasion. (There are long periods of composition or recuperation when Colonel Stingo, though at home, remains, as he has it, *incomiado*.) On the fifth or sixth day, I finally received a telephone call from the author of the White Robin piece. His voice was mild, fresh, and courteous, and untinged with regional accent. A certain measured orotundity of phrasing reminded me of his prose style, but his tone bespoke amusement at his own rhetoric. I told him I wished to meet him, because of my interest in his writing. His voice reflected a modest incredulity, but he proposed an evening rendezvous in a joint on Fourteenth Street near Irving Place. “I would suggest that you ask for me at the bar,” he said. Upon keeping the appoint-

ment, I acted on his suggestion, and the bartender pointed out to me the protagonist of this chronicle.

It is difficult to remember, when you have known a man for a considerable time, what about him especially impressed you at first sight. In the case of the Colonel, I think it was that he seemed rather a very old youth than a youthful old man. (He was seventy-three at the time.) The Colonel was as surprised at the maturity of my appearance as I at the juvenile quality of his. "From your voice, I judged you to be a young neophyte," he said. "But I see before me a man with the outward aspect of a Russian heavyweight wrestler." Nothing flatters a fat man more than the suggestion that he is in fact a mass of muscle. The Colonel, had he produced stock-subscription blanks and a fountain pen, could have signed me up right there for ten units in the American Hog Syndicate or a hundred shares of the Stray Dog Manhattan Mining Company—both of them promotions that have engaged portions of his past, although, of course, I had not at that time heard of them. But he contented himself with accepting a peg of John Begg.

Contemplating Colonel Stingo as he sipped his drink, I saw a small, lively man with a back as straight as the wide part precisely in the middle of his hair, which is still distinguishably blond. (The part has become wider but no less precise with the passing of the years since then.) He wore a bow tie, a white carnation in his lapel, and pointed shoes, which showed off his elegantly diminutive feet. I forget which of his suits he had on, but it looked like one a young man would have worn in the period of the Great Gatsby. His neatness, his dash made me wonder whether he ever had been a military man, and I felt impelled to ask.

"I deny the impeachment, but I come of a military family," he replied, smiling. "One of my ancestors, a giant of a man, led the last despairing charge of the Clan Macdonald at Culloden. It is possible the genes have marked my physique." The Colonel had, I now noticed, a wide mouth, which, when he smiled, presented a full crescent of square teeth, several of them braced with wires, and his nose, wide at the base, was tilted up at the end. His confiding eyes were the color of a washed-out blue shirt. The full face was disarming, the profile less so. The bridge of the nose was high, and so were the cheekbones. The

lids hung heavy over the eyes when he wasn't looking straight at me. From the side, the head reminded me of a not particularly benign tortoise.

I asked the Colonel what newspapers he had worked on before the *Enquirer*, remarking that his column offered evidence that he had been around long before the birth of that paper. This is sometimes a good way to get an old newspaperman started talking, and it worked with the Colonel. (It is never hard to get him started, I have since learned, but, like Scheherazade, he takes his own way home.) "I began in my native city of New Orleans, and by the time I was twenty I had achieved the position of handicapper on the *Item*," the Colonel said. "My selections appeared on the first page of the early edition during the winter racing season. At that time, New Orleans offered the most important winter racing in America. There was a track at Jacksonville, but it didn't amount to much, and neither did Florida.

"Stopping in at the *Item* office one day on my way to the Fair Grounds track, in 1896, '97, or '98—memory grows furtive—I found a note asking me to call on a Mr. Charles Phillips Cooper at the St. Charles Hotel. The name meant nothing to me, but I went. Mr. Cooper introduced himself as the managing editor of the New York *Evening Sun*. He said he was in town with his wife and daughter for a holiday, and the women had played my selections in the *Item* and won thirty-four hundred dollars. [Mr. Cooper was, for years after his retirement from newspaper work, a professor at the Columbia School of Journalism. He died in 1950, a professor emeritus. I once asked Cooper about the Colonel's story, and he said he had never been in New Orleans in his life. Furthermore, he had never had a daughter. Not long ago, I told the Colonel what Cooper had said—it was an unkind thing to do—and he replied, "Of course. It was a man named Maclay. Memory grows furtive, my friend. Memory grows furtive."]

"That proves to me, my boy,' Mr. Cooper said, 'that you are the best racing writer in the business and I offer you the post of turf editor of the *Evening Sun*, at a stipend of fifty dollars a week.' I accepted his offer, but delayed my departure after he had left town. When he wrote that he wouldn't hold

the job any longer unless I took the next train, I finally made up my mind to quit the City of Mardi Gras, where I had been raised under the tender care of my grandmother's household slaves."

"But surely you don't go back before the Civil War?" I said.

"I was born in 1874," the Colonel said. "People in New Orleans held slaves long after the end of Mr. Lincoln's war. It was like bootlegging. When I was a little tad, my grandmother and her mother—my great-grandmother—would send two of their male slaves and a white-haired, black-faced mammy over to Newtown, beyond Canal Street, to the big house where I was born, to get me and return me in regal splendor in a Creole-type open barouche behind a big jack mule who could roar like a lion. He liked me, that I remember, for I always maintained an adequate supply of sweet yams for his delectability. On one of these cavalcades, I saw General Beauregard. The mammy called him to my attention. It had been twenty years since Beauregard had smelled powder at Chickamauga, but nevertheless he was still the Napoleon of the Promenade at Spanish Fort on Sunday afternoons. My great-grandmother, whose maiden name was Angelica O'Reilly, lived to be ninety-four and my grandmother, whose maiden name was Elizabeth O'Regan, to be ninety. Since my great-grandmother had been only sixteen when she gave birth to my grandmother, the two, at the age when I recall them seemed to me like sisters. They called each other by their first names. My great-grandmother spoke but little English, but she was fluent in Spanish and very handy with the Gaelic tongue. She looked like the monument you see of the pioneer mother. She was rough but kindly, I recall. All the slaves adored her. My wonderful grandmother sang and played most acceptably on the first Steinway piano ever brought into residential Vieux Carré. She had once acted upon the stage of the French Opéra and could handle a Springfield rifle like a soldier at Shiloh. Well I recall seeing my grandmother, many times, smoking a big black plantation cigar while knocking off with fine appreciation Brahms or Liszt in G Minor at the Steinway. Her expectoration had remarkable capacity as to distance and accuracy, her objective being right through the open window to the green lawn in the

garden across the pedestrian walk. If ever the flapping window curtains interfered with her trajectory, vent would be accorded her annoyance by an indulgence in choice profanity.”

The Colonel ordered us another brace of drinks. “It is not yet the hour of the great transition,” he said, introducing me to one of his habitual idioms. “I drink hard liquor only before breakfast. But I got up at five o’clock this afternoon and have not had my breakfast yet. After breakfast, on principle, I drink only the Gambrinian amber.”

The Colonel watched the barman set down the drinks, and then went on, obviously warming to his narrative, “It is the wonderful dining hall at Sarsfield House, our ancestral demesne, that sticks uppermost in my childish memory, with its two immense and positively beautiful old ante-bellum crystal chandeliers, the soft and generous old-time Irish linen at a table overspread with silver—‘right from Tiffany’s up there in that hateful place New York,’ as my grandmother would explain. Out of forty-odd slaves who manned Sarsfield House, not one accepted freedom at the close of the war, though they were all invited to do so. My grandmother directed them with regal authority, but she was also kindly and considerate. The old-time darkies just loved her. She would get up in the middle of the night and go out into a pelting storm to help one of them in an hour of anguish or emergent necessity.

“My father was a Macdonald, a descendent of the Highlanders who came to Louisiana after the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie. He was a highly successful attorney. But by and by hard times came knocking at the door, and the result was my precipitation, at an early age, into the branch of letters which first suggests itself to the non-holding—namely, journalism. [“Non-holding” is another idiom of the Colonel’s, meaning a lack of tease.]

“It was 1888. At home, my destiny became the live subject of commentation at all family gatherings. What to do with him? My dear mother finally announced that she had achieved the brave heights by securing James Aloysius—that’s me—a job with the New Orleans *Catholic Register*, then edited by a fine, kindly gentleman named Father John Quinn. I’m assigned the task of securing data and writing pieces about the dear departed of St. Jerome’s Parish and collecting money from the news-

stands based upon the prior week's sales. I would have been much more at home keeping score of the Southern League games at Heinemann Park between the Pelicans and visiting teams.

"After writing a few dandy pieces about prominent decedents of the Parish, and after aggrandizing twenty dollars or so from the downtown newsstands and top carriers, a comforting discovery came to me. I learned, much to my surprise and delight, that a perfectly adorable spot to rest the body and cool the fetid brow from much deep-sea thinking and unremitting pave-pounding—about five blocks of it—was Sitting Bull Bush's barn-like poolroom, where business was done on five different fields of horses in five different cities. This soon resulted in my being out some eighteen dollars in my newsstand collections, and when I made known my predicament to Father Quinn, that kindly man and fine editor looked at me with his two saucer-shaped blue eyes and said, 'My boy, worry no further. It is plain to me that you were cut out for greater things. I've gotten a new position for you this coming Monday, on Mr. Dominick O'Malley's very sedate daily *Item*. I'm sorry to see you go, but destiny for you beckons to other and larger fields of newspaper endeavor.'

"And so it was that I reported to the *Item* front boss and was assigned a desk and utensils. No sooner had I gotten well set in my work than pistol slugs began skimming over my head, some of them bouncing off a steel pictorial linecut I was holding in front of me for a final checkup and O.K. And that was my beginning in a chosen field of destiny, the newspaper business."

"What brought you into the line of fire?" I asked, astonished at this quick change in narrative mood from the ecclesiastical to the pyrotechnic.

"Mr. O'Malley had abandoned his desk at the usual hour of twelve," the Colonel said, "and betaken himself for prandial relaxation first to the bar of the St. Charles Hotel, where he had a three-bagger of Sazeracs, then to Hymen's bar, on Common Street, where he increased his apéritif by four silver gin fizzes, and after that over to Farbacher's saloon, on Royal, where he had a schooner or two of Boston Club punch. O'Malley was not of that *sang-pur* elegance that would have

got him past the portal of the august Boston Club itself—the most revered club in New Orleans—but he had bribed a fancy girl to wheedle the formula from a Boston Club bartender. He then turned this over to Farbacher's to keep available for him."

"And what was the general nature of this drink?" I asked.

"Twelve bottles of champagne," Colonel Stingo replied without hesitation, "eight of white wine, one and a half bottles of raspberry syrup, half a bottle of brandy, half a bottle of kirschwasser, a quarter of a bottle of Jamaica rum, a quarter of a bottle of curaçao, two pineapples, two dozen oranges, two and a half pounds of sugar, seltzer, and ice. That would serve several persons, naturally.

"But to continue. When Mr. O'Malley had finished his preparations bacchanalic, he strolled over to Antoine's, where he had four dozen freshly shucked oysters without any muck on them, a red-snapper flambée in absinthe, a salmi of three woodcock and four snipe, a chateaubriand *bleu*, six bottles of Bass's ale, and a magnum of La Mission-Haut-Brion of the comet year.* After that, he smoked a made-to-measure cigar, as long as his arm from the inside of the elbow to the tip of the middle finger, and drank a dipper of Calvados from a cask that had been brought to Louisiana from Normandy with the first cargo of sparkle-eyed Cyprians in 1721. Not more than one quart had been drawn from the cask in any one year since, and it had been carefully replenished each time. Having effectuated the *trou normand*, O'Malley consumed an *omelette au kirsch* and a small baked Alaska, followed by a *caffè espresso*, for which he sent the maître d'hôtel to a dive operated by the Maffia. 'The hardest thing to get in New Orleans,' O'Malley always said, 'is a decent cup of coffee.' He then started to walk back toward the office, which was on Camp Street, perchance with some vague notion of pausing on the way to drape a beautiful octoroon's ivory throat with pearls, and would have arrived at his usual hour—half past four—had he not met with an unforeseen vicissitude, of which more later.

"Meanwhile, I, a mere kid, had been entranced from the moment of Mr. O'Malley's exit by the idea of seating myself in

*The Colonel here indicated his disapproval of that fraud, Oysters Rockefeller.

his swivel chair and cocking my feet on his desk. Expecting momentarily his return, for I had heard that secular newspapermen ate, so to speak, *sur le pouce*, I refrained for the first four hours and fifteen minutes. Then, deciding that he might not be back at all, I yielded. I made my way furtively to his desk, sat down, swung my legs up, and, encouraged by the smiles of the older men, even took the boss's green eyeshade off the blotter and placed it on my towish potato. I then raised a steel line cut from the desk and, pretending to inspect it, held it in front of my face, thus veiling my identity.

"I did not know it was the habit of Mr. David Hennessy, the Chief of Police of New Orleans, to arrive at the *Item* office with two revolvers each afternoon at four-thirty-five to shoot at Mr. O'Malley. The fellows in the composing room set their watches by it, and would send the final edition to press as Mr. Hennessy fired his twelfth shot. This always signaled his retreat, as he would not tarry to reload under fire.

"It was a tryst. O'Malley would arrive at four-thirty, hang up his frock coat, lay out his revolvers on the desk in front of him, and start to write an editorial taking the skin off Hennessy, charging the Chief with official dereliction by permitting the poolrooms, policy bazaars, brothels and bagnios, the stews and knocking shops to run wide open every day, including Sunday, a day of extreme reverence south of the Tennessee River. Mr. O'Malley was in political control of the city and figured that any madam who wanted a Sunday turn at bat should apply to him personally. At four-thirty-five, the Chief, who had been steaming up on Creole coffee laced with contraband Cuban rum at McConkey's, in Commercial Alley, would proceed across Camp Street and ascend to the first landing in the *Item* building. He always gave Mr. O'Malley five minutes to get set. With little knowledge of trigonometry but with a certain natural intuition, Mr. Hennessy would select a large angle of trajectory through the wooden partition screening the city room and the corner where Mr. O'Malley sat in pontifical augustity. His first shots were a long price to wing Mr. O'Malley but a good bet to drive him under his desk in search of cover, a position from which he could not efficiently retaliate. Advancing behind the barrage, Mr. Hennessy would reach a spot from which he could survey the city room, but there he would

be caught in a cross fire between the sports editor and the editor of the religious page and, after emptying both revolvers, would be impelled to retreat. It was a lesson in logistics that I have never forgotten—firepower is dependent upon a commensurate supply of ammunition.

“But do not think that Mr. O’Malley had not his troops in elegant *élan* and precise readiness for these maneuvers. At the first muffled roar and crackling sound of rendered timber, all hands except the enfiling pair—from the city editor to the meekest copy boy—would secure shotguns conveniently placed for the purpose and rush to the front windows looking out on the street below, knowing full well that the miscreant Hennessy must, perforce, make egress and briefly present a target.

“After I had survived my first payday, I was initiated into the routine. But on the first day of employment I was completely unprepared when a bullet from a Smith & Wesson whammed into the steel plate I held in front of me, knocking it from my hands and me *derrière dessus* behind Mr. O’Malley’s desk. I learned afterward that it was the most accurate opening shot Mr. Hennessy had ever fired. ‘A perfect carom,’ the religious editor said. ‘He played it off that new machine they call a typewriter. Just goes to prove typewriters have no place in a newspaper office.’

“After Mr. Hennessy had retreated, shrinking up close to the front of the *Item* building, so as not to give the boys with the fowling pieces a clean shot, all my seniors apologized profusely for not having tipped me off. They hadn’t thought I was in any real danger, they explained, and had just wanted to see some of the cockiness taken out of me when the first missile whistled overhead. ‘It is ceasing to be fun,’ the sports editor said. ‘Also, I suspect the Chief of wearing the cover of a wash boiler inside the seat of his pants. The head of the copy desk had a clean hit on him day before yesterday and the only result was a loud clang. What worries me, though, is what has happened to the boss. He is either in the clink or some panel worker has stolen his trousers again.’”

The Colonel looked up at me, and his nostrils, forming a deeply indented “M,” had a look of unshakable sincerity. “The first surmise was correct,” he went on. “He was lagged. Mr.

O'Malley, returning to the office from his last port of call, had been hurrying through Commercial Alley, a narrow lane between St. Charles and Camp Street, in order to arrive at the rendezvous before Hennessy. Should Hennessy get there first, Mr. O'Malley would find himself cut off from his base. In making his way through the alley, the editor, a man of generous girth, came into abrupt collision, like a crack flier of the Southern Railway meeting a freight train of the Louisville & Nashville, with the editor of a rival newspaper, the New Orleans *Morning States*, headed in the opposite direction. The two had exchanged acrimonious ink about a suggestion, publicized by Mr. O'Malley, that a bank of which his fellow-editor was a director was on the point of failure. By coincidence, the bank had refused Mr. O'Malley a loan. The bank was the Hibernia National, known in New Orleans of the epoch as the Irish Rock.

"The editor of the *States*, whose name, as I recollect it, was Ewing, invariably carried an umbrella, which, vouchsafing it served him as a sunshade in the summer, he prized because it had a sharp ferrule. He thrust it immediately at Mr. O'Malley's right eye, being resigned to an exchange of shots and thinking that by this preliminary he might impair Mr. O'Malley's aim. He missed the eyeball but severely indented Mr. O'Malley's brow, and forthwith the fusillade began. Of course, down there in those days there was so much shooting the general public knew just what to do. The patrolmen on St. Charles and Camp detoured all traffic headed past the ends of the alley, and a number of shopkeepers on Commercial reached out from their doorways and grabbed the right hands of the contestants, and the hostilities were terminated with no casualties beyond the effusion of gore from Mr. O'Malley's punctured pumpkin.

"The police escorted both men before a magistrate, and from the clutches of those Dogberries O'Malley would soon have talked himself free had not Ewing, himself a political power, sworn out a warrant against him for impairing the credit of the Hibernia National and causing a run on the Irish Rock. The judge happened to own stock in that institution. O'Malley was therefore immured, soon to be joined by a Mr. Kiernan, who published the New Orleans *News* and who had

collaborated in his campaign against the Hibernia. A swift messenger informed us at the *Item* office of their predicament.

“A high bail was set, and while the senior members of the staff sought bond for the captives, I was dispatched to the St. Charles Parish Prison, where they were incarcerated, in a hired hack, with a case of vintage Irroy, *brut*, and Mr. O’Malley’s English bulldog, Mike, whom he had left tied to the umbrella stand when he went out to lunch. I found the prisoners in good spirits and left them in better after they had emptied the first three bottles, kindly inviting me and the turnkey to have a glass with them. I went out thinking I had landed in the pearl of professions. And so it was, in those days of halcyon—the very cap and zenith of American journalism.”*

The Colonel appeared to ruminate for a while, and I fancied that a procession of eminent zenithians, like Marse Henry Watterson and the youthful William Randolph Hearst, was passing behind his eyelids. But he was thinking of something else, for presently he said, “I have never ceased to regret that on my first day at the *Item* I was the indirect, though innocent, cause of Chief Hennessy’s death. The bullet that struck the steel plate in my hand ricocheted through the flimsy ceiling and hit an old-style Southern gentleman in the business office in the calf of the leg. His name, as I remember it, was Mr. Troup Sessams, and he had withheld his own fire previously because he considered the shooting downstairs a strictly editorial matter. When the bullet arrived, Mr. Troup Sessams said, ‘This is no damn joke.’

“He closed up his roll-top desk, hung his alpaca office coat on a hook, put on his long-tailed frock coat and a hat with a five-inch brim, and withdrew from the lower drawer of the desk a rosewood case containing two long-barrelled duelling pistols, with which he had eliminated all ante-bellum rivals for the hand of his wife, at that time heiress to a plantation Faulknerian but since, like so many of us, non-holding. He loaded the pistols and placed one inside each breast of his frock coat,

*New Orleans is nearer the dull nadir of American Journalism now. The Times-Picayune Company, publishing its only morning paper, has swallowed both the great O’Malley’s *Item* and the irascible Mr. Ewing’s *States*, and agglutinated both into one evening paper, the *States-Item*, a flaccid appendage. The spirited competition of old has given way to dull monopolistic calm.

in the long pockets, provided for that purpose by ante-bellum tailors. He then walked downstairs, limping a little—the shot had only grazed him—and followed Hennessy out into the street. It was the end of the Chief. The year was 1889. The precise date eludes me.”

The next day, I was telling a friend of mine who was born and brought up in New Orleans about how a bullet had nearly put an end to the Colonel's career almost before it had got started and about the succession of gory events the bullet had set off. My friend said it all sounded perfectly possible in the New Orleans of an earlier generation, except that he was certain Hennessy had been murdered by the Maffia, and a few nights later, when I was again in the Colonel's company, I gently taxed him with this seeming discrepancy. He appeared unperturbed.

“That was the common theory, and the citizens of New Orleans acted upon it to the extent of shooting eleven Italians and then hanging them to trees,” the Colonel said. “But they were desperate characters anyway, and doubtless deserved their fate.”

In the course of a recent visit to New Orleans, I sought corroboration of Colonel Stingo's recollections. My research there indicates that while the years may have blurred his memory in regard to some of the facts and caused it to embellish, if not invent, others, there is a certain hard core of veracity in what he remembers and no doubt at all that at least some of his cast of characters did exist in roles more or less akin to those he ascribes to them. There is the matter of Mr. O'Malley's *embon-point*, for instance; I learned that there was definitely one editorial fracas in which it served him ill, and rather more gravely so than in the one recounted by Colonel Stingo. This was a duel between Mr. O'Malley and Colonel Harrison Parker, editor of the *Daily Picayune*. Mr. O'Malley had published in the *Item* a cartoon representing Colonel Parker as a dog led on a string by the governor of Louisiana, whom Mr. O'Malley disliked. The newspaper offices were on opposite sides of Camp Street. One day, both editors emerged into the street at the same time, bound for lunch; apparently, lunch was when shootings always started in that miraculous city. “O'Malley fired first and