

LXXV.

ROBERT BONNER AND THE NEW
YORK LEDGER.

HIS EARLY CAREER. — REMOVAL TO NEW YORK. — AN UPWARD STEP. — OWNS THE LEDGER. — HIS SYSTEM OF ADVERTISING. — STRATEGY. — THE VALUE OF A NAME. — BANCROFT AND MR. EVERETT. — MR. BEECHER AND THE LEDGER. — BONNER'S HORSES. — HIS STABLES. — PERSONAL.

MR. BONNER was born in the north of Ireland, not far from Londonderry, near the spot from which A. T. Stewart emigrated. The Scotch Presbyterian blood that made General Jackson so famous, and has given success to the well-known house of Brown & Brothers, runs in the blood of Mr. Bonner. He is simply a Scotchman born in Ireland. He was trained under the influence of the Shorter Catechism. From the faith of his fathers he has never departed. He has been trustee for many years in a Scotch Presbyterian Church in the upper part of New York, and a liberal contributor to the support of public worship and the various forms of benevolence and charity. He is a conscientious business man, with great resources, with fertility of genius unmatched, and with indomitable will, untiring industry, and more than all, he possesses

that crowning gift which Solomon possessed as an especial patrimony from God — “largeness of heart.”

HIS EARLY CAREER.

He was distinguished in his boyhood for great manliness of character, for frank and generous impulses. When a boy was wronged or wrongly accused, it was Bonner's custom to make the quarrel of his school-fellow his own. He allowed himself to be turned out of school for the part he took in defending a boy whom he knew to be innocent. At an early age he entered the printing office of the Hartford Courant to learn the art of printing. He was dexterous, swift at setting type, and led all the workmen in the nimbleness with which he could set up an article. The President's Message, in those days, was transmitted by mail. The editor of the Courant purchased an advanced copy, paying for it the enormous sum of thirty dollars! The only advantage to be derived from this early copy was in getting the message out in advance of other papers. To accomplish this Mr. Bonner performed the unheard-of feat of setting up seventeen hundred ems an hour. He performed all the duties connected with his position, became an accomplished printer, tried his hand at correspondence, and seated himself occasionally in the editorial chair.

REMOVAL TO NEW YORK.

In 1844 Mr. Bonner removed to the city of New York. There was a popular impression that a literary paper could not succeed in this metropolis. Boston and Philadelphia monopolized the family newspapers

and literary weeklies, and it was said that no paper of the kind could prosper in this city. Mr. Bonner thought otherwise. He early resolved to attempt a paper that should be circulated throughout the whole land. He watched his opportunity and bided his time, working hard in the mean while, and not being dainty in the place or style of business in which he engaged. Mayor Harper had been elected as the American candidate. A paper called the "American Republican" was the organ of the party. In this office Mr. Bonner commenced his New York career. The wages paid him were small. His work was hard, and economy was requisite to enable him to live. He formed the habit, from which he has never departed, of buying nothing that he could not pay for. He never borrowed a dollar of money, never signed a note in his life, and now carries on his great business on strictly cash principles, and literally owes no man anything. In some of his large enterprises he has paid his last dollar, and never has once failed in the venture he made. In some of his great advertising feats, in which he has paid as high as twenty-five thousand dollars a week for advertising, he has been offered lines of papers to increase the advertisement to fifty thousand dollars, with unlimited credit, and his answer has invariably been, "I cannot advertise beyond my means. I have no more money to spend in that way." The whole business of the Ledger is conducted on the same principle to-day.

AN UPWARD STEP.

The "Republican" was an evanescent affair, and Mr. Bonner found permanent employment on the "Evening Mirror" as a practical printer. This paper was conducted by Morris, Willis, and Fuller. It was Mr. Fuller's business to make up the paper. It was very desirable to display the advertisements, and do it in good taste. In this department Mr. Bonner excelled. The whole matter was soon left in his hands. He had an eye for beauty, and the Mirror advertisements became very famous. There was a small mercantile paper in New York, known as the "Merchant's Ledger." It was devoted almost entirely to commercial matters, with a very limited circulation. A young man, whose business it was to get up advertisements, was struck with the elegant manner in which Mr. Bonner made up the Mirror. He called the attention of the editor of the Ledger to Mr. Bonner's capacity, and this culminated in an engagement with Mr. Bonner to become the printer of that paper. Mr. Bonner did not own the material, but simply printed the sheet. He occasionally wrote articles that attracted attention, from their terse, compact, and spicy composition. A little incident showed Mr. Bonner the value of a name. His contributions to the Ledger were very well received. The proprietor had a spice of jealousy about him, and he did not want his energetic and spirited printer to get into the editorial chair. Mr. Bonner wrote a short, pithy article on a popular subject, jammed it into a little nook in the paper, and placed at the bottom the name of Dr. Chalmers. It took like

wildfire. It was copied into all the prominent papers of the land. It taught Mr. Bonner the value of a name, — a lesson he has never forgotten.

OWNS THE LEDGER.

Shortly after he entered the office, Mr. Bonner purchased the Ledger. He seated himself in the editorial chair, and resolved to realize the visions of his youth. He did not change its character at once, but gradually. The Ledger became less and less commercial, and more and more literary. About this time Fanny Fern was creating a great sensation in the literary world. Her Ruth Hall had just appeared, and the work and its authoress were criticised by the press in all parts of the land. She was the literary star of the day. The question was violently discussed whether she was or was not the sister of N. P. Willis. Mr. Bonner saw his opportunity, and sent a note to Fanny Fern, offering her twenty-five dollars a column to write a story for the Ledger. She declined the offer. Another proposition was sent, offering her fifty dollars a column. That she also declined. Seventy-five dollars were offered. That she declined, announcing that she did not intend to write any more for the newspapers. She admitted that she admired Mr. Bonner's pluck. Soon it was intimated to Mr. Bonner that if he would allow Fanny Fern to write a story of ten columns, more or less, though the story should not occupy less than nine columns of the Ledger, she would undertake it. He closed the contract immediately, received the manuscript, read six lines, and sent her a check of one thousand dollars. He resolved, with this story, to introduce

a new era in the Ledger. He changed the form of the paper, double-leaded the story, so that it made twenty columns in the paper. He advertised it as nothing was ever advertised before. He had paid an unheard-of sum for a story — one hundred dollars a column. The harvest was a golden one. Out of the profits of that story Mr. Bonner purchased the pleasant residence in this city in which he still lives.

HIS SYSTEM OF ADVERTISING.

In the magnitude of his advertising Mr. Bonner has displayed the remarkable business skill for which he is celebrated. The manner of commending the Ledger to the public is wholly his own. When he startled the public by his extravagance in taking columns of a daily journal, or one entire side, he secured the end he had in view. His method of repeating three or four lines, such as, — "Fanny Fern writes only for the Ledger" — or, "Read Mrs. Southworth's new story in the Ledger" — and this repeated over and over and over again, till men turned from it in disgust, and did not conceal their ill-temper, was a system of itself. "What is the use," said a man to Mr. Bonner, "of your taking the whole side of the Herald, and repeating that statement a thousand times?" "Would you have asked me that question," replied Mr. Bonner, "if I had inserted it but once? I put it in to attract your attention, and make you ask that question."

Mr. Bonner knows how to reach the public. He pays liberally, but intends to have the worth of his money. He does not advertise twice alike. The newspapers are afraid of him. His advertisements are

so queer and unusual, that when they make a contract with him, they have no idea in what shape the advertisement will come. Sometimes it is in the shape of a fragment of a story; sometimes the page will be nearly blank, with two or three little items in it. In his peculiar style of advertising he often gives great trouble to the editors of the leading papers. Sometimes an entire page is almost blank. Sometimes a few small advertisements occupy the corner, giving the sheet a peculiar appearance, which attracts attention. Said an editor, "I had rather publish one of your horses in the centre than have such a looking sheet." But Mr. Bonner's purpose was answered by one insertion, and the contract was withdrawn.

With a manliness and liberality peculiar to Mr. Bonner, after one insertion, if the parties are dissatisfied, he always throws up the contract, however beneficial it might have proved to him.

STRATEGY.

His mode of advertising was new, and it excited both astonishment and ridicule. His ruin was predicted over and over again. But as he paid as he went along he alone would be the sufferer. He was assailed in various ways. Men sneered at his writers, as well as at the method in which he made them known. He had no competition. Just then it was announced that the Harpers were to put a first-class Weekly into the field. The announcement was hailed with delight by many classes. Men who had been predicting Bonner's ruin from the start were anxious to see it accomplished.

He had agents in all the leading cities in the land. These held a monopoly of the Ledger. The book-men and newspaper-men, who were left out, were quite willing to have the Ledger go under. The respectability and wealth of the house, its enterprise, with the class of writers it could secure, made the new paper a dangerous rival. Mr. Bonner concluded to make the first issue serviceable to himself. His paragraph advertising was considered sensational, and smacking of the charlatan. He resolved to make it respectable. He wrote a half a column in sensational style — "Buy Harper's Weekly" — "Buy Harper's Weekly" — "Buy Harper's Weekly" — "Buy Harper's Weekly" — and so on through the half column. Through his advertising agent he sent this advertisement to the Herald, Tribune, and Times, and paid for its insertion. Among the astonished readers of this Ledger style of advertising were the quiet gentlemen who do business on Franklin Square. The community were astonished. "The Harpers are waking up!" "This is the Bonner style!" "This is the way the Ledger man does it!" were heard on all sides. The young Harpers were congratulated by the book-men everywhere on the enterprise with which they were pushing the new publication. They said nothing, and took the joke in good part. But it settled the respectability of the Ledger style of advertising. It is now imitated by the leading publishers, insurance men, and most eminent dry goods men in the country. The sums spent by Mr. Bonner in advertising are perfectly marvellous. He never advertises unless he has something new to present to the public. He pays from five to twenty-

five thousand dollars a week when he advertises. The enormous circulation of the Ledger, — over three hundred thousand copies a week, — shows how profitable his style of doing business is. Nearly everything he does, every horse he buys, or new personal movement that distinguishes him, is set down to a desire on his part for gratuitous advertising. Of course he has an eye to business in whatever he does. But all the advertising he wants he is quite ready to pay for.

THE VALUE OF A NAME.

The popularity given to a little squib of his own, to which the name of Dr. Chalmers was attached, taught Mr. Bonner a lesson that he never forgot. Mr. Edward Everett had taken upon himself to aid the ladies of America in purchasing Mount Vernon. Mr. Bonner resolved to secure Mr. Everett as a writer for the Ledger. He knew that money could not purchase Mr. Everett's connection with his paper. He offered Mr. Everett ten thousand dollars to write a series of articles for the Ledger, the money to be appropriated to the purchase of the tomb of the father of his country. Mr. Everett could do no less than accept. At the conclusion of the Mount Vernon papers Mr. Everett continued on the Ledger until his death. Mr. Bonner paid him over fifty thousand dollars for services rendered on his paper. The notices to correspondents, which is a marked feature in the Ledger, contain answers to questions sent to the editor. Not more than one question in five is replied to. Those answers are written by the most eminent men in the country. Many of them were written by Mr. Everett, Henry

Ward Beecher, and distinguished statesmen and lawyers. The connection between Mr. Bonner and Mr. Everett was of the most delicate and tender character, as Mr. Everett's confidential letters sufficiently show.

It was Mr. Bonner's policy to spike every gun that could be aimed against him, and make every influence and every prominent man his ally. To this end James Gordon Bennett of the Herald, Henry J. Raymond of the Times, and Horace Greeley of the Tribune, became contributors to the Ledger.

The Ledger was objected to in some quarters as not being a suitable sheet for young persons to read. Mr. Bonner secured the services of the presidents of twelve of the principal colleges in this country to write for his paper. Of course it would not be improper for the young men in colleges to take a paper for which the president wrote. Indeed, over the purity of expression and chasteness of sentiment and utterance in what appears in the Ledger, Mr. Bonner exercises a rigorous censorship. There are a great many articles and advertisements that appear in religious papers that would not be admitted into the Ledger. Mr. Bonner gives this order: "Take the most pious old lady in a Presbyterian Church, and any word or phrase, innuendo or expression, that she would want to skip if she were reading a Ledger story to her grandchild, strike out."

Paul Morphy, in the height of his popularity, edited a chess column in the Ledger. Bryant, Willis, Halleck, Morris, and Saxe laid a poetical wreath at Mr. Bonner's feet. Prentice, Bancroft, Parton, and Cozens joined the galaxy of Ledger writers. Fanny Fern, Mrs. Southworth, and other eminent novelists,