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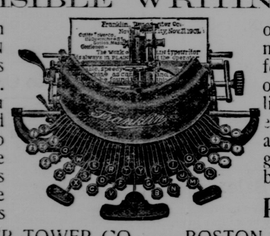

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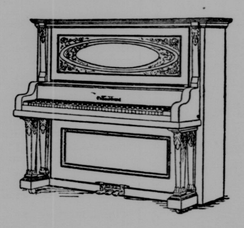

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THE BOOMHOUSE MAN'S STORY

What appeals to me as my most interesting experience as a writer occurred a winter or two ago in a little lumber hamlet of the hill region of Kentucky. For a moment at least it was quite thrilling—rather too thrilling indeed to be useful as material to me with my straight and simple art standards. I have a groveling fondness for reproducing only the usual features of life, and this little episode, though it was pitifully commonplace in its setting, had about it something that was not only unusual, but nearly sublime.

I had gone down to the village in question with the ambitious design of seeing a "tide" in the river. Tides are peculiar to wintry months. They are useful to lumbermen and incidentally to writers, but they have their unpleasant features. My little hill hamlet, having doffed its green livery, was cowled in dark mud. Rain sheeted the air. The inn seemed to be saturated, and the roar of the river on the skirts of the town corroborated the innkeeper's assurance concerning the magnitude of the special "tide" which was in progress.

"She's booming for all that's in her," declared the innkeeper, an elderly man, who had enjoyed during the previous summer the happy privilege of being useful to me in many ways. "They look for the boom to bust tonight. Thousands of dollars afloat. You see that man by the stove? He's one of the big timber fellers up north. Just come down. He'll lose heavy if she busts. Say, miss, take a look at that feller. You remember me telling you about the boomhouse man's daughter? Well, that feller—he was the man—he was Idy's beau."

I remembered the story. On a certain day in the previous June I was standing at the head of a mill shoot looking down at the sunken river. Suddenly a dugout shot round the bend. The man in the rude thing seemed only half human. He was bent and shrunken, with a clay colored skin, matted red hair and such a woebegone vacuity of face as startled one. The innkeeper had related that this poor creature lived alone in the boomhouse, a shed on the river cliff, and that his duty was to cook for the loggers in time of tides.

"He's seen trouble," said the innkeeper. "Used to own a nice little farm up yonder and live well. He had an only daughter. Pretty as a peach, Idy was—slim waisted, with kinky red hair and big eyes. He set store by Idy. Nothing was too good for her. And one summer a son of one of the mill owners was down here settling up the mill books, and he took a fancy to Idy, and folks said it'd be a match. The boomhouse man was proud as a peafowl, and after the young feller went north again, why, Idy's paw he narrated around that the wedding was to come off on Christmas day and how't Idy was going up north to live in great style. But the young feller never came back. He never came back," repeated the innkeeper, with a graphic sort of pause. "And Idy—well, I always said if she'd of had a mother things would have been different. I always said she took the best way out of it, for 'bout the time tongues was beginning to wag Idy was missing one day, and they found her tangled up in the river drift yonder where the sand bar reaches across the shallows."

"And what did her father do?"

"Do? Oh, he acted like he'd got it between the eyes—kind of daft. Ain't been just right ever since."

This tragic narrative, which the innkeeper related with the equanimity of an epic poet, recurred to me vividly as I observed the man by the stove.

He was middle aged. The story lay fifteen years behind him, but he had a chin which made me believe the innkeeper an honest chronicler.

He was stolid and well fed. Apparently life had laid no heavy penalty upon him.

He seemed too vulgar and heavy a type of humanity to invite exceptional treatment of fate, yet I saw him that night in rather a notable situation.

Just after dark the innkeeper and his daughter and I set out across the cliff path to see the river in active operation. We walked in the wind's teeth, with a splitting rain in our faces. It was cold and bleak. Then in an instant the river flashed in sight. Its whole freshet swollen current flamed with red from countless fire baskets and lanterns. Long shafts of vermilion stabbed the packed timber in the boom, struck across the climbing banks and made fiery lances of the pike poles in the loggers' hands.

Men were leaping about on the logs. In a flare of crimson I saw on the wedged in float the man who had been Idy's lover. He was working sturdily as any logman about, handling the heavy cables and shouting directions.

It was worth seeing, that mountain stream as it mouthed at the straining timber in the boom. It was worth seeing, but the air was cold and wet, and in the second hour of our watching the innkeeper's daughter, being upheld by neither hospitality nor ambition, besought me to accompany her to the boomhouse for the purpose of getting "thored out."

The boomhouse showed its little red window just below us on the rocks.

The two tiny rooms of the place looked warm and bright as we opened the door.

Half a dozen men were drinking coffee from tin cups at a table. The boomhouse man, apathetic as ever, with his resinous looking hair in his pale eyes, was frying bacon in a great skillet.

The innkeeper joined the throng at the board. His daughter and I sat by the stove in the inner room.

I shall never forget that room. The pattern of the homespun coverlet on the boomhouse man's pallet is indelibly with me.

Soothed by the heat, the innkeeper's daughter dozed off, with her feet on the hearth. I remember observing with dreamy interest the yellowness of the teeth exhibited in the graceful abandon of her slumber. I thought of snuff. I think I had a drowsy moment myself.

Some one stamped noisily into the other room and asked for whisky. I glanced out. It was the mill man of Idy's infatuation. He flung himself at length on a bench behind the cook stove and lay with shut eyes. His clothes were dripping with thin mud, and an air of utter weariness pervaded his attitude.

He had scarcely looked at the boomhouse man. I glanced at him, however, and became aware that his aspect had changed. Something like life shone in the pale eyes under that unkempt hair. He was standing still, just staring with a half blind gaze at the man on the bench.

Suddenly he stepped forward like a shadow.

"It's you, ain't it?" he said.

The man on the bench shot round a startled gaze. He saw the revolver in the lean hand leveled toward him. He must have recognized Idy's father in the figure standing over him, sternly poised as to a deed of necessary vengeance.

"I knowed God A'mighty 'd give you up to me soon or late," said the old man simply. "I waited. They ain't nothin' to say. You know what you're dyin' for."

The whole thing was singularly passionless and without any aspect of tragedy. On the stove a panful of meat crackled. Noises from outside came distinctly. The candle flickered and cast a thread of light on the lifted face of the man on the bench.

I myself had a sense of inability to move or speak. The innkeeper's girl slept on. Whatever consciousness I had seemed to be in the millman's frame, passively awaiting a sharp, metallic click. There was no chance at all for him. He seemed to see this and to take it calmly.

"Go on," he said. "I wronged you. I've got—a little daughter—myself. If you've any heart in you—don't say—why"—

His voice broke.

The briefest instant passed, and then there was a sound, but not the sound we waited for. The boomhouse man moved a little. The rigor left his form, and I saw his arm fall slowly against his side.

"I ain't goin' to kill you," he muttered. "You got a daughter. Go and see as no black hearted villain steals her from you."

Beaconsfield's Advice.

When Lord Beaconsfield was at the height of his fame, one of his most ardent supporters in the house of commons asked as a signal favor that he might bring his son to Downing street and that "the greatest man of the age" would give the boy some wise maxim or word of counsel which might in after years be the treasure and guide of his life. Lord Beaconsfield, old and gouty, groaned, but consented. The proud papa duly produced young hopeful, whom the veteran statesman thus addressed: "My dear young friend, whatever you do in after life, mind that you never ask who wrote the 'Letters of Junius' or on which side of Whitehall Charles I. was beheaded. For if you do either of those things you will be considered a bore, and that is something too dreadful for you at your tender age to conceive."

The Discovery of Glass.

Though the Egyptians claim to have been taught by Hermes the art of making glass, it may be stated upon the authority of Pliny that its discovery belongs to the Syrians, or, rather, Phœnicians, who obtained it accidentally. A small number of sailors who had landed upon the coast of Spain built a fire upon the sand and supported their cooking utensils with stones which they had found near the shore. After finishing their meal one of the party accidentally raked the ashes, and, the action of the heat having combined the niter and sand, he found a crystalline substance, the glass of the present day.

Getting the Good of It.

A ten-year-old philosopher whose week end holiday gives him the only morning that he can lie abed as long as he likes promulgated this order as he was leisurely absorbing his dessert at the dinner table last Friday night:

"Wake me up at just 7 o'clock, as usual, tomorrow morning, mamma. It seems so good to be able to turn over and take another nap!"

A SPORTING PARSON.

The Sequel to a Wager Laid on the Life of Napoleon.

In 1812 an action was brought by Rev. Robert Gilbert against Sir Mark Sykes, and it arose from a bet made between the parties upon the life of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Sir Mark ten years before the action had invited some friends to dinner, the reverend gentleman being one of the number. Politics became the subject of conversation, and the opinion was freely expressed by some of the party that Napoleon was in a critical situation at that time and that attempts would be made to assassinate him.

This view was held by the host, who said that he considered Bonaparte's life in such danger that if any one would give him 100 guineas he would pay him a guinea a day during Napoleon's lifetime.

Upon this Rev. Gilbert, "in the language," as the defendant's counsel put it, "of a common five guinea bettor on a race course, nailed him with: 'Will you, Sir Mark? I'll take you—done.'"

The sporting parson gave 100 guineas to Sir Mark, who for a considerable time paid him various sums of money on account of the wager, amounting in all to $4,850.

Then for five or six years the guinea a day payments ceased, the baronet feeling no doubt that if Bonaparte was not dead he ought to be, and Gilbert, who, it may be mentioned, enjoyed a living worth some $6,000 a year, brought this action against Sir Mark to enforce the wager and sought to recover from him a further $11,000.

The plaintiff's counsel contended that, although it might be objected that wagers on the life of men were immoral, yet the laws of England supported such wagers.

The judges did not seem to have laid much stress upon the question whether this wager tended to imperil the safety of the state. He asked the jury to consider whether the bet had been seriously made, and if it were a serious bet whether in all the circumstances the plaintiff had not been paid enough money by the defendant. The jury took the hint and gave a verdict against the rapacious parson.—Longman's Magazine.

Mixed Pickles, Esq.

Lord Wolseley in his reminiscences tells this incident of his campaign in Ashanti: "Sailors are proverbially fond of pets, and the naval brigade adopted one, a negro boy, very black and very small. They had dressed him in the full uniform of a bluejacket, which made him very proud of himself and of the wooden sword they had made for him. When you asked him his name they had taught him to stand up to attention, to salute and to answer quite solemnly, 'Mixed Pickles, Esq., sir.' They took the utmost delight in teaching him English, and the appearance and frolicsome pomposity of this child were a source of perpetual amusement to all ranks."

Belleisle-en-Mer.

This island is one of the finest of the group composing the corner of Brittany called the Morbihan. It contains four towns, five lighthouses and several coast guard stations. The crossing from Quiberon takes some fifty minutes, and, the sea being usually very rough, with treacherous rocks stretching far out from the land, there is always a spice of danger in making Belleisle. Indeed, the sunken rocks in many parts render access impossible except to small rowing boats.

Mark Twain's Audiences.

It was on a train somewhere between New York and the west. Mark Twain was traveling between towns on a lecture tour, and a friend had been drawing the humorist out on the subject of his experiences.

"What sort of audience," he asked, "do you like best? Who, in your opinion, make the most responsive and sympathetic listeners?"

"College men," replied Mark after a moment's thought—"college men and convicts."—Harper's Weekly.

Wonderful Bird Flight.

The most wonderful bird flight noted is the migratory achievement of the Virginia plover, which leaves its northern haunts in North America and, taking a course down the Atlantic, usually from 400 to 500 miles east of the Bermudas, reaches the coast of Brazil in one unbroken flight of fifteen hours, covering a distance of 3,200 miles at the rate of four miles a minute.

Marriage Bureaus.

The growing number of marriage advertisements in Austrian and German newspapers seems to indicate an increasing commercial element in matrimonial affairs. A journalist who investigated the matter discovered, however, that most of these advertisements are inserted by the marriage bureaus, which do a thriving business in plucking fools.

His Art and His Manners.

"I'll admit that the eminent tragedian we have just mentioned is exceedingly irascible and sometimes indiscreet in his manifestations," said the playgoer, "but he is a fine actor."

"Yes," answered Mr. Stormington Barnes, "he knows how to act, but he doesn't know how to behave."—Washington Star.

A FAMOUS HOAX.

The Trick Theodore Hook Played on a Woman He Disliked.

Theodore Hook, the wit par excellence of the early nineteenth century, is a name that still brings a kind of genial glow to the mind as at the remembrance of good and happy days. We suspect, however, that very few people today could give a definite account of who Theodore Hook was and what he did. An article in the Cornhill by Viscount St. Cyres sets the wit and his circle pretty clearly before the mind. This famous hoax, for example, played off on Mrs. Tottenham, an old lady of Berners street who had offended him, may be new to many readers and is at least worth repeating:

"I'll make the old woman the talk of London," he said, and accordingly wrote to every sort and kind of person—it is said to 4,000 in all—asking them to call at her house in Berners street on a certain day. "The first thing witnessed," says a newspaper of the time, "was six stout men bearing an organ, surrounded by wine porters, barbers with wigs, mantaumakers with bandboxes, opticians with the various instruments of their trade. Wagons laden with coal from the Paddington wharfs, upholsterers' goods in cart loads, pianofortes, linen and jewelry of every description filled the street. Besides these, a coffin was brought to the house, made by order, agreeable to letter, five feet six by sixteen inches. There were accoucheurs, tooth drawers, miniature painters and servants of every description wanting places. Certain revelations to be made respecting a complicated system of fraud pursued at the Bank of England brought the governor of that establishment. The lord mayor and his chaplain were allured by an invitation to receive the deathbed confession of a peculating common council man, while the Duke of Gloucester started off with Colonel Dalton to receive a communication from a dying woman, formerly a confidential attendant on his royal highness' mother. His were the royal liveries conspicuous on the occasion."

There must certainly have been a zest to life in those days, though the old lady of Berners street may not have enjoyed the joke as much as did Theodore Hook and the actor Lintot, who rented a chamber opposite the fated house and looked down on the wilderness of wagons and carriers that filled the ways for blocks around.

Morning Wakers.

A writer in the London Chronicle, noting a reference in Scribner's Magazine to a sign in a Dutch town, "L. Y. D. Zwaan, Morgen Wekker" (which means morning waker), notes that the industry is common in the districts where London workingmen live, and sixpence a week from each client is the usual "waker's" wage. All over London, too, policemen make a little extra in waking those whose work calls them early. He tells of seeing a South Kensington constable clambering suspiciously upon a wall. There the peace officer caught the end of a rope and pulled till an answering shout was heard. The constable explained that the other end of the rope was affixed to a baker's bedclothes.

A Pleasant Hour With Carlyle.

Thomas Carlyle was a "hoarder of the gold of silence" and would sit for hours, puffing away at his pipe, without uttering more than a grunt or a gruff monosyllable. Leigh Hunt, his neighbor and intimate, once wrote to a friend: "Have just spent a pleasant hour with Carlyle. When I went in he growled: 'Hello! Here again?' and at parting he snapped out, 'Good day!' and that is the sum of the conversation he honored me with. But how eloquent his silence is! I just sat and looked at him and came away strengthened for a fresh struggle."

The Worm's Punishment.

A father had been lecturing his son upon the evils of staying out late at night and of getting up late in the morning. "You never will amount to anything," he continued, "unless you turn over a new leaf. Remember that the early bird catches the worm."

"How about the worm, father?" inquired the young man, borrowing the old sarcasm. "Wasn't he rather foolish to get up so early?"

"My son," replied the old man solemnly, "that worm hadn't been to bed at all. He was on his way home."

Breaking It Gently.

Father—Eleanor, now that you have given up young Hopkins, I wish he would stop coming to the house.

Daughter—He's been here only seven times this week, pa.

"Only seven times! How many do you want him to come?"

"Don't be harsh, father. George is trying to break it off gradually."

His Ambition.

"Young man," he asked, "what is your ambition in life?"

"To get rich, sir," replied the young man, lighting a fresh cigar.

"Not a very high aim. But while you are trying to get rich aren't you spending a good deal of money?"

"Oh, I don't mind the expense, sir. I'm willing to get rich regardless of cost."