

THE COUNTRY PRINTER

BY W. D. HOWELLS, IN SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE FOR MAY

(Continued from last month.)

III.

IT may have been only a theory of his; it may have been a joke. He had a great many theories and a great many jokes, and together these always kept life interesting and sunshiny to him. With his serene temperament and his happy doubt of disaster in any form, he was singularly well fitted to encounter the hardships of a country editor's lot. But for the moment, and for what now seems a long time after the removal of our paper to the county-seat, these seemed to have vanished. The printing-office was the centre of civic and social interest; it was frequented by visitors at all times, and on publication day it was a scene of gayety that looks a little incredible in the retrospect. The place was as bare and rude as a printing-office seems always to be; the walls were splotted with ink and the floor littered with refuse newspapers; but, lured by the novelty of the affair, and attracted by a natural curiosity to see what manner of strange men the printers were, the school-girls and young ladies of the village flocked in, and made it like a scene of comic opera, with their pretty dresses and faces, their eager chatter and lively energy in folding the papers and addressing them to the subscribers, while our fellow-citizens of the place, like the basses and baritones and tenors of the chorus, stood about and looked on with faintly sarcastic faces. It would not do to think now of what sorrow life and death have since wrought for all those happy young creatures, but I may recall without too much pathos the sensation when some citizen volunteer relaxed from his gravity far enough to relieve the regular mercenary at the crank of our huge power-press wheel, amid the applause of the whole company.

We were very vain of that press, which replaced the hand-press hitherto employed in printing the paper. This was of the style and make of the hand-press which superseded the Ramage press of Franklin's time; but it had been decided to signalize our new departure by the purchase of a power-press of modern contrivance, and of a speed fitted to meet the demands of a subscription list which might be indefinitely extended. A deputation of the leading politicians accompanied the editor to New York, where he went to choose the machine, and where he bought a second-hand Adams press of the earliest pattern and patent. I do not know, or at this date I would not undertake to say, just what principle governed his selection of this superannuated veteran; it seems not to have been very cheap; but possibly he had a prescience of the disabilities which were to task his ingenuity to the

very last days of that press. Certainly no man of less gift and skill could have coped with its infirmities, and I am sure that he thoroughly enjoyed nursing it into such activity as carried it hysterically through those far-off publication days. It had obscure functional disorders of various kinds, so that it would from time to time cease to act, and would have to be doctored by the hour before it would go on. There was probably some organic trouble, too, for though it did not really fall to pieces on our hands, it showed itself incapable of profiting by several improvements which he invented, and could, no doubt, have successfully applied to the press if its constitution had not been undermined. It went with a crank set in a prodigious fly-wheel, which revolved at a great rate, till it came to the moment of making the impression, when the whole mechanism was seized with such a reluctance as nothing but an heroic effort at the crank could overcome.

It finally made so great a draft upon our forces that it was decided to substitute steam for muscle in its operation, and we got a small engine, which could fully sympathize with the press in having seen better days. I do not know that there was anything the matter with the engine itself, but the boiler had some peculiarities which might well mystify the casual spectator. He could easily have satisfied himself that there was no danger of its blowing up, when he saw my brother feeding bran or corn-meal into its safety-valve, in order to fill up certain seams or fissures in it, which caused it to give out at the moments of the greatest reluctance in the press. But still, he must have had his misgivings of latent danger of some other kind, though nothing ever actually happened of a hurtful character. To this day, I do not know just where these seams or fissures were, but I think they were in the boiler head, and that it was therefore suffering from a kind of chronic fracture of the skull. What is certain is that, somehow, the engine and the press did always get us through publication day, and not only with safety but often with credit; so that not long ago, when I was at home, and my brother and I were looking over an old file of his paper, we found it much better printed than either of us expected; as well printed, in fact, as if it had been done on an old hand-press, instead of the steam-power press which it vaunted the use of. The wonder was that, under all the disadvantages the paper was ever printed on our steam-power press at all; it was little short of miraculous that it was legibly printed, and altogether unaccountable that such impressions as we found in that file could come from it. Of course, they were not average impressions; they were the very best out of the whole edition, and were as creditable as the editorial make-up of the sheet.