

BLIND TRIBUTE

CHAPTER ONE

FIRST SHOTS FIRED AT FORT SUMTER



MARI ANNE CHRISTIE

*Every newspaper editor
owes tribute to the devil.*

— *Jean de la Fontaine*

DAILY The Philadelphia Standard

THE POLITICAL MADE PERSONAL: RUMINATIONS ON SECESSION

by P. H. Wentworth III
Executive Editor

April 12, 1861

Reader:

Our nation is papered with newsprint. Every pen has an opinion, each louder than the last: Secession, Abolition, States' Rights. Union and Confederacy saddling up for armed conflict. There is no end of rash judgment, no end of commentary, and no end to the people who will pay to read it. Fully half of every paper is news of impending war.

Trusted reporters have been dispatched to send the latest information by wire, all hoping to be caught in the thick of a battle and live to tell about it. New York Associated Press writers and artists are covering Richmond, Kansas, Charleston, New Orleans, and the front lines wherever they might be, establishing contacts and couriers and telegraphs, ready to ride on a moment's notice to find the best news in the area.

Palmer Harrold Wentworth the Third, Executive Editor of *The Philadelphia Daily Standard*, delivered a period at the end of his sentence with enough force to split the nib of his old quill pen. He sat back and reached for a new goose feather from the box he kept in his desk drawer, next to the fountain pens he could not stand. One last time, he weighed his options and mulled his reasons and rearranged all his rationalizations, deciding how he would write what might become the most important Saturday editorial of his career.

He could hear, in the back of his mind, the anxious masses waiting in anticipation as he dawdled—when he should have been sprinting—toward a deadline he had set himself. He dropped the broken quill into the wastepaper basket, and flipped open the lid of the heirloom brass inkwell his father had given him to mark his graduation from Oxford. He almost overfilled it from the pint bottle of black ink and used a small whetstone from his drawer to sharpen his pen-knife. After tucking stone and oil into their leather pouch and back into the drawer, he cut the quill the same way he had since he was twelve and first allowed to use ink, and twirled it restlessly between his thumb and finger.

Outside his door, a round-the-clock, big-city news operation filled three floors of a two-lot building where Harry had spent more than half of his working life. He had worked his way

up to become the most important man at the largest newspaper in the city—one of the largest papers on the East Coast. He had made himself into the man who, with twenty-two reporters and four sub-editors, decided every day what information about the world was most important for Philadelphians to know.

In pursuit of this sacred duty, the rest of the operation housed thirteen copyeditors, twelve proofreaders, twenty-three page compositors, four telegraphers, six copyboys, nineteen men who sold advertising and private printing, seventeen business staff, one-hundred-twelve newsboys hawking papers and delivering subscriptions, eight typefounders who, with a fiery furnace in the basement, cast letterforms, engravings, and lead printing plates, and forty pressmen who printed, folded, and stacked twelve pages, fifty thousand times a day. The sounds of the newsroom through his closed door blended with the ticking of the clock on his desk and the thumping of the printing presses two floors below, noises that lived so deep in his marrow they registered as silence and soothed.

Harry wished to high heaven he were still avoiding this assignment. He had been doing so for weeks now, months—an argument could even be made for years—until lunch today, when the other members of the Editorial Board had given him all but no choice. His Publisher and Managing Editor, as

well as the National, International, and City Editors, had all been in general agreement for the first time in living memory: his reticence on the matter must come to an end. Even though he held more influence, and therefore more votes on editorial direction, he hadn't enough sway to refuse to comply with all of them.

It was enough to make him dyspeptic.

With his collar unbuttoned and removed, sleeves rolled up, he sat tapping his right foot, his knee shaking the desk, the ever-present miasma of his cigar hanging on him like an overcoat. His top hat rested easily on the corner of his desk, and his jacket hung on a peg behind the door.

His clothes were the fashionable, well-tailored dress of a gentleman, but with scattered ink stains on his shirt, waistcoat, and cuffs, and more than a few visible frays and patches. His face was hardened and looked every day of his advanced years, above a stocky, solid figure, not fleshy and bloated like so many wealthy intellectuals. His wiry grey hair was cut short, as was a well-trimmed beard; his always-ink-stained fingers were as heavy and strong as a stevedore's. Still, his bearing and manner bespoke generations of good breeding, which his attire would confirm, were it in better repair.

Tapping his pen on a scrap of parchment, leaving minute splashes of India ink on the desk and his own cuff, Harry stared blankly at the chalkboard

where he tracked assignments, which hung on the wall next to a world map covered in pins. The rack in the corner where he might have hung his overcoat was instead a resting place for a dress suit, an extra shirt, a set of braces, and three different neckties. He could hardly remember what the southwest corner of his office looked like without his dinner jacket. *When had he begun keeping clothes at the office?* He tugged at the loose end of the string tie hanging off his neck. He tossed it toward the coat rack, but missed, the inconsequential thing draping itself across the back of a chair. Many minutes passed before he finally sat forward and dipped his pen.

Countless broadsheets and tracts have cropped up declaring for one side or the other, printed on small presses throughout our broken nation, some on sale for a half-cent and some given free by fanatics. The dozen editors whose opinions matter most, whose rhetoric is sharpest and readership large enough to drive the direction of any conflict, are quoted and misquoted with abandon. A gruesome clash between North and South is inevitable—if only because newspapermen are screaming about it.

“Said the newspaperman, screaming,” he muttered. The newsroom noise outside his door harmonized with the constant background of dozens of

telegraphs in a room down the hall and six rotary presses that never ceased without a very good explanation—he could tell by the rhythm in the floorboards if one fell silent.

The back of his hand brushed the inkstand as he inked his pen, jogging it and splashing yet another stain across his desk, long past the point of being saved by a paper blotter. By reflex, he tossed a rag over the spill, without any further effort toward removing it. There was little point. Dozens—hundreds—of other such blemishes littered every room Harry had ever occupied. He spilled ink wherever he went.

The Standard has stayed largely neutral in the conflict between North and South, in part because the personal opinions of this writer are the most significant to the editorial decisions of this paper. As you have seen in these pages, I stand in the center of this conflict in every aspect of my life, a position sure to become lonelier—and more choleric—as events unfold.

The tiny office was no larger than the domain of any other editor who warranted a door, and had been furnished with a cheap, factory-made, pine desk, two chairs, and an all-purpose cabinet that held, on top, a small pitcher and basin, and inside, an unholy mess of anything Harry had nowhere else to store. The old varnish on the desk, which had cracked and peeled down

the sides, had been worn down to bare wood on the writing surface, in the shape of his right arm. A shaker of pounce waited on a paper blotter to dry his ink, sandy grains trickling across the desktop.

An ancient red ink stain ran down the front of his desk from under haphazard pages of newsprint and foolscap. It had pooled years ago, like blood, in a large blot on the threadbare carpet. Legend had it in the newsroom that Harry had spilled the ink purposefully as a warning to bad writers of corrections to come. He knew better than to ruin good legend with the truth—his usual clumsiness. It was sheer good luck the ink was red.

A thesaurus lay open to his right to entries from *libertine* to *ligament*. He flipped pages back and forth, searching for the least volatile synonyms for rebellion. He pulled a small notebook out of the inner pocket of his jacket; he had them made by the gross in the newspaper's bindery and insisted every writer in his employ carry one. He had carried two, at all times, for more than forty years. An entire wall of his studio at home was devoted to their storage.

Running a fingertip across the shorthand pencil marks and foreshortened phrases, he crystallized a point he had known he would have to make long before deciding to announce it publicly. Setting the notebook aside, but using the box of pounce to prop it open, he tapped it twice as he reflected one

last time on his months of musings. He wafted the end of the quill across the page a few times to remove some errant grains of sand or chalk fallen from his cuff, then inked his pen and started to write again.

I was raised, and my family still resides, in Charleston, South Carolina, heart (perhaps even soul) of the rebellion being fomented. At the hands of, and alongside, some of the leading voices in Secession, I was reared to perpetuate the Southern economy in as grand a fashion as can be imagined. Instead, I traveled the world until the day I met and married my wife two decades ago here in Philadelphia, her native city. I have spent the better part of my adult life with my help-mate and children here.

But my parents, my sister and her children, and dozens of aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends live in Charleston and the surrounding countryside. My family has lived on the same land for almost two hundred years, generations of Wentworths at Vista Point Plantation.

There were times—right now being one—Harry could smell the sweet pluff mud of the spartina grass marshes and the stink of an alligator rising up out of the water to snap its jaws through some unwary animal. He missed the huge live oak by the

Stono River as though its limbs were his own, spreading out over the water, rooted in dark, Lowcountry dirt. He remembered every hour spent climbing that tree, the rough bark and the scratchy threads of the rope swing hidden among the Spanish moss. The initials he and his friend Edward had carved, when given their first pocketknives. Once older, he'd stolen his first kiss hidden under the sweeping branches with Alexandra Porcher.

He transcribed a line from his notebook he had written more than a fortnight ago:

There is no inch of the fields and woods where I played growing up that hadn't been discovered first by an earlier Wentworth child.

The glass in the door rattled under someone's fist. His head shot up and feet hit the floor; he straightened his sleeves and slipped his notes back into his pocket.

"They did it, Harry!" his Managing Editor shouted, the pebble glass only slightly muffling Miles Campton's voice and the sudden commotion behind him: two dozen men scrambling for information, tossing facts and conjecture back and forth across a sea of desks, calling out for copyboys to do their jobs instead of scuffling like little boys.

"Enter!" Harry called out. The door opened, and Miles slipped inside,

shutting it behind him.

"The Rebs fired on Fort Sumter; just in over the wire. I need your column posthaste."

Miles had been the one man on the Board to argue that Harry's commentary should be left to his own discretion, but had still let himself be convinced to vote with the others when the time came.

Harry stifled his sigh and schooled his eyes as he waved Miles to a seat in one of the ladder-back chairs on the other side of the desk. His voice had endured a lifetime of cigar smoke, whiskey, and hollering at men, but there was little he could say, now that the Confederates had made the piece even more difficult to write.

"I know. I know. Tomorrow's paper. You're giving me indigestion." Harry shifted to loosen the button at his waist. "You know what this means."

"It means war, so selling papers."

Miles placed the stacks of newsprint he had brought with him onto Harry's desk and clutched his own notepad, larger than Harry's, in a hand draped across his knee. Harry reached into his desk drawer for the pint bottle of Tennessee bourbon and two glasses. "Here's to selling newspapers," he said, by rote and—he knew—without nearly enough conviction.

They each tossed back their drinks in a time-honored afternoon ritual, after which Harry rose from his desk,

strode to his assignment board, and took up the chalk and the damp rag he used to assign and reassign reporters, stories, deadlines, and column inches.

“Take the print run to sixty thousand in the morning, and twenty thousand papers on street corners every night this week,” he said. “No, indefinitely. We’ll hit a hundred thousand by the end of the month, and that won’t be the end of it. Hire any good staff you’ve interviewed the past few months, and order those new presses you’ve been eyeing.”

“A hundred thousand? In two weeks? We’ve been expanding for months to the numbers we have now.”

“Mark my words. This war is at home. No steamship delay on the death notices.” He looked at Miles with his eyebrows turned down and his lip turned up, and jabbed the chalk in his general direction. “You knew this was coming, or you don’t deserve your job.”

With his rag, Harry wiped away the circulation figures at the bottom of the board, which had been tallied with revenue and expenses and the cost of the combined staff—all calculated daily and displayed strategically.

Miles was the only other person who had ever seen the blank space filled, on the side of the chalkboard where Harry made notes as he worked, because it was Miles’ job to ink Harry’s orders and see them carried out. Now, Miles took out the pencil he kept perpetually

lodged behind his right ear and started making rapid notes he'd translate into action within the hour.

Harry's sleeve moved so fast it dripped chalk dust onto the carpet. He damped his rag in the pitcher of water in the basin. "No one is going home tonight," he said. "No one."

"They're staying," Miles said. "They might kill each other for cables. Baker took a black eye." He chuckled. "Purely by accident."

"Good. Let them fight it out. We have four hours—no, three-and-a-half—and a lot of information to find. And an evening edition." Harry turned back to Miles, chalk raised in his hand. "Two hundred ten minutes. Late copy gets cut and so does the writer." He went back to revising word counts and page space. "Be in touch with Washington. I want the War Secretary on the other end of a wire inside an hour. Cameron owes me."

"Cross is already at the War Department. I just saw the cable." Their primary Washington correspondent had been there nearly as long as Harry had been in Pennsylvania.

Harry erased Cross's name from two other stories and filled both blanks with question marks. He would have to consider which reporter, or reporters, would shortly be transferred there for the foreseeable future.

"Assign a man to talk to the mothers and wives of enlisted men over the next three days, once the panic

sets in." He wiped one of the question marks away with his fist and wrote: Baker.

Miles stood. "All right, Harry. I have an evening edition to fill. And you," Miles added pointedly, "have two hundred ten minutes to write an editorial."

As Miles closed the door, Harry called out, "Half again as much advertising this month, or I start sacking salesmen!"

After the door clicked shut, Harry made a few more notes to be considered later and stepped away from the board. Turning back to his desk, he threw the chalk and the damp rag on a pile of edited copy, smearing his corrections.

"Damn!" Not a hint of a reprieve. His editorial had now changed from a restrained commentary on the political situation to a certain bloody battle in every corner of his family.

He unrolled, smoothed, and re-rolled his shirtsleeves in the few steps to his wooden swivel chair, passing it by to open the window and encourage a breeze. He looked out over the city streets, but the familiar view did not inspire. He crossed back to his desk, but once he'd taken his seat, shifting to accommodate the left-leaning spring, the annoying squeak reminded him of nothing so much as the squawking he had endured over luncheon. Given his Board's infernal interference, he hoped he could leave them all speechless, because today, it would be a welcome

change.

To be clear, my family owns roughly two hundred slaves. In part by their labors, I was raised a gentleman and a planter, and I like to think I exemplify the former (though never the latter), to some extent because I was raised by the most loving Black hands. I cannot excuse men who treat fellow human beings with cruelty and brutality, nor can I ignore the kindness and respect that have most often existed between the races in my home.

He could still taste the tender spoon bread his Nonny made and still feel the sharp sting of the switches she'd cut from the birch tree outside the kitchen door whenever he caused some mischief that couldn't be explained away. He recalled many hours wasted in the stables or storehouse, or with the cooper or blacksmith or carpenter, whenever he could steal away from his tutor. In his memories, he heard the low songs of the hands in the fields, the chattering of black children too young to do heavy work, and the smooth Gullah cadence of old women in the kitchen.

When I imagine the sound of that first shot on Fort Sumter, I hear a battle brewing on all sides of my family: muskets trained on my mother, my sister subjected to soldiers, the screams of my son or my nephews as they

encounter their first battles—in all likelihood, fighting against each other. I hear the old songs of my homeland turn to dirges. No place or person I know—North or South—will be impervious to the war that has been declared, and no matter which position I endorse, personally or professionally, it will cause pain to someone whom I love, and anger one faction or the other.

“If there were ever an understatement,” Harry grumbled.

Once he'd published these thousand words, he might not be allowed up the steps to his parents' house, even with grandchildren in tow. And his sister, Ruthie, and her boys... Ruthie's husband, Charles, would never allow them to see Harry once he'd been tarred with even the lightest Abolitionist brush. He could only imagine what his father would say if he turned up on the doorstep after twenty-five years as a Yankee.

Yet, he might not fare much better here. He always now half-expected to find himself ejected from the home he'd made with his wife, for she had lost patience with his divided loyalties months—perhaps years—ago. If Harry hadn't been fifty times wealthier than her father, she would have long since moved back to her childhood home. Yet another discussion of North and South, especially one he had started in the newspaper, could not help matters.

Harry found himself more and more in charity with President Lincoln: no one likes a centrist.

I am politically ambivalent as well. I fully support of the right of the Southern states to secede and form their own government, and am justifiably suspicious of central control of power. However, the Southern states have fallen behind the times, and are subsequently unprepared to carry this conflict, and I find myself deeply—unaccountably—emotional about my homeland's likely fate.

Northern industry as an economic system is superior to the aristocratic Old South; were the Confederacy to accept this fact, and adopt a similar structure, human servitude would not be required to maintain the communities and wealth they have built over the last two centuries. It is with staggering arrogance the South keeps its boot on the necks of the Black servants who have raised its children.

Reader, I am not a man accustomed to shilly-shallying, but on this issue, I have remained undecided for many months. With great relief, I have left coverage of this conflict to other members of the editorial and reporting staff; however, it has come time

to declare my position.

Harry rocked back and forth in his wheeled chair, in sympathy with the presses, and dipped his quill again. But before he could continue writing, the loose spring in his chair shifted suddenly and his knee hit the bottom of the desk. When he recovered his balance, a large blot of ink had dripped below his last sentence.

Once returned to his writing, still rubbing the bruise on his leg, he found his hand and pen were still endorsing opposite positions, as were his mind and his heart, so he stopped and watched the shine of a wet pool of ink turn dull as it soaked into the paper.

This was, without doubt, the story of his lifetime. He could no longer maintain his silence, because the war now begun would be the best—likely last—big story of his career, and he better placed than any man in America—no, the world—to write it. He wanted only courage to serve up his convictions, and he would not be stopped from his sworn duty by such a paltry deficit.

Tipped back in his creaking chair, Harry tugged at the whiskers on his chin, staring vacantly at the chalkboard, shifting in his seat. He sharpened the quill again and twisted it between his fingers. Finally, he dragged the tip of his pen through the spilled ink and finished his thought.

Effective four weeks from today, I will resign as Executive

Editor of The Philadelphia Daily Standard to return to Charleston for the duration of the conflict.

Before sending his resignation to be set in type and set in motion, he knew he had to tell Anne the time for considering her opinions had come to an end. He had to make arrangements for his children and find a way to appease his wife. Even with all the chaos he'd ordered in the newsroom and the pandemonium that would ensue as soon as anyone saw this column, he would have dinner at home, to break the news before the news broke. Besides, a few hours with his wife and children would surely leave him cranky and inclined to shout, which would shut down prying questions the rest of the night.

You may be sure, I do not choose this course out of "sympathy for the Confederacy" or "disdain for the Union," nor would the opposite be true if I remained here. I have proven over a lifetime, it is not my intent—nor my calling—to promote any entity's political agenda, but rather, to gather and present, rationally and fully, the breadth of available information for my readers' delectation. Be assured, I will remain a moderate voice of reason, ever louder and more peaceable as the volume rises in the public square.

I have been to war, Reader, ten times on five continents. Though

it has been many years, no day passes without recalling some detail of the soldiers I followed so I could record their stories. More than twenty years, and they haunt me yet.

Every soldier I have ever met reminds me of a truth oft-discounted in the fervor of mortal combat: a rush to battle leads only to destruction, and humankind is always better off finding middle ground than firing off shots at those who oppose us.

Harry sanded the paper and claimed a rare editorial privilege he had dismissed men for invoking. He was in no mood for an editor, and was the only man in the building who could safely ignore the need. He set his pen upright in the inkwell, tipped the pounce back into the box, and shook loose bits of sand from the paper. With only one brief last look, he tucked the column into his desk drawer, ready to be delivered to Composing once it was too late for anyone to do anything about it.



Who was Harry Wentworth?

Palmer Harrold Wentworth III, "Harry," fictional protagonist of *Blind Tribute*, whom you have met herein, is based on a real journalist who made real history, but whose name has not enjoyed the longevity of his conjoined contribution to journalism and the business world.

Percival Huntington Whaley, not incidentally the caricature on the cover of *Blind Tribute*, is the man from whom Harry inherited his profession, his Charleston ancestry, his barrier-island plantation, his beloved (but not enslaved) black nursemaid, and his writing career (to say nothing of his monogram). He is also the man who gave *Blind Tribute's* author, Whaley's great-great niece, Mari Anne Christie, her love of letters.

Educated at Hobart and Kenyon, P. H. Whaley was a reporter and editor for the *Charleston News*

and *Courier* beginning in 1909, the first Executive Editor of the *Philadelphia Evening Ledger* from 1914 to 1918, and Publisher of the Whaley-Eaton Service, an international newsgathering organization based in Washington, D.C., from 1918 to 1957. He died in 1964 at Prospect Hill Plantation on Edisto Island, South Carolina, on land owned by his family since the 1700s.

Analogous to Wentworth and Hoyt Business Service in *Blind Tribute*—although almost 60 years after Harry's venture—Whaley-Eaton had offices, at various times, in Washington, London, Paris, and Tokyo. As well as private research on behalf of business clients and multiple periodicals through the years, Whaley-Eaton published bimonthly *Whaley-Eaton Pamphlets* on matters of interest to businessmen, and the Whaley-Eaton *American Letter* and *Foreign Letter*, the first widely circulated investment newsletters in the United States. These weekly publications were precursors to, and friendly competitors with, *The Kiplinger Letter*, still in circulation and often wrongly cited as the "first business newsletter" in America.

Every newspaper editor owes tribute to the devil...

Harry Wentworth's bill just came due.

As America marches toward the Civil War, Harry Wentworth, gentleman of distinction and journalist of renown, finds his calls for peaceful resolution have fallen on deaf—*nay, hostile*—ears, so he must finally resolve his own moral quandary. Comment on the war from his influential—and safe—position in Northern Society, or make a news story and a target of himself South of the Mason-Dixon Line, in a city haunted by a life he has long since left behind?

The day-to-day struggle against countervailing forces, his personal and professional tragedies on both sides of the conflict, and the elegant and emotive writings that define him, all serve to illuminate the trials of this newsman's crusade, irreparably altering his mind, his body, his spirit, and his purpose as an honorable man. *Blind Tribute* exposes the shifting stones of the moral high ground, as Harry's family and friendships, North and South, are shattered by his acts of conscience.

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MARI ANNE CHRISTIE

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