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Henry Watterson and the Liberal Convention of 1872

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At the beginning of the presidential year of 1872, revolt was brewing in the incumbent Republican party against the Radical faction which dominated it. This was caused in part by Grant's ineptitude as President, by numerous scandals in high public office, and especially by the harshness of Congress' reconstruction policy toward the South. A ground swell of discontent was rising among moderate Republicans throughout the North. The movement first came to a head in Missouri. A so-called Liberal Republican group organized there in the late sixties. It was led by moderate Republicans who opposed the postwar Republican state administration's severe proscription of ex-Confederates. Many Democrats, living under the suspicion of treason, were glad to join the group in the hope of obtaining political amnesty. The Liberals carried the Missouri state elections in 1870. They sent their outstanding leader, Carl Schurz, to the Senate and placed B. Gratz Brown in the governor's chair. The new party's chief principles included amnesty to the South, civil service reform, and tariff reform.¹

The movement attracted widespread attention throughout the country because of its timeliness and success. Many people felt that it should be extended to the nation as a whole. In September of 1871, Carl Schurz raised the banner for a national Liberal independent third party to run a presidential candidate against Grant who was sure to be the Radicals' choice in 1872. Reformers of various stripes cast interested glances at the project: low-tariff men, Eastern

¹ Earle D. Ross, "Horace Greeley and the South, 1865-1872," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (Durham, North Carolina, 1902-), XVI (1917), 334-35.

civil service reformers, women's-rights champions and various others tending toward the "lunatic fringe." The most serious problem which confronted the Liberals after they had won over the moderate Republicans of the North was to gain the adherence of the Democratic party, both North and South. Grant could be defeated only by a coalition of this magnitude. It was especially necessary that Southern Democrats be won over. Liberal leaders and many of the moderate Republicans were becoming convinced that the welfare of the entire nation demanded that the Federal troops and other types of Federal interference in the ex-Confederate states should be removed and full home rule restored to the South. Southerners were in a most difficult frame of mind: the raw sores of the war were constantly being irritated by Congress' reconstruction policy, a new race antagonism had arisen, along with a blind resentment against everything labelled "Yankee." Liberals had to overcome their distrust and bring them to see that their only hope of home rule lay in cooperation with the best elements in the North to bring about the end of Radical rule, rather than a stubborn refusal to cooperate in any way with the Northerners. Suspicion and resentment existed on the other side, too; many moderate Northern Republicans looked at Ku Klux activities and were doubtful whether the South had accepted the results of the war in good faith.

The press was naturally vitally interested in the Liberal group. The post-Civil War period was the heyday of the great personal editors. Prior to the war, journalists were often mere party hacks; by 1900, the "counting-room," that is, considerations of finance and advertising, influenced editorial policies. But for a generation or so, they were able to keep themselves relatively free from outside pressure. A number of editors of outstanding ability and great force of character attracted to themselves tremendous personal followings, whose first thought on grabbing the paper in the morning was to turn to the editorial page and "see what old So and So says." The attitude of leading editors in the various sections was bound to be enormously important in determining the successes of the Liberal movement which depended upon popular support rather than party machine.

The dean of American journalists and one of the most outstanding editors of the country was Horace Greeley of the

New York *Tribune*. He had made a really great contribution in the building up of Northern public opinion against slavery in the generation before the war and he had helped build up the Republican party's strength. These contributions, as well as his well-known eccentricities of person and of minor principles, had made violent friends and enemies for him. He consistently baited the South and the Democratic party before the war but, since its close, had advocated sectional reconciliation and amnesty for the South. His support would be valuable for the Liberal movement but not in a position of leadership, as he was still suspect to the South.

Other prominent younger Republican editors of independent views came out heartily for the Liberals, whose principles they had been advocating for some time in their crusade against Grantism. The more outstanding of these included Samuel Bowles of the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Republican*, Horace White of the Chicago *Tribune*, and Murat Halstead of the Cincinnati *Commercial*.

The support of the Southern Democratic press was particularly needed by the Liberal movement. Henry Watterson of the Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal* took a friendly attitude from the beginning. His record for the past few years explains this stand. Although a Tennessee Democrat and apparently a Unionist at heart, he had been a Confederate soldier and the editor of a Confederate army newspaper during part of the war. When the war was barely over, in the spring of 1865, he became an editor of the Cincinnati *Evening Times*; and in the Northern setting, the young ex-Confederate began his long crusade for reconciliation between the sections. He continued the work for a while on the editorial page of the Nashville, Tennessee, *Republican Banner*. In 1868, he helped organize the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, which was a fusion of the ex-Unionist Louisville *Daily Journal* of George D. Prentice and the ex-Confederate Louisville *Courier*. He attained nation-wide prominence during the next fifty years as its editor. For the first ten years or so of his career there, he devoted himself chiefly to his crusade for sectional reconciliation. His primary concern was the restoration and rehabilitation of the South. He felt that this could best be attained by forgiving and forgetting about the war and turning the attention of both the North and the South to the new problems which were arising in the postwar era. By

1872, Watterson appeared to be winning an uphill fight for recognition of himself and his principles in Kentucky and to some extent in the deep South. He had also won definite approval from journalists in other sections, particularly the Northeast.² During the course of the campaign of 1872, Thomas Nast and other cartoonists introduced the public of both sections to the dashing, ebullient young man with long flowing blond mustache and hair. His robust and usually vehement editorials were followed by a widening circle of readers.

Overtures looking toward a coalition were made by Liberals to Southern Democrats as early as the fall of 1871. Democrats were discouraged by failure in the recent elections and were amiably disposed to listen,³ but each group was afraid that it would be swallowed up by the other. At the beginning of 1872, everybody waited for the situation to clarify. Watterson advised his following in Kentucky and other parts of the South to "lie low and keep dark."⁴

On January 4, 1872, the Liberal Republican state convention of Missouri issued a call for a national Liberal Republican convention to meet in Cincinnati in May. Watterson remarked approvingly, "This begins to look like business" and wished them "all possible success." He added that the Kentucky Democratic party was ready to support "any liberal and patriotic movement having a fair and practicable showing of efficiency."⁵

Watterson's editorials to his constituents in Kentucky and the South during the spring of 1872 reflected the delicate if not dangerous nature of the political situation as it affected Southern Democrats in general and one Southern Democratic editor in particular. He could not afford to get out on a limb too far in supporting the Liberals and thus run the risk of being repudiated by the Democrats. His attitude was mainly one of watchful waiting or what he called "masterly activity." Sending up trial balloons or smoke screens as the occasion might demand, he felt his way carefully. His main

² Lena C. Logan, Henry Watterson, *Border Nationalist, 1840-1877* (Ph. D. thesis, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 1942), 249q-252 and the references cited therein.

³ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, weekly ed., January 10, 1872.

⁴ *Ibid.*, January 10, 1872.

⁵ *Ibid.*, February 7, 1872.

object was, of course, amnesty and restoration of home rule for the South, to which end he worked for years in an attempt to reconcile the two sections in feeling. In 1872, the chief tangible step possible toward the accomplishment of his purpose was the defeat of Grant and the Radicals. This could be brought about only by a coalition of Liberal Republicans and Democrats. Before Watterson came out openly and advised Democrats to join the Liberals, he waited for several things to happen. The Liberals must give definite proof that they had broken clean with Radical interests and the hypnotic influence of Republican party spirit. They must also nominate a good ticket which the South would be willing to support. If they fulfilled both these conditions and if the great independent Republican editors gave the movement their support, then Grant's doom was certain, Watterson believed. The Democrats would show the "wildest folly" in such a case, if they nominated a third ticket.⁶ He wrote in March, "We hold the old Ship of Zion well to the wind, though we do fly a white flag and are keeping a sharp look-out for friendly signals."⁷

Watterson worked all during the spring of 1872 to reassure and bring together various discordant elements in the proposed coalition. He reassured Democrats who were afraid of Horace Greeley, the pioneer Republican, with the assertion, "There is nothing in the creed of Thomas Jefferson that Horace Greeley may not faithfully subscribe to." One of the most intransigent groups of die-hard Southerners, opposed to any suggestion of reconciliation or cooperation with anything Northern, was led by Alexander H. Stephens, former vice-president of the Confederacy. Watterson assured Stephens that he would find no difficulty in subscribing to all the principles of Greeley's *New York Tribune* except those relating to slavery and the war issues,⁸ which, however, were of permanent importance to both persons. Watterson probably drove the blood pressure of Democratic worthies several points higher when he went so far as to assert that even the name "Democrat" was not sacred. "If the old Ship of Zion seem irreligious or old-fogyfied, call her the Young Ironsides. In other words, what's in a name?"⁹

⁶ *Ibid.*, April 10, 1872; April 3, 1872; March 20, 1872.

⁷ *Ibid.*, April 3, 1872.

⁸ *Ibid.*, March 20, 1872.

⁹ *Ibid.*, April 3, 1872.

Republican ill-wishers expected questions of party principle such as tariff and currency to be the great stumbling blocks of the Liberal convention and to prevent subsequent coalition with the Democrats.¹⁰ Although Watterson was a strong advocate of lower tariff during much of his fifty-odd-year career as an editor, at this time he relegated it to the background. He and all Southerners felt that the Southern question far transcended it in importance. He was not sure, however, that Liberal Republicans were sufficiently convinced of its importance; from a purely political standpoint, this question had to be stressed in order to attract Southern votes to the Liberals. Amnesty to the South had been a cardinal principle of the Missouri Liberals from the beginning. But now, Watterson felt that the movement had come to be dominated by Easterners, who stressed tariff and civil service reform above the Southern issue. There was no strong positive hand of sympathy between these two political, or rather sectional, groups. Watterson jibed at the Eastern Liberals as being "too mathematical, too precise, too passionless, too timid" to appeal to enough voters to win an American political campaign. They needed emotional appeal which could be furnished by the Southern question. "A great political revival cannot be attained by the application of the rule of three." The Liberals "must, as they say on the river, 'fire up.'"¹¹

Even at times such as this, when he was assuming to address the South and the whole nation, Watterson had to keep a watchful eye on the Kentucky Democrats, whom many observers accused of being notoriously unruly and ready to break over the traces at the slightest provocation. Early in 1872, the Kentucky Democratic party situation was relatively quiet. A knock-down and drag-out fight had raged between Democratic state administration leaders at Frankfort, who represented the Bluegrass section of the state on the one side and Watterson's *Courier-Journal* and the Louisville interests on the other. The chief question involved in the quarrel was acceptance of the results of the war, particularly the changed status of the negro, and a more amicable attitude toward the North.

By 1872, Watterson and his group felt that they had won; at least the administration leaders appeared less intran-

¹⁰ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Gazette*, April 4, 1872.

¹¹ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, weekly ed., April 17, 1872.

sigent. Now Watterson adjured them to stick together and be ready to cooperate with the national Democratic party and the Liberal movement: "Don't fire off any pieces before the rest of the line goes into action."¹²

By the latter part of April, the national political situation was shaping up well enough for Watterson to become moderately optimistic. Liberals were no longer demanding that the Democratic party should dissolve its identity in supporting them; all they asked was Democratic help in a coalition to defeat Grant.¹³

The Liberal Republican convention had been called to meet May 1 at Cincinnati. As the time approached, interest in the convention, which was at first very slight, became very considerable. Whitelaw Reid, Greeley's second on the New York *Tribune* and a close friend of Watterson, remarked that "the Cincinnati movement goes on gloriously."¹⁴

Watching avidly, the Cincinnati papers noted the arrival of the delegates and other luminaries in their city for the convention. The press was well represented, as this gathering promised to be news of the first water, no matter what took place nor how it ended. Watterson arrived before April 30, along with other "prominent members of the press," including Reid, Bowles, and White.¹⁵ Watterson wrote many years later that he had "resolved to go a little in advance to Cincinnati, to have a look at the stalking-horse there to be offered, free to take it or leave it as I liked, my bridges and lines of communications still open and intact." He added that "the full contingent of Washington correspondents was there, of course, with sharpened eyes and pencils, to make the most of what they had already begun to christen a conclave of cranks."

As for the delegates themselves, "a livelier and more variegated omnium-gatherum was never assembled. . . . There were long-haired and spectacled doctrinaires from New England, and short-haired and blatant emissaries from New York. . . . There were brisk Westerners from Chicago and

¹² *Ibid.*, March 20, 1872.

¹³ *Ibid.*, April 17, 1872; March 20, 1872.

¹⁴ Royal Cortissoz, *The Life of Whitelaw Reid* (2 vols., New York, 1921), I, 208.

¹⁵ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, April 30, 1872.

St. Louis."¹⁶ Carl Schurz, the leading spirit of the movement from the beginning, was on hand with his following. So was Whitelaw Reid, Greeley's personal representative. With his New York retinue, he was intent on setting the nomination for his master, the eccentric "philosopher of Chappoqua." Even the carpetbagger dared show himself in a gathering whose main purpose was to exterminate him. A few rather overdressed persons had been brought up from New Orleans by her carpetbagger governor who had been ousted from the Louisiana statehouse by a rival carpetbagger clique. There was also at the convention, Watterson's main concern, "a motley array of Southerners of every sort, who were ready to clutch at every straw that promised relief to intolerable conditions."¹⁷

Generally speaking, the convention seemed to contain more cold fish than queer fish. Reporters noted the gravity of the gathering, bordering on solemnity. "There were none of the rough and 'hurrah' elements of ordinary political gatherings apparent. . . . There was no wild enthusiasm over anything or anybody."¹⁸ Other observers of different temperaments praised its conscientiousness, earnestness, and patriotism.¹⁹ The *Courier-Journal* reporters harped on this characteristic while commenting on the rising stock of the convention: "The grandest, popular outpouring that the country has ever witnessed," not "a ring of disappointed politicians," but "the most influential men of the Republican party, and they have the hardy mass of the people behind them."²⁰

This convention was promoted and dominated by journalists to an extent which is unusual in American history.²¹ The fourth estate, which had been awakening to a sense of

¹⁶ Henry Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century* (98 vols., New York, 1881-1930), LXXXV (1912-1913), 29-30. Watterson's account of the Liberal Republican movement exists in identical form in two other printed sources: "Marse Henry" (2 vols., New York, 1919), I, 239-67; and "Looking Backward," in serial form in *The Saturday Evening Post* (Philadelphia, 1728-), CXCI (1918-1919).

¹⁷ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 30.

¹⁸ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 2, 1872.

¹⁹ George W. Julian, *Political Recollections, 1840-1872* (Chicago, 1884), 337.

²⁰ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 2, 1872.

²¹ Ellis P. Oberholtzer, *A History of the United States Since the Civil War* (5 vols., New York, 1917-1937), III, 19; Cincinnati, Ohio, *Gazette*, May 7, 1872.

its power and its function as an organizer rather than a follower of public opinion and party opinion ever since the Civil War, came into its own and perhaps tried to overreach itself at this time. Journalists had been the mouthpieces of party hacks for a long time; now they were aspiring to be the molders of public opinion. Journalists had marshalled the postwar liberal movements in both parties away from war issues and toward new ones. This Liberal convention was a fruition of their labors. They had no intention of standing aside during its meeting and letting the old party hacks dominate it, choose its platform and candidate on consideration of politics rather than principle, and thus wreck all their endeavors. Also, they would fight as the vanguard of a campaign against Grant. It remained to be seen whether they possessed sufficient political sophistication to manipulate effectively the wires in the show versus seasoned politicians. They possessed a great weapon, if they knew how to use it, and that was the appeal to public opinion over the heads of the politicians.

The editorial group that had promoted the Liberal Republican movement for several months and now hoped to control its convention was known as the Quadrilateral, from the popular term applied to the four great fortified towns by which Austria had dominated northern Italy.²² Its Republican membership included Bowles of the *Springfield Republican*, White of the *Chicago Tribune* and Halstead of the *Cincinnati Commercial*. Watterson, the only Democrat, made the fourth side of the quadrilateral proper. In spite of its name, two others were included in the deliberations of the group. Schurz was the guardian philosopher and friend of the four aspiring younger men. He and Watterson shared a suite of rooms at the St. Nicholas Hotel where the group often met. Reid was suspect with many of the group as he was known to be working for the candidacy of Greeley which the others felt would ruin the movement. However, they yielded to his pleas and those of his close friend Watterson and admitted him. They believed that Greeley had no chance and that the

²² Oberholtzer, *A History of the United States Since the Civil War*, III, 19-20.

Tribune, as the most important Republican paper in the country, was important as a support of their cause.²³

Watterson was the only Democrat in the group and enjoyed great importance as the representative of both the Democratic party and the South. Being only thirty-two, he was younger than the others, both in editorial experience and in age. The *Cincinnati Gazette*, which wasted no love on any of them, felt inspired to refer to him as the "center figure of the group," surrounded by "its other members." This was a wise movement on the part of Grant supporters; it was designed to indicate to the regular Republicans that this group, as well as most of the rest of the convention, was heretical. Other papers did not place Watterson above the rest in importance; occasionally a paper did not even mention him.

The Cincinnati convention's main purpose in life was to nominate a presidential candidate. Its platform of tariff reform, civil service reform, and amnesty to the South was already understood by the public and promised to give little trouble. The Quadrilateral addressed itself to this problem as early as the night of April 29. Schurz, Bowles, Halstead, and Watterson favored Charles F. Adams; White was for Lyman Trumbull; and Reid advocated Greeley. All agreed that the lucky man must be distinguished for pure and upright political character as well as extraordinary ability. They refused to be sidetracked by political considerations, dear to the heart of professional politicians, such as availability and attraction to voters. Charles Francis Adams fulfilled this bill to a "t," having been distinguished for his disdain²⁴ of public favor. He indicated his feeling for the Liberal movement by sailing away to Europe just before the convention opened.²⁵ One is mildly surprised that the genial and effervescent Watterson supported a man of this type. He later confessed that he was not particularly devoted to Adams but he felt that the country needed him, which smacks of the

²³ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 31; Horace White, *The Life of Lyman Trumbull* (Boston and New York, 1913), 380; Oberholtzer, *A History of the United States Since the Civil War*, III, 23.

²⁴ Cortissoz, *The Life of Whitelaw Reid*, I, 209.

²⁵ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 35.

mood of prescribing a dose of castor oil.²⁶ Even Schurz, who was certainly no ball of fire, said that his "thermometer went down twenty degrees" the first meeting he had with Adams.²⁷ Lyman Trumbull, the upright and able Illinois jurist, a former Democrat and friend of Lincoln, was the other favorite. It was hoped that Trumbull and Adams could both be named on the same ticket, but apparently no effective efforts were made to bring this about. Reid persisted in holding to Greeley. The others were not perturbed, but assured themselves that the "Old White Hat" was "too eccentric and picturesque" to upset their plans for "such a sober-minded convention as ours."²⁸ The journalistic leaders scratched off other hopefuls, such as John F. Palmer of Illinois and B. Gratz Brown of Missouri. Watterson seems, at this stage, to have hankered a little after Brown, who, because of his Kentucky connections, "had better served my purpose."²⁹

The only ninepin that remained to be knocked down was Judge David Davis of Illinois, now an associate justice of the Supreme Court. For several years past, he had felt a chronic call to serve his country as a Democratic candidate for president.³⁰ In March, 1872, the Labor Reform party's nomination had been given to him. This maneuver was regarded by the Republican Cincinnati *Gazette* as having "the design of offering him as a bait to the Democratic and Liberal convention."³¹ Many Democratic papers, with the exception of the powerful New York *World* and the Louisville *Courier-Journal* "regarded the labor ticket as a suitable one for the coalition" of Liberals and Democrats. The leading independent Republican papers opposed him.³² Watterson said afterwards that the labor convention, "a gang of execrable

²⁶ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 6, 1872; George S. Merriam, *The Life and Times of Samuel Bowles* (2 vols., New York, 1885), II, 181, wrote that "next to the Cincinnati *Commercial*, the Louisville *Courier-Journal* was the most serviceable advocate" of Adams' nomination. The New York *Times*, as quoted in the Cincinnati *Commercial*, May 3, 1872, jeered at him as "a Democratic worshiper of Adams."

²⁷ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 1, 1872.

²⁸ White, *The Life of Lyman Trumbull*, 381.

²⁹ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 31; Cincinnati, Ohio, *Gazette*, May 3, 1872.

³⁰ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, April 29, 1872.

³¹ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Gazette*, March 19, 1872.

³² Earle D. Ross, *The Liberal Republican Movement* (New York, 1919), 78.

dead beats," had been gotten up by Democratic congressmen who hoped then to palm Davis on the Liberals as the Democratic choice.³³ The Cincinnati *Commercial* noted a "widely spread belief that Davis is the candidate of Grant's office-holders"—probably because they thought he would be easy to beat.³⁴ This illustrates the Quadrilateral's firm belief that Davis was tied up with the reactionary machine politicians of both parties, the antithesis of that for which the Liberals stood. Davis was the only aspirant at Cincinnati, who possessed the asset of a "bar'l" of money. His organizers had a large and vociferous gang at the convention, as telegrams had been sent to Chicago for "the boys" to come down quick."³⁵ All the talk in the lobbies was "Davis, Davis."³⁶

This was, of course, the first direct challenge to the Quadrilateral, which had widely trumpeted this as a reform convention above the maneuverings of professional politicians. They had practically committed themselves beforehand to support the Liberal candidate in the coming campaign, so the influence and dignity of journalism were involved and imperiled³⁷ and its success at stake. Many Republican delegates were already announcing that they would "go to Philadelphia"—the regular Republican convention—if Davis was nominated."³⁸ In this emergency, the Quadrilateral decided to "go to the country"—in a sense, hold a referendum of public opinion over Davis' candidacy. This was the "chief, if not our only weapon."³⁹ They undertook his demolition with "an editorial blast in the four quarters of the country."⁴⁰ That evening, the four men, not without a sense of the drama of the situation and of their own importance, prepared their separate editorials in concert. The next morning, April 30,

³³ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 6, 1872; Ross, *The Liberal Republican Movement*, 77.

³⁴ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 3, 1872.

³⁵ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 32; Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 1, 1872; Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, April 29, 1872.

³⁶ Thomas J. McCormack (ed.), *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, 1809-1896* (2 vols., Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1909), II, 548.

³⁷ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 32.

³⁸ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 3, 1872.

³⁹ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 32-33.

⁴⁰ New York *Times* as quoted in the Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 3, 1872.

each of their papers carried an editorial "striking 'D. Davis' at a pre-arranged and varying angle."⁴¹

As Watterson was the only Democrat in the band, he played a muted trombone. His position was decidedly ambiguous in the eyes of the straight-out members of both parties. He especially needed to justify himself before his own party.

His contribution to the broadside was that, of course, the Cincinnati convention was "a Republican and not a Democratic gathering." Therefore, its doings were "only interesting to us Democrats so far as they enable us to meet the liberalism of the country on an equal footing for the purpose of genuine reform and union. From this standpoint, however, we sincerely wish it well." Warily approaching the business of the hour, he charged that "certain well-known Republican wire-pullers" were trying to push through "certain pre-arranged combinations." He never felt strong enough to mention Davis' name, leaving his readers to learn the culprits from the Republican newspapers. For the benefit of his Democratic audience, he was ignoring the fact that most of Davis' support came from Democratic politicians.⁴²

This was a tone of entirely unaccustomed moderation for Watterson. His timidity must have been due to the difficulty of his position before his own party. The public response was evidently sufficient to embolden him to explain the next day what he had meant the day before. Now he thundered against "the already shop-worn candidacy of Davis" in quite his usual style. He made so bold as to speak for the Democratic party and announced that "if we are to be beaten, we prefer to go down head and tail erect, with our colors flying."⁴³ Decidedly feeling his oats, he offered the Liberal press the advice that the Liberal movement could not stand without their support "and as far as we are concerned, we decline to prop it by a one-legged Democratic boosting." The Democrats could support it only if it found a candidate who could split the Republican party.⁴⁴ The Davis boom collapsed under

⁴¹ Halstead printed them all in the Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, April 30, 1872, so that none of the delegates would miss them and used the caption, "This important editorial article will appear in the *Courier-Journal* tomorrow."

⁴² Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, April 30, 1872.

⁴³ This is a noteworthy example of the Watterson metaphor.

⁴⁴ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 1, 1872.

the Quadrilateral onslaught. Forty years later, Watterson chortled, "The earth seemed to have arisen and hit them amidships."⁴⁵

Although Watterson could observe that since Davis' downfall, Adams' stock was "at a premium,"⁴⁶ signs of danger were not wanting to the Quadrilateral's best laid plans. The Cincinnati *Commercial* said that in view of the defection of Southern delegates from Adams, it did not seem "wholly improbable" that Greeley would get the nomination.⁴⁷ Later, Bowles' biographer said that the squelching of Davis brought "Greeley to the front."⁴⁸ The Quadrilateral doubtless developed overconfidence as a result of its early victory and did not fear Greeley enough to bother with attacking him.⁴⁹

Watterson could not afford to take his eye off Kentucky politics even during the short time he was at the convention. A Kentucky Liberal Republican state convention had met at Covington, across the river from Cincinnati, the day before the national convention opened at Cincinnati. It had chosen Cassius M. Clay of Richmond for its chairman of its delegation at Cincinnati. Kentucky Liberals were divided in their preference for president. Louisville was for Adams, probably due to Watterson's influence. Frankfort, the state capitol, was for B. Gratz Brown, who was born there.⁵⁰ It was also the home Clay boasted about having carried against the Watterson influence in Louisville.⁵¹ This looked like the working out of the same Bluegrass-Louisville antagonism in the Liberal group that had already divided the Kentucky Democracy.

The formal proceedings of the convention must have seemed tame to the journalistic oligarchy who were now congratulating themselves on the winning of their first battle. The assembly met in the great Cincinnati Exposition Hall which seated more than 10,000 people. It was festooned with

⁴⁵ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 33; Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 1, 1872; Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 2, 1872.

⁴⁶ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 2, 1872.

⁴⁷ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 1, 1872.

⁴⁸ Merriam, *The Life and Times of Samuel Bowles*, II, 185; Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 5, 1872.

⁴⁹ Ross, *The Liberal Republican Movement*, 101; Claude M. Fuess, *Carl Schurz, Reformer* (New York, 1932), 190.

⁵⁰ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, April 28, 1872.

⁵¹ *The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay. Memoirs, Writings, and Speeches* (2 vols., Cincinnati, 1886), I, 504.

evergreens and American flags. At one end was a platform with seats for more than one hundred dignitaries, including Watterson.⁵² He delivered the keynote address in the "usual style."⁵³ The permanent organization provoked controversy. This was a mass convention. Its delegates were not chosen in any regular way; many of them simply appointed themselves. It was decided that the men from each state would get together and choose its official delegates. This method did not represent the popular strength of the group and gave rise to charges of bulldozing and packing.⁵⁴

Carl Schurz was elected permanent chairman. Although all conceded him to be the leading spirit of the movement, many observers felt that he could have worked more effectively behind the scenes. Watterson listened enraptured, saying, "Who that was there will ever forget his opening words: 'this is a moving day.'"⁵⁵ Schurz discussed the pure and lofty aspirations of the movement and the country's need for reform. He mentioned amnesty for the South and the need for sectional reconciliation. When Schurz specified that the candidate chosen must be of "superior intelligence, coupled with superior virtue," no one doubted that he referred to Adams.⁵⁶ Enthusiasm mounted in this staid, though eccentric, gathering. For two days and a night and a half, the Quadrilateral had the world in a sling and things its own way.⁵⁷

The convention quickly adopted for its platform the well-known Liberal principles of civil service reform, amnesty to the South, and acceptance of the three wartime amendments. It ran into a snag, however, over the tariff question. David A. Wells and many Northwesterners wanted free trade; Greeley's supporters wanted protection. They compromised by agreeing to leave the question up to Congress.⁵⁸ Such wrangling delayed the balloting until Friday, May 3. This revived the Adams' candidacy. It had been riding high on Wednesday after the Davis fiasco and Schurz's speech. Watterson be-

⁵² Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, April 30, 1872.

⁵³ Ross, *The Liberal Republican Movement*, 91.

⁵⁴ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Gazette*, May 3, 1872.

⁵⁵ Watterson, "*Marse Henry*," I, 253.

⁵⁶ Frederick Bancroft (ed.), *Speeches, Correspondence and Political Papers of Carl Schurz* (6 vols., New York, 1913), II, 354-61; Fuess, *Carl Schurz, Reformer*, 187.

⁵⁷ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 35.

⁵⁸ Ross, *The Liberal Republican Movement*, 93-96.

lieved that Adams would have won if the vote had been taken that night.⁵⁹

Even before the balloting began on Friday, the politicians had accomplished the discomfiture of the reformers. Just before midnight Thursday, Governor B. Gratz Brown, second in command of the Missouri Liberals, and Frank Blair blew in from Missouri. Both were jealous of Schurz on account of his influence in Missouri and the growing national attention he was receiving because of his role. Although they were identified with Greeley, their object in coming was to be, not so much to nominate the New York editor, but to destroy Schurz and get him out of Missouri politics.⁶⁰ Brown even then was regarded as a "sort of Democrat on the half-shell."⁶¹ Part of his disagreement with Schurz resulted from the German's ultra-Republicanism. Some observers reported that Schurz telegraphed the two to come and help him persuade the Missouri delegation to go for Trumbull.⁶² In order to offset the bad impression made by their intriguing against Schurz, Brown and Blair themselves started the rumor that Schurz had betrayed Brown's candidacy in some undefined way.⁶³ As Cassius M. Clay remembered it, he himself was responsible for sending the fateful telegram to the two Missouri gentlemen.⁶⁴

At any rate, Brown and Blair came to town Thursday night, secured a room at the St. James Hotel, and began their momentous conferences. Their object was, of course, to throw Brown's presidential strength to Greeley and, in exchange, secure for Brown the vice-presidency.⁶⁵ Three of the Quadrilateral and their friends got wind that something was up but failed at the critical moment to stop it. They dressed,

⁵⁹ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 35.

⁶⁰ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 6, 1872; *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz* (3 vols., New York, 1907-1908), III, 345.

⁶¹ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Gazette*, April 16, 1872. Later Brown and the Missouri Liberals went over bodily to the Democratic party.

⁶² *Ibid.*, May 3, 1872.

⁶³ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 1, 1872.

⁶⁴ *The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay*, I, 505.

⁶⁵ *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz*, III, 345; Oberholzter, *A History of the United States Since the Civil War*, III, 24; Cincinnati, Ohio, *Gazette*, May 3, 1872; Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 3, 1872; Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 6, 1872.

came downstairs to the Burnett House lobby, and waited uneasily, unable to make up their minds as to what was going on or what they should do about it.⁶⁶ Only Halstead took any action. He shrewdly guessed what was up and stuck a warning editorial in the *Commercial*. Forces such as these were the only combination able to beat Greeley and Brown.⁶⁷

Where was the Democratic member of the Quadrilateral at this crisis? The stage was all set for a dramatic, last-minute rescue but Watterson missed his cue. He explained, later, that his business as editor of a morning daily, made him something of a night owl and unable to go to bed "before the presses began to thunder below" for the morning *Courier-Journal*. This unfortunate habit made him a prey to temptation on Thursday night. At the solicitation of a "party of Kentuckians, some of whom had come to back me and some to watch me," he went over the river to Covington to celebrate the triumph of principle over politics at the convention. The occasion was sufficiently important to claim his attention "until the wee sma' hours ayont the twel."

When he did reach his hotel, just before going to bed, he glanced at the early edition of the Cincinnati *Commercial* which contained Halstead's warning editorial. Watterson noticed that "something—I was too tired to decipher precisely what—had happened." He was unable to present himself at the convention hall until toward noon the next day. By that time, Brown and Blair's work was over; their little scheme for nominating Greeley had been put over and the convention was spiked. Watterson claimed later that he had in his possession "documents which would have induced at least one of them to pause before making himself conspicuous." The other members of the Quadrilateral knew that he had the documents but were unable to find him. When Watterson reached the convention hall Friday morning, he had an "angry collision" with either Blair or Brown—probably Brown, but the horse had already been stolen.⁶⁸

A sensation of a wildly alarming historical nature might be made out to the effect that Watterson was taken off and

⁶⁶ White, *The Life of Lyman Trumbull*, 382.

⁶⁷ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 3, 1872.

⁶⁸ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 39.

put in cold storage that night by some Kentuckians, possessed with malice aforethought. Watterson said part of them were there to watch or guard him. Clay said he had sent the telegram to Brown. The *Courier-Journal* stated that Clay's "friendship for Greeley was made available."⁶⁹ The *Commercial* said the Greeley movement was "specially assisted by Brown's Kentucky friends."⁷⁰ But this is not likely—it rests too much on old gentlemen's memoirs.

The scene at the convention hall the morning Watterson was absent was dramatic. It gave Adams a 56-vote lead over Greeley. At its close B. Gratz Brown asked permission to speak. Schurz was suspicious but a sense of fair play made him reluctantly agree, in view of Brown's candidacy. So, "up the platform stairs slowly mounted Mr. B. Gratz Brown, the sun from the upper windows, striking with fierce light on his red beard and hair and pallid features."⁷¹ Some observers were evidently struck with his resemblance to a being out of the infernal regions. Brown made an amnesty speech, throwing his support to Greeley and calling upon all who could to rally to Greeley's support. But nothing happened for several ballots. Once more the Adams and Trumbull followers were too inept and too inexperienced to save the situation. Many observers, including Watterson, believed that concerted action on the part of Adams and Trumbull followers at this point would have carried the convention, but they waited too long.⁷²

Upon his arrival, Watterson did make an attempt. Clay, chairman of the Kentucky delegates, recalled later that at this stage of the convention "a small, flaxen-haired, 'chipper' man" bounded down from the platform to Clay's seat and besought him to use his influence for Adams, which Clay refused to do. After the young man had gone, Clay asked a neighbor who he was and received the reply that that was

⁶⁹ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 1, 1872.

⁷⁰ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 3, 1872.

⁷¹ "The Cincinnati Convention," *The Nation* (New York, 1865-), XIV (1872), 304; Fuess, *Carl Schurz, Reformer*, 192.

⁷² Ross, *The Liberal Republican Movement*, 102; McCormack, *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, 1809-1896*, II, 554-55; Julian, *Political Recollections, 1840-1872*, p. 339; Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 6, 1872. Others, however, hold Brown and Blair responsible for Greeley's nomination. Oberholtzer, *A History of the United States Since the Civil War*, III, 24-29; Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 4, 1872.

Henry Watterson.⁷³ Clay later offered the theory that Adams was unpopular in the North since the time of Jackson and in the South, because of his family's opposition to Henry Clay.⁷⁴ After the convention was over, he wrote Watterson a conciliatory note about the failure of Adams' candidacy.⁷⁵

Adams was still ahead until the fifth ballot. Then Brown and Blair sprang their trump card, "the spontaneous rally which had been carefully planned the night before." At first, the rally appeared stiff, then wavered, then gained momentum and swelled into a torrent of enthusiasm and Horace Greeley was nominated, the staid and eccentric convention shouting itself hoarse. A gleeful Republican paper stuck on its front page an isolated paragraph stating that "not a face in the hall grew paler than that of Henry Watterson" when the nomination of Greeley was accomplished.⁷⁶

So the Quadrilateral had been knocked into a cocked hat.⁷⁷ "The corruptionists were too much for the newspaper combinations,"⁷⁸ exulted the Radicals who faced most danger from the clean character of the reform movement. They made the most of the fact that it had been captured by old-line party hacks. This made less of a contrast between it and Grant corruption. The *Cincinnati Gazette* observed, "The convention received a blow that will, in all probability, utterly and hopelessly paralyze whatever moral effect it might have had."⁷⁹

Before all this happened, Reid had invited the Quadrilateral to dine with him the night after the nominations were made, but the dinner was a flop. Schurz was "as a death's head at the board." Halstead and Watterson "through sheer bravado, tried to enliven the feast." But it was no use—

⁷³ *The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay*, I, 506.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 504.

⁷⁵ Logan, Henry Watterson, *Border Nationalist*, 1840-1877, p. 274 and the references cited therein.

⁷⁶ *Cincinnati, Ohio, Gazette*, May 4, 1872.

⁷⁷ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 39.

⁷⁸ *Cincinnati, Ohio, Gazette*, May 7, 1872.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, May 4, 1872; White *The Life of Lyman Trumbull*, 385; *Cincinnati, Ohio, Commercial*, May 4, 1872; Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 6, 1872.

they "separated early and sadly, reformers hoist by their own petard."⁸⁰

It seems odd that Watterson held no resentment against Reid. Later, he wrote that he perceived that Reid was the only one of us that clearly understood the situation and thoroughly knew what he was about.⁸¹ The two remained close friends, although Reid had, in a sense, betrayed the Quadrilateral which had only taken him in on Watterson's recommendation. Reid wrote Watterson later, "While you all were taking me into camp, I was comforting myself with the belief that I was taking the Quadrilateral into camp and should find them very useful articles to begin housekeeping with."⁸²

Before leaving Cincinnati, the Quadrilateral seems to have made an effort to swallow Greeley, bitter medicine though it was, and made an effort to agree on concerted action even though plans were awry. They agreed to "begin such support in a mild form and by degrees grow warmer in the work." Schurz was unable to make up his mind to support Greeley for several weeks, but finally came into line.⁸³

It was now up to Mr. Watterson to decide what to do. A newspaper editor cannot go off to his tent as an ordinary person and sulk until he makes up his mind. He has to decide at once and decide so well that he will not change his mind. Later, Watterson said that he took a day and a night to pull himself together.⁸⁴ A Republican observer at the time said the *Courier-Journal* was in a "heavy fog" for several days and took refuge in the Democratic dovecote before coming out for Greeley.⁸⁵ This fits the case. Watterson had so far committed himself at Cincinnati that he could not very well back out. His greatest aim, the restoration of the South,

⁸⁰ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 39-40.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, LXXXV, 39.

⁸² *Ibid.*, LXXXV, 43-44.

⁸³ Cortissoz, *The Life of Whitelaw Reid*, I, 211; Dispatch from Lexington in Cincinnati, Ohio, *Gazette*, May 8, 1872. Bowles sent the famous admonition to the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Republican*, to support Greeley, "but not to gush!" Merriam, *The Life and Times of Samuel Bowles*, II, 187; White, *The Life of Lyman Trumbull*, 384, 391-99; Ross, *The Liberal Republican Movement*, 106.

⁸⁴ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 41.

⁸⁵ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial*, May 22, 1872; May 4, 1872.

could only be accomplished by Liberal-Democratic coalition against the Radicals.⁸⁶

Watterson came out definitely announcing his decision to support Greeley in the *Courier-Journal* of May 6, 1872. His editorial of May 4 left the decision up to the Democratic National Committee but eased his own path of duty by remarking on "feelings of personal kindness, bordering on affection" which he entertained for Mr. Greeley.⁸⁷ All the Kentucky papers came out for Greeley except three or four, including the ultra-Southern Democratic Louisville *Ledger*.

Some disgruntled elements in the Liberal group had to be mollified in the next few weeks. Watterson spoke of pulling himself together in a hurry in order to "plunge into the swim to help fetch the water-logged factions ashore." Otherwise, he said, the Democrats would never support the Liberals. Schurz was the hardest to deal with. According to Watterson, the Fifth Avenue Hotel conference held by prominent Liberals in New York in June was gotten up as a kind of bridge for Schurz. It was "to carry him across the stream which flowed between his disappointed hopes and aims and what appeared to him an illogical and repulsive alternative."⁸⁸

Watterson invited Schurz to breakfast before the conference. He and Horace White also worked at soothing David A. Wells' feelings. Watterson made a speech at the conference in favor of accepting Greeley.⁸⁹ Schurz was so far won over that he made the closing speech, clinching the acceptance of Greeley.⁹⁰

Watterson was happy to note that, contrary to the expectations of politicians and reformers, the people rose to the nomination of Greeley. He laid this to "the sentimental, the fantastic and the paradoxical in human nature." In the

⁸⁶ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Gazette*, May 4, 1872; May 22, 1872.

⁸⁷ Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, May 4, 1872.

⁸⁸ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 41. Other commentators indicate that the original purpose of this conference was to persuade Greeley to withdraw and to nominate a new ticket. McCormack, *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, 1809-1896*, II, 559. Fuess and Cortissoz agreed with Watterson. Fuess, *Carl Schurz, Reformer*, 196; Cortissoz, *The Life of Whitelaw Reid*, I, 216.

⁸⁹ Oberholtzer, *A History of the United States Since the Civil War*, III, 43-44.

⁹⁰ Fuess, *Carl Schurz, Reformer*, 196; Ross, *The Liberal Republican Movement*, 121.

South, "an ebullition of pleased surprise grew into positive enthusiasm." This was connected with Watterson's central theme of reconciliation. "Peace was the need, if not the longing of the Southern heart, and Greeley had been the first hand stretched out to the South from the enemy's camp."⁹¹

It was this "spontaneous uprising" which alone induced the Democratic convention at Baltimore to accept Greeley. It cannot be said that the Quadrilateral had no small part in this fact.

⁹¹ Watterson, "The Humor and Tragedy of the Greeley Campaign," *Century*, LXXXV, 40; Ross, *The Liberal Republican Movement*, 130-31.