

“The Comedy of Secession”

The Student and Schoolmate 11 (August and September 1862), 279-83, 314-19

Characters

Madam Columbia, Principal of the Union Seminary

Madam Britannia, a neutral old Lady, fond of giving advice

Madam La Russe, a conservative old Lady.

La Belle France, fascinating, but cautious.

Goddess of Liberty, a popular belle

Pupils of the Union Seminary:

Miss Caroline, Miss Georgiana, Miss Flora Dee, Miss Louisa Anna, Miss Alie Balmy, Miss Virginia, Miss Mary Land, Miss K. Tucky, Miss Sue Wyre, Miss Tennie C., Miss Maine, Miss N. Hampshire, Miss Vermont, Miss Massachusetts, Little Rhody, Miss Connecticut, Miss N. York, Miss Penn, Miss Ohio, Miss Indiana, Miss Illinois, et al.

Madam Columbia:

This is disgraceful! For eighty-six years this has been one of the most prosperous and quiet Seminaries in the world. Now we are all in confusion. Half a dozen of the young ladies have become exceedingly rebellious, and threaten to leave – secede, they call it – without reason or justice, and contrary to the wishes of their fathers and mothers. Half a dozen more of them are sulky and impertinent, and I don't know whether they will stand by the rules of the school or join the malcontents. They give me a world of trouble, but I intend to make them behave themselves.

(Enter Caroline, singing “Dixie”.)

Caroline:

Well, madam, I have come to say good-by – to bid you a solemn farewell.

Madam Columbia:

Indeed! And pray where are you going?

Caroline:

I am going to leave the Union Seminary; I suppose it is none of your business how or where I am going.

Madam Columbia:

I think it is, Miss Caroline, and I think you will find before you proceed much farther, that the old Union Seminary has the will and the power to enforce obedience.

Caroline:

I don't care a straw for the Union Seminary! Let me add that I dislike the name and place altogether.

Madam Columbia:

Caroline, I am ashamed of you, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You have disgraced your ancestors.

Act One

Caroline:

Indeed, madam, this is very strong language.

Madam Columbia:

What would your highly respectable progenitors, the Sumters, the Marions, the Pinkneys, say, if they could step out of their honored graves, and behold the infamy of their darling child?

Caroline:

Infamy, Madam?

Madam Columbia:

Certainly, Caroline; we can call it by no milder name than infamy. Haven't you trampled upon my flowerbeds, broken into my storehouses, and even robbed my chicken coops?

Caroline:

Madam, these things belonged to me as much as to you.

Madam Columbia:

They were the property of the Union Seminary – an Institution founded for the education and progress of future generations as well as the present. Here come your companions in infamy.

(Enter Flora Dee, Louisa Anna, Alie Balmy and Georgiana.)

Caroline:

You are insulting, Madam Columbia. You treat me and my companions like children – as though we had no rights, and were of no account whatever.

Madam Columbia:

As pupils in the Union Seminary, with someone to take care of you, no doubt you are very respectable persons; but as wandering stars, as vagrants and poachers on the manor of your Uncle Sam, you will become a nuisance to yourself and everybody else.

Georgiana:

I think we are abundantly able to take care of ourselves.

Madam Columbia:

You have broken into your Uncle's storehouses, stolen his gold and his hardware, Georgiana. This is not the way to get along.

Georgiana:

O, we will pay for all we have taken.

Madam Columbia:

Pay for it! Can the chicken thief compound his felony by paying for the fowls he stole?

Flora Dee:

We have been foully wronged! The chickens belonged to us by right.

Madam Columbia:

You impudent minx! How dare you make such an assertion! You are little better than a pauper, Flora Dee. Who paid for the very ground you stand upon, but Uncle Sam? Who has poured out money like water to protect and defend you? Who bought off and drove off the insatiate savage when he prowled at midnight round the couch on which you slept? For shame, Flora Dee! to treat your friends with such black ingratitude.

Louisa Anna:

Madam, you take advantage of Flora's good nature to impose upon her.

Madam Columbia:

No doubt she is a very good-natured thief, a lovely and amiable rebel! I do not wonder that you sympathize with her, for birds of a feather flock together. All I have said of her, and more, is true of you.

Louisa Anna:

Will you be kind enough to remember that I have done more for this Seminary than any other individual.

Madam Columbia:

You did very well while you behaved yourself like a lady. Let me ask you to remember that this Institution has done more for you than for any half dozen of its pupils.

Alie Balmy:

Now, I should like to ask what fault you have to find with any of us. We are dissatisfied, and intend to leave – in short, to secede. What objection can you reasonable offer to such a course?

Madam Columbia:

Your fathers placed you in the Union Seminary, with the understanding that you were to remain here. They placed you in charge of Uncle Sam, the Chairman of the Trustees of this Institution. The old gentleman has taken excellent care of you, watched over your interests and your progress with untiring zeal. He has humored, petted, and indulged you, even beyond what a wise and prudent guardian should do.

Alie Balmy:

He is a grim, obsolete old foggy!

Louisa Anna:

A tyrant and an oppressor!

Caroline:

An abominable old wretch!

Georgiana:

A fossilized humbug!

Flora Dee:

The conglomerated effervescence of superannuated stupidity!

Madam Columbia:

This abuse I might well expect from you after such an exhibition of base ingratitude.

Louisa Anna:

Really, madam, I can't see that you have the slightest cause to complain. We merely intend to establish another Institution, to be called the Confederate Seminary.

Madam Columbia:

And, pray, where do you intend to locate it?

Louisa Anna:

O, just south of here.

Madam Columbia:

Yes; and upon lands belonging to the trustees of this Seminary. Do you really think that Uncle Sam will permit you to establish a rival institution upon his grounds.

Georgiana:

I don't see that he can help himself. We have prepared our plans, and intend to put them in execution immediately.

Flora Dee:

We shall open the new establishment at once, and have Jeff. Davis for Principal.

Louisa Anna:

And Beauregard for dancing master. **(1 – See last pages.)**

Alie Balmy:

And Cobb for treasurer. **2**

Caroline:

“Still so gently o’er me stealing” – and Floyd for chief Purveyor. **3**

Georgiana:

And Professor Maury for entomologist. He knows all about the bug. **4**

Caroline:

What bug?

Georgiana:

Humbug!

Flora Dee:

And Wigfall for Chaplain. **5**

Louisa Anna:

And Wise – let me see – what shall we do with Wise? **6**

Alie Balmy:

We will invent an office for him. We will make him Bragmaster-General.

Madam Columbia:

All this is very fine. The treacherous rascals whom you mention have left my service; and I shall no longer permit them to prowl about my manor. As for you, young ladies, if you do not at once return to your duty, and obey the rules of this Institution, I shall direct Mr. Lincoln to bring you to a realizing sense of your obligations of this establishment.

Caroline:

But, madam, we have seceded. We have nothing more to do with you, or you with us.

Madam Columbia:

Let me assure you that you are making a mistake – a tremendous blunder. There is no such word as Secession in the vocabulary of the Union Seminary. Your infamous plot shall be foiled, and you shall be punished for your folly and wickedness. **(Exit.)**

Georgiana:

The old lady is as spunky as a cat that has lost her kittens.

Flora Dee:

Never mind her; she is of no account.

Louisa Anna:

But it will be well to proceed carefully, for you know Uncle Sam is a stout and rugged old fellow.

Alie Balmy:

Nonsense! He would be as powerless as a spring chicken in a northeast gale.

Caroline:

Certainly he will. Everybody will sympathize with us. Besides, we have strong friends on the other side of the ocean. That stiff old lady, Madam Britannia, and sweet, smiling La Belle France will espouse our cause, and patronize the new Seminary to the utmost of their ability.

Georgiana:

But there are only a half dozen, or so, of us. What will the rest of the pupils in the institution do?

Flora Dee:

Do? They will go with us, or course – at least, a majority of them will.

Georgiana:

Perhaps not.

Louisa Anna:

We mustn't get into a scrape that we can't get out of. There are those six New England Yankee girls – I am sure they will stand by Uncle Sam.

Alie Balmy:

I hope they will; I am sure we don't want them.

Caroline:

No; we will leave them out in the cold. Nearly all the rest of the ladies will join us.

Flora Dee:

Let me see: we may certainly depend upon Mademoiselles Virginia, Mary Land, Miss K. Tuckie, and Miss Sue Wrye and Miss Tennie.

Georgiana:

To be sure. They will go with us. They may need a little coaxing.

Alie Balmy:

But we must do something besides talk. – Ah, there comes a young lady who has always been exceedingly popular in this establishment. We must persuade her to go with us – I mean the lady whose portrait is on the coin – generally called the Goddess of Liberty.

Caroline:

She is an arrant humbug!

Georgiana:

We don't want her!

Flora Dee:

Certainly not; she doesn't know the differences between a tinker and a nabob; between a magnate and a mudsill.

Louisa Anna:

Hush! Hush! Are you mad? Don't you see that we must conciliate this popular demoiselle? She is very pretty, and the masses worship her. We must use her to win over our doubtful sisters.

Alie Balmy:

Well, Caroline, we will leave her with you, while the rest of us attend to other matters.

(Exit all but Caroline.)

Caroline:

Goddess of Liberty! It's a very pretty name, and I suppose we must keep on the right side of her.

(Enter Goddess of Liberty.)

Caroline:

I can hardly stoop to conciliate this fascinating belle, but I suppose I must, and I will try. Mademoiselle, I am your very obedient, humble servant. ***(Bows low.)***

Liberty:

No, you are not.

Caroline:

I assure you of my entire devotion.

Liberty:

You are a hypocrite.

Caroline:

Nay, you don't understand me. We are going to establish a new institution to be called the Confederate Seminary, just south of here, and we very much desire your presence and your influence.

Liberty:

Do you, indeed? You are very gracious, and condescending to honor me with your patronage.

Caroline:

You do not comprehend. We wish to have you with us as one of the family.

Liberty:

In other words, you wish me to become a cat's paw to enable you to delude weak and unsuspecting people into the support of your new establishment. May I inquire why you propose to leave the Union Seminary?

Caroline:

Because our rights have been trampled upon.

Act Two

Liberty:

Nonsense! You mean if you cannot be the greatest toad in the puddle, you will set the river on fire, if you can.

Caroline:

You misjudge me.

Liberty:

You know me well, Caroline; you know that I never trifle with my friends. You are a hypocrite! Uncle Sam has done everything he can to make the Union Seminary a pleasant and profitable place for you. He has supported and defended you, and given you every privilege you could possibly desire.

Caroline:

You are mistaken. What do you think of that rail-splitting clodhopper, who has just been made Steward over us?

Liberty:

He is one of my friends – an honest and true man. He will respect all your rights.

Caroline:

But we will not remain under his administration.

Liberty:

Won't you, indeed? Perhaps the Steward will compel you to remain.

Caroline:

Ha, ha, ha! That is very good. I should like to see him do it.

Liberty:

Probably you will have that pleasure before long. You forget that nearly all the members of the Institution will stand by their Alma Mater – the glorious Old Union – Miss Caroline, some eighty odd years ago, some of my friends --- your ancestors were among them – adopted a certain device, which is commonly called the Star Spangled Banner. Here it is. (Displays the flag.)

When the old Union is in danger, it is only necessary to point to this, and all except your miserable faction will rush to its support.

Caroline:

I think not. Here are several who will do nothing of the kind.

(Enter Virginia, Mary Land, Miss K. Tuckie, Miss Tennie C, and Miss Sue Wrye.)

Caroline:

Of course you will go with us into the Confederate Seminary, Virginia?

Virginia:

Well, I don't know. I have a great many doubts.

Liberty:

And well she may have. Shame, for even having a doubt. Virginia, can you be false to the memory of Washington, your truest and best friend, one of the revered founders of the old Union?

Virginia:

Well, the truth is, my friends are all going, and I can't very well help it.

Mary Land:

If Virginia goes, I suppose I must go too.

Liberty:

Shame, Mary Land!

Enter Massachusetts and Little Rhody.

Mary Land:

I must go.

Massachusetts:

No, you shall not!

Little Rhody:

Not if I can help it!

Caroline:

But you can't help it! *(Seizes her by the arm, and is assisted by Virginia.)*

Massachusetts:

We will try, at any rate. *(Takes Mary by the other arm.)*

Little Rhody:

Don't let her go. *(Assists Massachusetts. They pull in opposite directions.)*

Mary Land:

O dear! Let go of me! You will pull me all to pieces! You will kill me! *(Caroline and Virginia release her.)*

Caroline:

But you will come with us, Miss Sue Wrye?

Miss Sue Wrye:

Well, I want to go, and I don't want to go.

(Enter Indiana, Illinois and Iowa.)

Virginia:

O, come! Come over! Your friends are all with us.

Indiana:

No, they are not, and you can't go. No Price can buy you. **(The struggle is repeated, and Indiana triumphs.)**

Virginia:

You will certainly join us, Miss K. Tuckie.

Miss K. Tuckie:

Yes, I think I will. *(Walks over.)*

Caroline:

Bravo! Kate, I honor, respect and love you!

Virginia:

Just what we might have expected of Kate – noble, generous, and truehearted.

Miss K. Tuckie:

On second thought, I guess I won't go over. (*Walks back.*)

Liberty:

Just what I might have expected of Kate – noble, generous and true hearted. Thy friends, Kate, thy Clay, thy Crittenden, all thy nobles ones, were my friends. They were always so true to this. (*Pointing to the flag.*)

Miss K. Tuckie:

So am I. Breckinridge may go to grass! **7**

Virginia:

Ah, Miss Tennie, there can be no doubt about you.

Miss Tennie:

I always liked the old Union, but I suppose it is of no use for me to stop here any longer. (*Crosses over.*)

Liberty:

For shame, Tennie! Amid the din of coming battle, Old Jackson's bones will surely rattle! How dare you, while thus sinking down low, Confront the curse of Parson Brownlow? **8**

Exeunt all but Liberty and Caroline.

Caroline:

Perhaps, my sweet friend, you will yet conclude to go with us.

Liberty:

Never! Where this stays (**points up to the flag**) I shall stay! When this goes down, I shall go down with it. (**Exit.**)

Caroline:

Don't be rash. Ah, here come some of our foreign friends.

Enter Madam Britannia.

Madam Britannia, I am delighted to see you. Of course you intend to sustain the new movement?

Madam Britannia:

My sympathies are with you, but you see there is a little difficulty in the way. I have just been talking over the matter with Madam Columbia, and for decency's sake, I promised to be neutral.

Enter Georgiana.

Caroline:

Neutral.

Georgiana:

Why, that is worse than nothing.

Madam Britannia:

Why no, my child; my sympathies are with you, and I can help you a great deal. But we must be very cautious. You see I have certain business relations with Madam Columbia, which might be disturbed by open rupture.

Georgiana:

And you have certain business relations with us which may be disturbed if you don't go with us.

Caroline:

No shuffling, old lady.

Madam Britannia:

Hush! I will help you to the utmost of my ability. Hush – sh! Here comes Madam Columbia, and we must be very careful.

Enter Madam Columbia.

(To Madam Columbia:) Madam, I am glad to meet you now, as I always am. I sincerely regret that you are involved in this trouble.

(To Georgiana:) Certainly, I'll help you.

(To Madam Columbia:) But you have my sympathies, Madam Columbia.

(To Georgiana:) My heart is with you in this new movement, and as soon as I can decently do so, I will acknowledge the new Seminary.

(To Madam Columbia:) And I trust, Madam Columbia, that you will be able to put down this infamous rebellion.

(To Georgiana:) And if you want provisions, cutlery, hardware, I will send them to you; but we must be very cautious.

(To

Madam Columbia:) Yes, Madam Columbia, I hope you will be able to put down this infamous rebellion.

(To Georgiana:) You may depend upon me for all the assistance in my power, but for the present, I must remain neutral.

Madam Columbia:

You seem to manifest your neutrality in the most extraordinary manner. You have been sending every comfort to the insurgents.

Madam Britannia:

Madam, you are disposed to find fault, and to be quarrelsome. Madam, I protest against your

course. Why do you wish to oppress these poor children, flesh of your flesh, and bone of your bone? Let them go if they wish. Why will you attempt to subjugate them?

Madam Columbia:

Because they are rebels and traitors. Why do you put down a rebellion in the Indian, Canadian or Irish branches of your establishment? I think madam, that you had better mind your own business.

Madam Britannia:

This isn't the first time you have insulted me, madam. I demand satisfaction! If you don't apologize, I will pull the house down over your head! I will break down the doors of the apartments, which you have fastened upon these young ladies, and let them out, and let in all the world.

(To Georgiana:) What do you think of that?

Georgiana:

Very good. Pray, quarrel with the old lady if you can.

Madam Britannia:

(To Madam Columbia:) I will pull the house down over your head; and my friend La Belle France will assist me.

(Enter La Belle France.)

La Belle France:

Pardonnez-moi, madame. Shall I put my fingaïre in ze fire? No! I will mind my own beeseness – s'il vous plait. Ze traitaire, ze rebelleong – vat zis you call him? – trouble me vaïre much. But shall I put my fingaïre in ze fire? No Madame. J'en suis tres fachee.

Enter La Russe.

La Russe:

Madam Columbia, you have my sympathies. When I have a rebellion in my establishment, I always put it down, and I hope you will do the same. Do your duty to yourself and the world. I will sustain you for one.

Madam Britannia:

(To Georgiana:) Don't be alarmed; your cause is safe. I will get up a quarrel with the old lady. You are doing very well.

(Enter Louisa Anna.)

Louisa Anna:

Everything is going against us! They have got Miss Tennie back, and Sue and Mary and Kate are actually making faces at us.

(Enter Massachusetts.)

Massachusetts:

I have the pleasure of informing you, Miss Lou, "Picayune Butler's come to town."

9 He is stopping at the St. Charles, and has already proved that he can keep a hotel.

Louisa Anna:

I was never so vexed in my life!

Madam Columbia:

Madam Britannia, you hear the news. My Steward is doing the work which I gave him to do.

Madam Britannia:

(Obsequiously.) Madam Columbia, I am your most obedient, humble servant. You know I always sympathized with you, and always hoped you would be able to put down this rebellion.

(Enter Maine.)

Maine:

Madam, we have caught half a dozen of the naughty girls; and we have got a whole nest of them penned up in Miss Virginia's front parlor. McClellan will unearth them very soon. **10**

Louisa Anna:

Things are against us – fiddle faddle!
I think we might as well skedaddle.

(Exeunt all but loyal ladies.)

Madam Columbia:

I am satisfied with the course of events, and I hope my children will all learn a lesson from what has transpired that will last them to the end of time. But it is time for school to begin. **(Rings the bell, and Liberty and the loyal ladies enter.)** Ah, Miss Tennie, I am glad to see you back again. I hope the whipping you have had has cured you of any desire to flirt with that abominable Jeff. Davis, Wigfall, and Toombs. **11**

Miss K. Tuckie:

Poor Jeff.! He has been jilted.

Madam Columbia:

Don't you like him, Miss Tennie?

Miss K. Tuckie:

Kinder! (Bites her thumb.)

Little Rhody:

As for Wigfall – it will be more than a wig fall; head and all will fall with the wig.

Maine:

And Toombs – “Hark from the Toombs, a doleful sound!”

Massachusetts:

I beg your pardon, Madam, but can you tell me why this rebellion is like a boot?

Madam Columbia:

I cannot.

Massachusetts:

Because we put our Foote into it. **12**

Little Rhody:

Very true; but why is General Floyd like a butcher?

Maine:

Like a tallow candle, you mean – because he runs away.

Little Rhody:

No; because he steels his knife before he uses it.

Madam Columbia:

Fie! Fie! Children. Punning is a vicious habit. Now let us sing our morning song, and attend to our duties.

(They sing the Star Spangled Banner.)

History Notes to Accompany Comedy of Secession:

1 General Pierre G. T. Beauregard led the bombardment of Fort Sumter. He also commanded the rebels at the first Battle of Bull Run (they won) and in 1862 commanded troops in Mississippi.

2 Howell Cobb was the former speaker of the US House of Representatives, governor of Georgia, and secretary of the treasury. After Lincoln's election, he urged Georgians to secede. Later he became a Confederate general.

3 John Floyd was a politician from Virginia. He was US secretary of war before the Civil War. Northerners believed that he transferred munitions and supplies – in his capacity as head of the War Department – to Southern forts and facilities just before the secession crisis.

4 Matthew Maury was a famous meteorologist and oceanographer for the US Navy in the 1840s and 1850s. He joined the Confederate Navy.

5 Louis T. Wigfall was the fire-eating Confederate and US Senator from Texas.

6 Henry Wise was a Virginia congressman and governor, and a huge supporter of slavery and states' rights. He became an unsuccessful Confederate general.

7 Tennessee was the home state **Henry Clay** (who created the "Great Compromise") and of **John Crittenden** (whose compromise tried to prevent war in late 1860). Kentucky was seriously divided in its loyalties – it tried to remain neutral during the first few months of the war, but both Union and Confederate armies invaded. The battle for control of the state lasted nearly two years. About ¼ of the 100,000 Kentuckians who fought in the war served the Confederacy, including **John Breckenridge**, who as US vice president in 1860 ran as the presidential candidate of the Southern Democrats. They threatened that the South would secede if Lincoln were elected president.

8 Andrew Jackson was a loyal Southerner and Tennessean. He pushed the Union to the brink of civil war during the Nullification Controversy of 1831 when he threatened to use the army to force South Carolina to back away from its nullification of a federal tariff. (Nullification – declaring that a law is "null and void" in a particular state.) The Rev. William Brownlow was a Tennessee Unionist who published a book about the persecution of Southern Unionists during the war and later served as Governor of Tennessee.

9 General Benjamin Butler was a politician turned general. He commanded Massachusetts troops when they were attacked by Baltimore civilians on their

way to Washington, earned the hatred of Southerners with his tough administration of occupied New Orleans, and he first applied the status of “contraband of war” to slaves coming into Union lines. Butler was a better politician than a soldier but remained popular among Northerners.

10 Gen. George McClellan was idolized by his troops and by much of the North. He was the commanding general of the Union army from fall of 1861 to summer of 1862. His caution cost him a victory in the 1862 Peninsula Campaign.

11 Robert Toombs, a Georgia congressman and senator, resigned from the Senate in early 1861 to organize the secession movement. He failed to become Confederate President, and served briefly as secretary of state and as a general until 1863.

12 Capt. Andrew Hull Foote was the commander of the US Navy on the Upper Mississippi and helped capture Forts Henry and Donelson in spring 1862.

*Notes adapted from *Lessons of War*, Ed. James Marten.