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THE OLD PRINTER.

A Sketch of Life Behind the Scenes in a Newspaper Composing-Room.

There was a wife, and there was a boy. Long before any one now in the office had a "sit" in news-room, press-room, business office, or sanctum, and before the old man had begun to look out at the world through spectacles and his figure was as straight as it was tall, the types and reporters used to hear him talk about buying a lot and building a house out on the hill, where he could have a patch of garden. And by-and-by he was going to quit "sticking type," and get into something that would let him stay home nights, and get acquainted with his family. And the suit of clothes he bought in the fall lasted a long way into the next summer, and then they came out again in the winter, and the old man "trashed" more than he ever did again while that dream of home was inspiring him. It is an old story, this struggle of a printer to get a home; any one of these restless mariners of the land, drifting from port to port and back again, lured by the *ignis fatuus* of so many cents more a thousand and a price and a half after two o'clock, and big bills with four or five nights work. Never a wandering "joint" got a chance to stand at the old man's case while he was saving money for a house and lot, and the "suits" looked at him with the despairing glances of starvation. But it is hard, up-hill work for the printer to buy a home. His pay is easily reduced and seldom raised; a road strike means taking to the road for him, and if he has a family and can't travel, he breaks his heart, puts dust on his head, and goes "out of the union," and wearily works at the boss's rates. So the old man worked bravely on, as many a printer has worked before and since his time, and the little plant in the bank began to grow brighter as the old clothes grew shabbier.

And the boy growing into his youth year used to be seen in the office after school, standing at his tall father's elbow, learning, in a very irregular, boyish, unapprenticed fashion, all that sort of thing, when by rushing a little he can get a "pick-up" or a great take of "blind copy," scribbled in pencil on blue foolscap on both sides of the paper and marked "solid," with never a break or paragraph from A to Z. But he would stand at that old case and pick up type all night, peering along on straight breviter as tranquilly as though he struck a display head on every take. He always made fair bills, and after a while, as the sixties began creeping on him, the boys had a way of "soldiering" for him, and maybe you don't know how hard it is for a printer not to drop a good many type, and fumble for the lids, and let his thumb get most awfully sore, and have to hunt for the bellows and blow out his case, and study the copy very closely and find it dreadfully hard to read, and all that sort of thing, when by rushing a little he can get a "pick-up" as long as your arm, and a "lead" take with a paragraph to every sentence. But they did that for the old man, and he knew it, and let his thumb get most awfully sore, and have to hunt for the bellows and blow out his case, and study the copy very closely and find it dreadfully hard to read, and all that sort of thing, when by rushing a little he can get a "pick-up" as long as your arm, and a "lead" take with a paragraph to every sentence.

And so, year after year, he wrought among the boys on a morning paper. He went to bed about the time the rest of the world got up, and he arose about the time the rest of the world sat down to dinner. He worked by very kind of light except sunlight, there were candles in the office when they came in; then they had kerosene lamps, that smoked and guttered, and smelled; then he saw two or three printers blinded by explosions of camphene and spirit-gas; then kerosene came in and heated up the news room on summer nights like a furnace; then the office put in gas; and now the electric light hung from the ceiling and dazzled his old eyes, and glared into them from his copy. If he sang on his way home, a policeman bade him "cheese that," and reminded him that he was disturbing the peace, and people wanted to sleep. But when he wanted to sleep, the rest of the world, for whom he had sat up all night to make a morning paper, roared and crashed down by the noisy street under his window with cart wheels and iron tires; blared with brass bands, howled with hand organs, and talked and shouted; and even the shrieking newsboy, with a ghastly sarcasm, murdered the sleep of the tired old printer by yelling the name of his own paper. Year after year the foreman roared at him to "remember that this wasn't an afternoon paper," editors shrieked down the tube to "have a blind man put on that dead man's case;" smart young proof-readers scribbled sarcastic comments on his work, on the margin of his proof-slips; long-winded correspondents, learning to write, and long-haired poets, who could never learn to spell, wrathfully cast all their imperfections upon his head. But through it all he wrought patiently, and found more sunshine than shadow in the world; he had more friends than enemies. Printers, and foremen, and editors, came and went, but he stayed, and he saw news-room and sanctum filled and emptied, and filled and emptied again, and filled again with row and strange faces.

He was working one night, and when the hours that are so short in the ball-room and so long in the composing-room drew wearily on, he was tired. He "hadn't" thrown in a fall case," he said. One of the boys, tired as himself—but a printer is never too tired to be good natured—offered to change places with him, but the old man said there was enough in his case to last him through his take, and he wouldn't work any more to-night. The type clicked in the silent room, and by and by the old man said: "I'm out of sorts." "I'm out of sorts," he said by the low window-sill by his case, with his stick in his hand, his hands folded wearily in his lap. The types clicked on. A gallery of telegraph waited.

"Will any one kindly tell me what gentleman is lingering with D 13?" called the foreman, who was always dangerously polished and polite when he was on the point of exploding with wrath and impatience. Slug Nine, passing by the alley, stopped to speak to the old man, sitting there so quietly. "Thirty!" They carried the old man to the foreman's long long table, and laid him down reverently, and covered his face. They took the stick out of his nerveless hand, and read his last take: Boston, November 23.—The American barque *Pilgrim* went to pieces off Marblehead in a light gale, about midnight. She was old and unseaworthy, and this was to have been her last trip. —Burdette.

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