



**JAMES  
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**THE LITERARY  
SHOP, AND  
OTHER TALES**

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# **The Literary Shop, and Other Tales**

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# CHAPTER I. IN AN OLD GARRET.

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I AM lying at full length on a broken-down haircloth sofa that has been placed near the cobwebby window of an old garret in a country farm-house. It is near the close of a rainy day, and all the afternoon I have listened to the pattering of the heavy drops on the shingled roof, the rustling of the slender locust-trees and the creaking of their branches as the wind moves them.

There are pop-corn ears drying on the floor of this old garret; its solid rafters are festooned with dried apples and white onions. Odd bits of furniture, and two or three hair trunks bearing initials made with brass-headed nails, are scattered about the room, and from where I lie I can see a Franklin stove, a pair of brass andirons, and one of those queer wooden-wheeled clocks that used to be made in Connecticut years ago, and which are a fitting monument to the ingenuity of the Yankee race.

Every article in the room is carefully treasured, and none is held in more tender regard than are certain square, dust-covered packages of what might be old newspapers that are piled up in big heaps beside the old chairs and tables. One of these bundles lies on the floor beside my sofa, with its string untied and its contents scattered carelessly about. Look down and you will see that it contains copies of the *New York Ledger*, of a year that was one of the early seventies, and which have been religiously preserved,

together with fully twoscore of other similar bundles, by the excellent people who dwell in the house.

The number which I hold in my hand contains instalments of four serials, as many complete stories, half a dozen poems, contributions by Henry Ward Beecher, James Parton, and Mary Kyle Dallas, and a number of short editorials and paragraphs, besides two solid nonpareil columns of "Notices to Correspondents." One of the serials is called "The Haunted Husband; or, Lady Chetwynde's Specter," and deals exclusively with that superior class of mortals who go to make up what a great many of the old *Ledger* readers would have called "carriage trade." Another story, "Unknown; or, The Mystery of Raven Rocks," bears the signature of Mrs. E. D. N. Southworth, a name venerated in every household in which a red-plush photograph-album is treasured as a precious *objet d'art*. The short stories are simple and innocuous enough to suit the most primitive of brain-cells. The fiction is embellished with three pictures, which are interesting as specimens of a simple and now happily obsolete school of art.

The "Notices to Correspondents" are a joy forever, and reflect with charming simplicity and candor the minds of the thousands of anxious inquirers who were wont to lay all their doubts and troubles at Robert Bonner's feet.

It is here that the secrets of the maiden heart are laid bare to the gaze of the whole world. It is here that we read of the young man who is "waiting on" a young widow and formerly "kept company with" a lady friend who is the cashier of the laundry which he patronizes. Not knowing which of the two he ought to marry, he pours out his soul in

this free-for-all arena of thought and discussion. "Mary X." writes from Xenia, O., to inquire if she is a flirt because she has a new beau every two weeks, and is solemnly warned by Mr. Bonner that if she goes on in that way she "will soon have no beaux at all." "L. L. D." is a young girl of eighteen, whose parents are addicted to drink. She wishes to know if it is proper for her to correspond with a young gentleman friend who is a telegraph-operator in Buffalo and has made her a present of a backgammon-board last Christmas. That these letters are genuine is proved by their tone of artless simplicity, and by the fact that no single mind or score of minds could invent the extraordinary questions that were propounded from week to week.

Careful perusal of the *Ledger* lyrics reveals a leaning on the part of the poets of that period toward such homely themes as "The Children's Photographs," "The Mother's Blessing," and "Down by the Old Orchard Wall." They are all written on the same plane of inanity, and are admirably well suited to the tastes of the admirers of Mrs. Southworth and Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

It is growing dark in the old garret—too dark to read—and I arise from the horsehair sofa, filled with memories of the past which have been awakened by perusal of the yellow sheet of twenty years ago. As I tie up the bundle and place it on the dust-covered heap with its fellows, my eye falls upon a dozen packages, different in shape from these and containing copies of the *Century Magazine* for the past decade, which are preserved with the same tender care that was once bestowed upon the *Ledger* alone.

But as I slowly descend the staircase my mind is full of the favorite old story-paper, and of the enormous influence which its Scotch proprietor, Robert Bonner, exerted over the literature of his day and generation—an influence which is still potent in the offices of the great magazines which now supply us with reading matter. I doubt if there has ever been, in this country, a better edited paper than the *Ledger* was in the days when its destinies were shaped by the hand of its canny proprietor. No editor ever understood his audience better, or, knowing his readers, was more successful in giving them what they wanted, than was Robert Bonner, whose dollars accumulated in his own coffers even as the files of his paper accumulated in country garrets in all parts of this broad land.

“Well, where do you find evidences of such careful editing in that hotch-potch which you describe so carefully?” I hear some carping critic ask, and as I run my eye over what I have written I realize that I have utterly failed in my attempt to convey an idea of the glories of that particular number of the *Ledger*. I would say, however, to my critical friend that the paper is well edited because it does not contain a line of prose or a stanza of verse that is not aimed directly at the hearts and minds of the vast army of farmers, midwives, gas-fitters’ daughters, and the blood-relations of janitors who constituted its peculiar *clientèle*. And I would add that if the critical one desires to get at the very bone and sinew of *Ledger* literature he should make a careful study of the poems which were an important feature of it, and in which may be found the very essence of the great principles by which the paper was guided.



Indeed, Mr. Bonner used to be more particular about his poetry than about his prose, and always read himself every line of verse submitted to him for publication. Some of the poems were written by women of simple, serious habits of thought; but a great many of the highly moral and instructive effusions that were an important feature of the paper were prepared by ungodly and happy-go-lucky Bohemians, who were glad to eke out the livelihood earned by reporting with an occasional “tenner” from Mr. Bonner’s treasury. These poets studied the great editor’s peculiarities and personal tastes as carefully as the most successful magazine contributors of to-day study those of the various Gilders, Johnsons, Burlingames, and Aldens who dominate American letters in the present year. For example, no horses in *Ledger* poems were ever permitted to trot faster than a mile in eight minutes, and it was considered sagacious to name them Dobbin or Old Bess. Poems in praise of stepmothers or life-insurance were supposed to be distasteful to the great editor, but he was believed to have an absolute passion for lyrics which extolled the charm of country life and the homely virtues of rural folk. If a poet wrote more than one rhyme to the quatrain he was warned by his fellows not to ruin the common market.

And now I hear from the carping critic again: “But you don’t mean to tell me that any good poetry was produced by such a process? Why, suppose one of our great magazines—”

“Who said anything about good poetry? It was good poetry for the *Ledger* subscribers to read, and as to the great modern magazines—haven’t I told you already that I

stumbled over a heap of them just as I was leaving the old garret where the pop-corn and the wreaths of dried apples and the bundles of *Ledgers* are kept?"



## CHAPTER II. THE “LEDGER” PERIOD OF LETTERS.

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A QUARTER of a century hence, perhaps, one of those arbiters of taste to whom poetastry owes its very existence will lecture before the intellectual and artistic circles of that period on “The Literary Remains of the Bonnerian Period”; and the *Ledger* school of poetry, long neglected by our critics, will become a fashionable cult. I hope, too, that the names of those writers who, as disciples of that school, gave an impetus to those great principles which live to-day in the beautifully printed pages of our leading periodicals will be rescued from the shades of obscurity and accorded the tardy credit that they have fairly won.

These principles have lived because they were founded on good, sound, logical common sense, for Mr. Bonner possesses one of the most logical minds in the world. In the days when he was—unconsciously, I am sure—moulding the literature of future generations of Americans, he was always able to give a reason for every one of his official acts; and I doubt if as much can be said of all the magazine editors of the present day. It was this faculty that enabled his contributors to learn so much of his likes and dislikes, for if he rejected a manuscript he was always ready to tell the author exactly why the work was not suitable for the *Ledger*.

For instance: One day a maker of prose and verse received from the hands of the great editor a story which he had submitted to him the week before.

“If you please,” said the poet, politely, “I should like to know why you cannot use my story, so that I may be guided in the future by your preferences.”

“Certainly,” replied Mr. Bonner. “This story will not do for me because you have in it the marriage of a man with his cousin.”

“But,” protested the young author, “cousins do marry in real life very often.”

“In real life, yes,” cried the canny Scotchman; “but not in the *New York Ledger!*”

And it is related of this talented young maker of prose and verse, that he changed his hero and heroine from cousins to neighbors, and the very same night was seen in Pfaff’s quaffing, smoking, and jesting with his fellow-poets, and making merry over the defeat that was turned into a victory. And in the generous fashion of Bohemia he told all his comrades that “Bonner was down on cousins marrying”; and thereafter neither in song nor story did a *Ledger* hero ever look with anything but the eye of brotherly affection on any woman of even the most remote consanguinity.

“In real life, yes; but not in the *New York Ledger!*”

That gives us a taste of the milk in the cocoanut, although it does not account for the hair on the outside of the shell.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Bonner knew that a great many of his subscribers did not approve of a man marrying his own cousin when there were plenty of other folks’ cousins to be had for the asking; and so, rather than cause a moment’s annoyance to a single one of these, he forbade the practice in the columns of his paper.

I knew a number of these *Ledger* writers in my salad days, and have often heard them discussing their trade and the condition of the market in a way that would have lifted the hair of some of the *littérateurs* of the modern “delightfully-Bohemian-studio-tea” and kettledrum school.

Years ago one of them confided to me his recipe for a *Ledger* poem. “Whatever you do,” he said, “be careful not to use up a whole idea on a single poem, for if you do you’ll never be able to make a cent. I usually cut an idea into eight pieces, like a pie, and write a poem for each piece, though once or twice I have made sixteen pieces out of one. My ‘Two Brothers’ idea yielded me just sixteen poems, all accepted, for which I received \$160. What do I mean by cutting up an idea? Well, I’ll tell you. I took for a whole idea two brothers brought up on a farm in the country, one of whom goes down to the city, while the other stays at home on the farm. Well, I wrote eight poems about those brothers, giving them such names as Homespun Bill and Fancy Jake, and the city man always went broke, and was glad to get back to the country again and find that Homespun Bill had either paid the mortgage on the place or saved the house from burning, or done something else calculated to commend him to the haymakers who subscribed for the paper. Then I wrote eight more, and in every one of those it was the yokel who got left; that is to say, Fancy Jake or Dashing Tom, or whatever I might choose to call him, would go to the city and either get rich in Wall Street—always Wall, never Broad or Nassau Street or Broadway, remember—and come back just in time to stop the sheriff’s sale and bid in the old homestead for some unheard-of figure, or else he

would become a great physician and return to save his native village at a time of pestilence, or maybe I'd have him a great preacher and come back and save all their souls; anyway, I got eight more poems out of the pair, to say nothing of some stories that I used in another paper."

I pondered for several moments over the words of the poet and then I said to him, "But if you were so successful with the 'Two Brothers' why didn't you try to do as well with two sisters?"

"I did," he replied. "I started a 'Two Sisters' series as soon as the brothers were all harvested, but I got them back on my hands again. You know Bonner is down on sisters."

"Bonner is down on sisters!"

What stumbling-blocks there were in the path to literary fame which the poets of the early *Ledger* period sought to tread!

Fancy the feelings of one who has poured out his whole soul in a poem descriptive of sisterly love and learns that his labor has been in vain, not because of any fault on his part, not because his poem is not good, but simply and solely because "Bonner is down on sisters"! And then I hear the carping critic ask if I call that good editing. I say that it was the very best of editing. At any rate, it was good enough to make the *Ledger* fiction popular from one end of this country to the other; and it is because of that editing that we still find the old dusty files in the country garrets, along with the pop-corn ears and the wreaths of dried apples. I wonder how much of the ephemeral literature of to-day will be found sacredly guarded in anybody's garret a quarter of a century hence?

But there were other folks besides sisters and matrimonial cousins who were regarded with disfavor by the great editor and thinker who long ago set the pace for modern American fiction.

Well do I remember Jack Moran coming upon us one bright morning, a dozen years ago, with bitter invective on his lips because his poem, "The Stepmother's Prayer," had been returned to him from the *Ledger* office. He read it aloud to us, and then inquired, pathetically, "Isn't that poem all right?"

It was more than "all right." It was a delicate, imaginative bit of verse, descriptive of the young bride kneeling reverently in the nursery of her new home and praying that God would make her a good mother to the sleeping stepchildren. It was a real poem—such a poem as poor, gifted Irish Jack Moran could write, but only when the mood was upon him, for he was not one of those makers of verse who go to work at six in the morning with their dinner-pails.

"Ah, Jack!" exclaimed a sympathizing poet, "you never should have taken it to the *Ledger*. Didn't you know that Bonner was down on stepmothers? Change it round so as to make the stepmother a beast, and he'll give you ten for it."

"By the way, Jack, do you remember the time there was a death in the old man's family, and we all got in on him with poems about meeting on the further shore and crossing the dark river?"

"I do," replied Jack, briefly. "It was worth just twenty to me."

And why was Bonner "down" on stepmothers? Simply because he wished to avoid giving offense to those who

disapproved of second marriages, and who formed a very large part of his constituency.

I hope that I have thrown sufficient pathos into my description of the condition of the poor rhymester of a dozen or fifteen years ago to touch the hearts of my sympathetic readers. How much better off, you say, is the literary man of to-day, who makes steady wages in Franklin Square, or occupies one of the neat white cottages erected for the employees of the McClure Steam Syndicate Mills in Paterson!

Better off in some respects, perhaps, dear reader, but in others his state is none the more gracious than it was in the days when Jack Moran's "Stepmother's Prayer" was rejected because Bonner was down on stepmothers. The great *Ledger* editor has retired to his stock-farm, but the principles which have enabled him to possess a stock-farm still live in every magazine office in the land, and the writer of to-day must be just as careful in regard to forbidden topics as his predecessor was, and, moreover, must keep his eye on three or four editors, with their likes and their dislikes.

But these remarks are not made in a carping spirit. There is some good reason for every one of these likes and dislikes. If Mr. Gilder prefers oatmeal to wheaten grits as a breakfast-table dish for the hero of the new *Century* serial, it is because he has an eye on his Scotch subscribers; and if the manuscript of *Robinson Crusoe* is returned to Mr. De Foe with the remark that "Burlingame is down on goats," it is simply because *Scribner's Magazine* is not pushing its sale in Harlem and Williamsburg.



In regard to the practice of cutting an idea into eight pieces and serving up each piece as a separate poem or story, can any one familiar with current literature deny that ideas are just as much cut up now as they ever were? More than that, have not some of our writers solved the old problem of making bricks without straw? Why, then, you ask, is their manuscript printed in preference to matter that is more virile and fresh and readable? For the same reason that Jack Moran's "Stepmother's Prayer" was returned to him by the very hand that was stretched forth in glad eagerness to grasp the sixteen poems that had sprung from the solitary idea of the two country brothers. Why, I know of one or two poets whose verses enjoy the widest sort of publicity, and who, I am sure, cut an idea into thirty-two pieces instead of sixteen.



## **CHAPTER III.**

### **SOMETHING ABOUT “GOOD BAD STUFF.”**

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“BONNER is down on stepmothers!” “All *Ledger* horses must be called Dobbin, and there is a heavy fine for driving them through a poem or serial faster than a walk, or, at best, a slow trot!” “Don’t write anything about cousins marrying unless you want to have them back on your hands again!” These were a few of the beacon-lights that shone on the literary pathway of twenty years ago, and I know of more than one successful writer whose early footsteps were guided by the great artistic principles first laid down by Robert Bonner and religiously followed by the makers of prose and verse who brought their wares to him every Friday morning. But poor Jack Moran did not live to become a successful writer. He dropped out of the ranks just as the rest of us were passing the quarter-post, but it was the first hurdle that really did for him. I have often thought that if Jack had taken his friend’s advice and “changed his poem round so as to make the stepmother a beast,” he might have lived to fill a responsible position in the Franklin Square Prose and Verse Foundry, or at the Eagle Verse Works in Jersey City. But Jack was a poet, and therefore did not know how to “change his poem round,” and besides he hated to go to work every morning with his dinner-pail in his hand, and there were cakes and ale in Bohemia in those days for such as he.

As for the poet who tried to guide Jack’s footsteps in the path that led to fame, he is alive to-day, and a highly

esteemed member of the guild. Indeed, a more industrious, sober, or thrifty man of letters never put on a pair of overalls or crossed the North River in the early morning boat with a basket of poems, jokes, and stories on his arm.

One Friday morning, many years ago, I went with this poet to the *Ledger* building, and there found half a dozen writers gathered together in an outer office, anxiously watching the dark shadow of a man that was thrown upon a partition of ground glass that extended from floor to ceiling across the room and separated it from the private office of the great editor.

The dark moving shadow on which every eye was fixed was that of Robert Bonner himself, and as it was seen to cross the room to a remote corner—growing smaller and fainter as it receded—every face brightened with hope, and forms that had seemed bent and dejected but a moment before were suddenly straightened. An instant later the door opened and the editor of the *Ledger* crossed the threshold, handed a ten-dollar bill to one of the waiting poets, and then hastily retired to his own den again.

Then my friend showed me how the watchers could tell by the movements of the dark shade whether a poem had been accepted or refused. If the editor walked from his desk to the remote corner of his private office they knew that he did it in order to place a poem in the drawer of an old bureau in which he kept the accepted manuscript; but if, on the other hand, he came directly to the door a horrible feeling of anxiety came into every mind, and each poet uttered a silent prayer—while his heart literally stood still

within him—that the blow might fall on some head other than his own.

On this occasion my friend received ten dollars for his poem entitled “When the Baby Smiled,” and in the fullness of his heart he invited the author of the rejected verses on “Resignation”—who, by the way, was uttering the most horrible curses as he descended the staircase—to join us in a drink.

It was on this occasion, also, as I distinctly remember, that my friend the poet put the whole trade of letters in a nutshell:

“There are plenty of people,” he remarked, “who can write good good stuff, but there are not many who can write good bad stuff. Here’s one of those ‘Two Brothers’ poems I told you about, and if that isn’t good bad stuff, I’d like to know what is.” He handed me a printed copy of the poem, and I can still recall the first verses of it:

Herbert to the city went,  
Though as sturdy was his arm  
As plain Tom’s, who, quite content,  
Stayed at home upon the farm.

Herbert wore a broadcloth coat,  
Thomas wore the homespun gray;  
Herbert on display did dote,  
Thomas labored every day.

These lines have clung to my memory during many changing years, and I quote them now with undimmed admiration as almost the best example of “good bad stuff”