

Virginia City Territorial Enterprise
May 24, 1864

Personal Correspondence

[I]

ENTERPRISE OFFICE,
Saturday, May 21, 1864

JAMES LAIRD, ESQ.—Sir: In your paper of the present date appeared two anonymous articles, in which a series of insults were leveled at the writer of an editorial in Thursday's ENTERPRISE, headed "How is it?—How it is." I wrote that editorial.

Some time since it was stated in the Virginia Union that its proprietors were alone responsible for all articles published in its columns. You being the proper person, by seniority, to apply to in cases of this kind, I demand of you a public retraction of the insulting articles I have mentioned, or satisfaction. I require an immediate answer to this note. The bearer of this—Mr. Stephen Gillis—will receive any communication you may see fit to make.

SAM. L. CLEMENS

[II]

OFFICE OF THE VIRGINIA DAILY UNION
VIRGINIA, May 21, 1864

SAMUEL CLEMENS, ESQ.—Mr. James Laird has just handed me your note of this date. Permit me to say that I am the author of the Article appearing in this morning's Union. I am responsible for it. I have nothing to retract. Respectfully,

J. W. WILMINGTON

[III]

ENTERPRISE OFFICE
Saturday Evening, May 21, 1864

JAMES LAIRD, ESQ.—Sir:—I wrote you a note this afternoon demanding a published retraction of insults that appeared in two Articles in the Union of this morning—or satisfaction. I have since received what purports to be a reply, written by a person who signs himself "J. W. Wilmington," in which he assumes the authorship and responsibility of one of said infamous articles. Mr. Wilmington is a person entirely unknown to me in the matter, and has nothing to do with it. In the columns of your paper you have declared your own responsibility for all articles appearing in it, and any farther attempt to make a catspaw of any other individual and thus shirk a responsibility that you had previously assumed will show that you are a cowardly sneak. I now peremptorily demand of you the satisfaction due to a gentleman—without alternative.

SAM. L. CLEMENS

[IV]

OFFICE OF THE VIRGINIA DAILY UNION

VIRGINIA, Saturday evening, May 21st, 1864

SAM'L. CLEMENS, ESQ:—Your note of this evening is received. To the first portion of it I will briefly reply, that Mr. J. W. Wilmington, the avowed author of the article to which you object, is a gentleman now in the employ of the Union office. He formerly was one of the proprietors of the Cincinnati Enquirer. He was Captain of a Company in the Sixth Ohio Regiment, and fought at Shiloh. His responsibility and character can be vouched for to your abundant satisfaction.

For all editorials appearing in the Union, the proprietors are personally responsible; for communications, they hold themselves ready, when properly called upon, either to give the name and address of the author, or failing that, to be themselves responsible.

The editorial in the ENTERPRISE headed "How is it?" out of which this controversy grew, was an attack made upon the printers of the Union. It was replied to by a Union printer, and a representative of the printers, who in a communication denounced the writer of that article as a liar, a poltroon and a puppy. You announce yourself as the writer of the article which provoked this communication, and demand "satisfaction"—which satisfaction the writer informs you, over his own signature, he is quite ready to afford. I have no right, under the rulings of the code you have invoked, to step in and assume Mr. Wilmington's position, nor would he allow me to do so. You demand of me, in your last letter, the satisfaction due to a gentleman, and couple the demand with offensive remarks. When you have earned the right to the title by complying with the usual custom, I shall be most happy to afford you any satisfaction you desire at any time and in any place. In short, Mr. Wilmington has a prior claim upon your attention. When he is through with you, I shall be at your service. If you decline to meet him after challenging him, you will prove yourself to be what he has charged you with being: "a liar, a poltroon and a puppy," and as such, can not of course be entitled to the consideration of a gentleman.

Respectfully,
JAMES L. LAIRD

[V]

ENTERPRISE OFFICE, VIRGINIA CITY

May 21, 1864—9 o'clock, P.M.

JAMES L. LAIRD, ESQ.—Sir: Your reply to my last note in which I peremptorily demanded satisfaction of you, without alternative—is just received, and to my utter astonishment you still endeavor to shield your craven carcass behind the person of an individual who in spite of your introduction is entirely unknown to me, and upon whose shoulders you cannot throw the whole responsibility. You acknowledge and reaffirm in this note that "For all editorials appearing in the Union, the proprietors are personally responsible." Now, sir, had there appeared no editorial on the subject endorsing and reiterating the slanderous and disgraceful insults heaped upon me in the "communication," I would have simply called upon you and demanded the name of its author, and upon your answer would have depended my farther action. But the "Editorial"

alluded to was equally vile and slanderous as the “communication,” and being an “Editorial” would naturally have more weight in the minds of readers. It was the following undignified and abominably insulting slander appearing in your “Editorial” headed “The ‘How is it’ issue,” that occasioned my sending you first an alternative and then a peremptory challenge:

“Never before in a long period of newspaper intercourse—never before in any contact with a contemporary, however unprincipled he might have been, have we found an opponent in statement or in discussion, who had no gentlemanly sense of professional propriety, who conveyed in every word, and in every purpose of all his words, such a groveling disregard for truth, decency and courtesy as to seem to court the distinction, only, of being understood as a vulgar liar. Meeting one who prefers falsehood; whose instincts are all toward falsehood; whose thought is falsification; whose aim is vilification through insincere professions of honesty; one whose only merit is thus described, and who evidently desires to be thus known, the obstacles presented are entirely insurmountable, and whoever would touch them fully, should expect to be abominably defiled.”—Union, May 21

You assume in your last note, that I “have challenged Mr. Wilmington,” and that he has informed me “over his own signature,” that he is quite ready to afford me “satisfaction.” Both assumptions are utterly false. I have twice challenged you, and you have twice attempted to shirk the responsibility. Mr. W’s note could not possibly be an answer to my demand of satisfaction from you; and besides, his note simply avowed authorship of a certain “communication” that appeared simultaneously with your libelous “editorial,” and states that its author had “nothing to retract.” For your gratification, however, I will remark that Mr. Wilmington’s case will be attended to in due time by a distant acquaintance of his who is not willing to see him suffer in obscurity. In the meantime, if you do not wish yourself posted as a coward, you will at once accept my peremptory challenge, which I now reiterate.

SAM. L. CLEMENS

[VI]

OFFICE TERRITORIAL ENTERPRISE

VIRGINIA, May 21, 1864

J. W. WILMINGTON—Sir: You are, perhaps, far from those who are wont to advise and care for you, else you would see the policy of minding your own business and letting that of other people alone. Under these circumstances, therefore, I take the liberty of suggesting that you are getting out of your sphere. A contemptible ass and coward like yourself should only meddle in the affairs of gentlemen when called upon to do so. I approve and endorse the course of my principal in this matter, and if your sensitive disposition is aroused by any proceeding of his, I have only to say that I can be found at the ENTERPRISE office, and always at your service.

S. E. GILLIS

[To the above, Mr. Wilmington gave a verbal reply to Mr. Millard—the gentleman through whom the note was conveyed to him—stating that he had no quarrel with Mr. Gillis; that he had written his communication only in defense of the craft, and did not desire a quarrel with a member of that craft; he showed Mr. G’s note to Mr. Millard, who read it, but made no comments upon it.]

[VII]

OFFICE OF THE VIRGINIA DAILY UNION,
Monday Morning, May 23, 1864

SAMUEL CLEMENS, ESQ.:—In reply to your lengthy communication, I have only to say that in your note opening this correspondence, you demanded satisfaction for a communication in the Union which branded the writer of an article in the ENTERPRISE as a liar, a poltroon and a puppy. You declare yourself to be the writer of the ENTERPRISE article, and the avowed author of the Union communication stands ready to afford satisfaction. Any attempt to evade a meeting with him and force one upon me will utterly fail, as I have no right under the rulings of the code, to meet or hold any communication with you in this connection. The threat of being posted as a coward cannot have the slightest effect upon the position I have assumed in the matter. If you think this correspondence reflects credit upon you, I advise you by all means to publish it; in the meantime you must excuse me from receiving any more long epistles from you. JAMES L. LAIRD

I denounce Mr. Laird as an unmitigated liar, because he says I published an editorial in which I attacked the printers employed on the Union, whereas there is nothing in that editorial which can be so construed. Moreover, he is a liar on general principles, and from natural instinct. I denounce him as an abject coward, because it has been stated in his paper that its proprietors are responsible for all articles appearing in its columns, yet he backs down from that position; because he acknowledges the “code,” but will not live up to it; because he says himself that he is responsible for all “editorials,” and then backs down from that also; and because he insults me in his note marked “IV,” and yet refuses to fight me. Finally, he is a fool, because he cannot understand that a publisher is bound to stand responsible for any and all articles printed by him, whether he wants to do it or not.

SAM. L. CLEMENS