

The Boom of the Clarion.

BY BRET HARTE.

The editorial sanctum of the Calaveras Clarion opened upon the "composing room" of that paper on the one side, and gave apparently upon the rest of Calaveras county upon the other. For, situated on the very outskirts of the settlement, and the summit of a very steep hill, the pines sloped away from the editorial windows to the long valley of the South Fork and—infinitely. The little wooden building had invaded Nature without subduing it. It was filled night and day with the murmur of pines and their fragrance. Squirrels scampered over its roof when it was not preoccupied by woodpeckers, and a printer's devil had once seen a nest-building blue jay enter the composing-room window, flutter before one of the slanting type-cases with an air of deliberate selection, and then fly off with a vowel in its bill.

Amidst these sylvan surroundings the temporary editor of the Clarion sat in his sanctum, reading the proofs of an editorial. As he was occupying that position during a six weeks' absence of the bona fide editor and proprietor, he was consequently reading the proof with some anxiety and responsibility. It had been suggested to him by certain citizens that the Clarion needed a firmer and more aggressive policy towards the bill before the Legislature for the wagon road to the South Fork. Several assembly men had been "got at" by the rival settlement of of Liberty Hill, and a scathing exposure and denunciation of such methods was necessary. The interests of their own township was also to be "whooped up." All this had been vigorously explained to him, and he had grasped the spirit, if not always the facts, of his informants. It is to be feared, therefore, that he was perusing his article more with reference to its vigour than his own convictions. And yet he was not so greatly absorbed as to be unmindful of the murmur of the pines without, his half-savage environment, and the lazy talk of his sole companions—the foreman and printer in the adjoining room.

"Bet your life! I've always said that a man inside a newspaper office could hold his own agin any outsider that wanted to play rough or tried to raid the office! That's the press, and that's the printin' ink and roller! Folks talk a heap o' the power o' the press!—I tell ye, ye don't half know it. Why, when old Kernel Fish was editin' the Sierra Banner, one o' them bullies that he'd lampooned in the Banner fought his way past the Kernel in the office, into the composin' room, to wreck everythin' and 'pye' all the types. Spoffrel—ye don't remember Spoffrel—little red-haired man—was foreman. Spoffrel fended him off with the roller, and got one good dab inter his eyes that blinded him, and then Spoffrel sorter skinned him over to the press—a plain lever just like ours—whar the looked-up forme of the inside was still a-lyin'. Then, quick as lightnin', Spoffrel tifts him over agin it, and he throws out his hand and ketches hold o' the forme to steady himself, when Spoffrel just runs the forme and the hand under the press and downs with the lever! And that held the feller fast as grim death! And when at last he begs off, and Spoffrel lets him loose, the hull o' that ere lampooning article he objected to was printed right onto the skin of his hand! Fact, and it wouldn't come off, either."

"Gosh! but I'd like to hev seen it," said the printer. "There ain't any chance, reckon, o' such a sight here. The boss don't take no risks lampoonin', and he' (the editor) knew he was being indicated by some unseen gesture of the unseen workman) 'ain't that style."

"Ye never kin tell," said the foreman, didactically, "what might happen. I've known editors to get into a fight jest for a little innercent bedevilin' o' the opposite party. Sometimes for a misprint. Old man Pritchard of the Argus once had a hole blown through his arm because his proofreader had called Colonel Starbottle's speech an 'ignominious' defence, when the old man had written 'ingenuous' defence."

The editor paused in his proof-reading. He had just come upon the sentence: "We cannot congratulate Liberty Hill—in its superior elevation—upon the ignominious silence of the representative of all Calaveras when this infamous bill was introduced." He referred to his copy. Yes! He had certainly written "ignominious"—that was what his informants had suggested. But was he sure they were right? He had a vague recollection, also, that the representative alluded to—Senator Bradley—had fought two duels, and was a "good," though somewhat impulsive, shot! He might alter the word to "ingenuous" or "ingenious"—either would be finely sarcastic, but then—there was his foreman, who would detect it! He would wait until he had finished the entire article. In that occupation he became oblivious of the next room, of a silence, a whispered conversation, which ended with a rapping at the door, and the appearance of the foreman in the doorway.

"There's a man in the office who wants to see the editor," he said.

"Show him in," replied the editor, briefly. He was, however, conscious that there was a singular significance in his foreman's manner, and an eager apparition of the other printer over the foreman's shoulder.

"He's carryin' a shotgun, and is a man twice as big as you be," said the foreman, gravely.

The editor quickly recalled his own brief and as yet blameless record in the Clarion. "Perhaps," he said, tentatively, with a gentle smile, "he's looking for Captain Brush (the absent editor)."

"I told him all that," said the foreman, grimly, "and he said he wanted to see the man in charge."

In proportion as the editor's heart sank his outward crest arose. "Show him in," he said, loftily.

"We kin keep him out," suggested the foreman, lingering a moment; "me and him," indicating the expectant printer behind him, "is enough for that."

"Show him up," repeated the editor, firmly.

The foreman withdrew, the editor seated himself, and again took up his proof. The doubtful word "ignominious" seemed to stand out of the paragraph before him; it certainly was a strong expression! He was about to run his pencil through it when he heard the heavy step of his visitor approaching. A sudden instinct of belligerency took possession of him, and he wrathfully threw the pencil down.

The burly form of the stranger blocked the doorway. He was dressed like a miner, but his build and general physiognomy were quite distinct from the local variety. His upper lip and chin were clean-shaven, still showing the blue-black roots of the beard which covered the rest of his face and depended in

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a thick fleece under his throat. He carried a small bundle tied up in a silk handkerchief in one hand, and a "shotgun" in the other, perilously at half cock. Entering the sanctum, he put down his bundle and quietly closed the door behind him. He then drew an empty chair towards him, and dropped heavily into it, with his gun on his knees. The editor's heart dropped almost as heavily, although he quite composedly held out his hand.

"Shall I relieve you of your gun?"

"Thank ye, lad—no. It's moor comfortable wi' me, and it's main dangerous to handle on the half-cock. That's why I didn't leave 'im on the horse outside!"

At the sound of his voice and occasional accent a flash of intelligence relieved the editor's mind. He remembered that twenty miles away, in the illimitable vista from his windows, lay a settlement of English north-country miners, who, while faithfully adopting the methods, customs, and even slang of the Californians, retained many of their native peculiarities. The gun he carried on his knee, however, was evidently part of the Californian imitation.

"Can I do anything for you?" said the editor, blandly.

"Aye! I've coom here to bill my woife."

"I—don't think I understand," hesitated the editor, with a smile.

"I've coom here to get ye to put into your paaper a warnin', a notiss, that unless she returns to my house in four weeks, I'll have nowt to do wi' her agin!"

"Oh," said the editor, now perfectly reassured, "you want an advertisement? That's the business of the foreman—I'll call him." He was rising from his seat when the stranger laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, and gently forced him down again.

"Noa, lad! I don't want noa foreman nor understrappers to take this job. I want to talk it over wi' you. Sabe? My woife she bin up and awaa these six months. We had a bit of difference, that ain't here nor there, but she skeddaddled outer my house. I want to give her fair warning, and let her know I ain't payin' any debts o' hers arter this notiss, and I ain't takin' her back arter four weeks from date!"

"I see," said the editor, glibly.

"What's your wife's name?"

"Eliza Jane Dimmidge."

"Good," continued the editor, scribbling on the paper before him, "something like this will do: 'Whereas, my wife, Eliza Jane Dimmidge, having left my bed and board, without just cause or provocation, this is to give notice that I shall not be responsible for any debts of her contracting on or after this date.'"

"Ye must be a lawyer," said Mr. Dimmidge, admiringly.

It was an old enough form of advertisement, and the remark showed incontestably that Mr. Dimmidge was not a native; but the editor smiled patronisingly, and went on, "And I further give notice that if she does not return within the period of four weeks from this date, I shall take such proceedings for relief as the law affords."

"Coom, lad, I didn't say that."

"But you said you wouldn't take her back."

"Aye."

"And you can't prevent her without legal proceedings. She's your wife. But you needn't take proceedings, you know. It's only a warning."

Mr. Dimmidge nodded approvingly. "That's so."

"You'll want it published for four weeks, until date?" asked the editor.

"Mebbe longer, lad."

The editor wrote "till forbid" in the margin of the paper and smiled.

"How big will it be?" said Mr. Dimmidge. The editor took a copy of the Clarion, and indicated about an inch of space. Mr. Dimmidge's face fell.

"I want it bigger—in large letters like a play-card," he said. "That's no good for a warning."

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"You can have half a column or a whole column if you like," said the editor, airily.

"I'll take a whole one," said Mr. Dimmidge, simply.

The editor laughed. "Why, it would cost you a hundred dollars."

"I'll take it," repeated Mr. Dimmidge.

"But," said the editor, gravely, "the same notice in a small space will serve your purpose and be quite legal."

"Never you mind that, lad. It's the locks of the thing I'm after, and not the expense. I'll take that column."

The editor called in the foreman and showed him the copy. "Can you display that so as to fill a column?"

The foreman grasped the situation promptly. It would be big business for the paper.

"Yes," he said, meditatively, "that bold-faced election type will do it."

Mr. Dimmidge's face brightened. The expression "bold-faced" pleased him. That's it! I told you. I want to bill her in a portion of the paper."

"I might put in a cut," said the foreman, suggestively; "something like this." He took a venerable woodcut from the case. I grieve to say it was one which, until the middle of the present century, was common enough in the newspaper offices in the South-West. It showed the running figure of a negro woman carrying her personal property in a knotted handkerchief slung from a stick over her shoulder, and was supposed to represent "a fugitive slave."

Mr. Dimmidge's eye brightened. I'll take that, too. It's a little dark complected for Mrs. D., but it will do. Now room away, lad," he said to the foreman, as he quietly pushed him into the outer office again and closed the door. Then facing the surprised editor, he said:—"There's another notiss I want ye to put in your paper; but that's atween us. Not a word to them," he indicated the banished foreman with a jerk of his thumb. "Sabe? I want you to put this in another part o' your paper, quite innocent like, ye know." He drew from his pocket a grey wallet, and taking out a slip of paper read from it gravely. "If this should meet the eye of R. B., look out for M. J. D., He is on your track. When this you see write a line to E. J. D., Elktown Postoffice. I want this to go in as 'Personal and Private'—sabe?—like them notisses in the big Frisco papers."

"I see," said the editor, laying it aside. "It shall go in the same issue in another column."

Apparently Mr. Dimmidge expected something more than this reply, for after a

moment's hesitation, he said, with an odd smile:—

"Ye ain't seein' the meanin' o' that, lad?"

"No," said the editor, lightly; "but I suppose R. B. does, and it isn't intended that anyone else should."

"Mebbe it is, and mebbe it isn't," said Mr. Dimmidge, with a self-satisfied air.

"I don't mind saying atween us that R. B. is the man as I've suspicioned as havin' something to do with my wife gone away; and ye see, if he writes to E. J. D.—that's my wife's initials—at Elktown, I'll get that letter a.d so make sure."

"But suppose your wife goes there first, or sends?"

"Then I'll ketch her or her messenger. Ye see?"

The editor did not see fit to oppose any argument to this phenomenal simplicity, and Mr. Dimmidge, after settling his bill with the foreman and enjoining the editor to the strictest secrecy regarding the origin of the "personal notice," took up his gun, and departed, leaving the treasury of the Clarion unprecedently enriched, and the editor to his proofs.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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