Some Good Short Stories

Mr. Bowser

A Brief Investigation of the Earthquake Business.

(Copyright, 1906, by Homer Sprague.)

MR. BOWSER had got seated with his newspaper and cigar when Mrs. Bowser observed that she needed handkerchiefs and gloves and asked if he could spare her three or four dollars.

"Sorry to say I can't," he replied. "I gave five dollars more to the San Francisco relief fund today, and am about dead broke. By the way, have you read up on what the scientists are saying as to the cause of earthquakes?"

"I haven't taken much interest in the matter beyond hoping that everything possible will be done for the people who have lost their all."

"You should read every word that's printed, Mrs. Bowser, but you won't of course. That's the way with a woman. Whenever there is a chance to post herself upon some solid subject she turns it down. Suppose the Greens or Browns should come in here some evening and begin to talk about earthquakes—where would you be?"

"But scientists differ about the cause, don't they?" she asked.

"Certainly they do, and that's where I come in. I've got my own theory, and I propose to begin working it out this very night. There are about ten different theories, I believe, but you ought to post yourself on at least half of them."

"How did you happen to get a theory?"

"How did I happen to get a theory!" he shouted out. "That's a pretty question to ask your husband. Do you imagine I found one in the road? I got it from this brain of mine, of course, where I've got many another theory. I've been turning it over and over for a week, and tonight I'm going to verify or disprove it."

"What is it?"

"If you can keep your mind off of bargain sales for five minutes I'll state it. Have you ever read or heard that the center of this earth is a mass of molten lava?"

"I believe I have."

"Oh, you do? Well, that's encouraging. It is a fact beyond dispute that we are living over vast lakes of molten lava, Mrs. Bowser. Thus far I agree with a number of scientists. From thence on we separate. Some say that the earth caving in down below makes earthquakes, and some have it that the cooling of the earth is responsible. Again, we read that they are due to gases."

"But are they not?" asked Mrs. Bowser.

"I claim and shall try to prove that all the scientists are off their chump in this matter. What keeps the fires burning down below is natural oil, or natural gas, or beds of coal. When the fire gets at a new and large supply of fuel there is a movement of the lava from east to west like the billows of the sea in a terrific storm. It is the waves breaking against rocky walls miles below us and falling back on themselves that sets the ground to trembling and shaking and produces earthquakes."

"But how are you going to prove it?"

"Did you ever know Samuel Bowser to set out to prove anything and make a failure of it?" asked the amateur scientist as he rose and walked up and down with his lips pursed up and his hands clasped behind his back.

Mrs. Bowser bent over and pretended to look on the floor for a lost hairpin, and the cat gurgled in her throat and tried her best to wink her left eye.

"Standing on our feet, Mrs. Bowser, the earth does not conduct any sound to us unless it is a fairly loud report. Lying down, we can hear the soft footfalls of a mouse twenty feet away. Dig a hole two feet deep and listen at its mouth and you can hear ten times as well. If there are tremors of the earth you can feel them. I expect to demonstrate that the tremors are always with us, and to hear from the lake of molten lava that undoubtedly boils beneath us. Our lot here may be situated above the very center of such a lake."

"And the crust of the earth may break and let us down any day or night."

"It is liable to, my dear, but if I am home I may get warning in time."

"And you are going to dig a hole in the back yard and listen?"

"That's what I shall do. I shall dig a hole, and then spread my raincoat on the grass and lie down. I shall record whatever I feel or hear, and you may read 'The Bowser Earthquake Theory' in all the newspapers before you are many days older. I think I feel a tremor of the earth now."

"It is only the hired girl walking around the kitchen," replied Mrs. Bowser. "Have these tremors you speak of anything to do with delirium tremors?"

Mr. Bowser stopped dead still and gave her one awful look that lasted a long minute. Then he tried to say something, but words failed him and he went upstairs after his rain coat. When he came down with it he went directly to the back yard and used the spade for about fifteen minutes. When he had got the hole deep enough Mrs. Bowser called to him from a back window:

"I have consulted the dictionary and found that one is tremors and the other tremens. Only the tremens comes from drink. Please excuse me."

He wouldn't do it. He lay down and put his ear to the ground, and his theory began working right away. He also began making notes, and at the end of half an hour had recorded the following:

"The smell of acids seems to be escaping from the earth. Smells like an old woolen sock on fire.

"If I am not mistaken I hear a seething noise, the same as occurs when a farmer's hired man spits on the family cook stove.

"The lake of molten lava has struck a fresh supply of fuel and is booming for keeps. No wonder coal and kerosene are so high.

"Tremors of the earth as the lake is agitated.

"I'll show Mrs. Bowser whether it's tremors or tremens. It is such remarks from her that have always kept me back in this world.

"Two tremors in quick succession, with a stronger smell of burning sock.

"Hang a woman who isn't interested in earthquakes.

"Rumblings, reverberations and groans from the center of the earth. Bowser's theory is working out to a dot.

"AS THEY FELL BACK HE PURSUED"

"HE LAY DOWN AND PUT HIS EAR TO THE GROUND"

"Decided tremors passing from east to west. Just the same symptoms as preceded the awful disaster at St. Pierre. I can't say there will be an earthquake or volcano, but if there is Mrs. Bowser needn't expect help from me.

"The escaping gases now smell like the bottom of a vinegar barrel. The fire may have taken in a factory or two.

"The Bowser theory is coming right along, as all his other theories have. Great rush of reporters to interview him tomorrow. Mrs. Bowser will not be allowed to do any talking.

"There are sounds like footsteps. They are probably produced by the fiery billows rebounding from the face of granite cliffs.

"The Bowser theory——"

Two tramps who had been making up the alley to find a shed to furnish them lodgings for the night had caught sight of the recumbent Mr. Bowser through the half-open gate and stood and watched him for ten minutes. Then they nudged each other and softly advanced, thinking they had found a drunken man asleep. They were bending over their victim when he became aware of their presence. Both piled on to him to search his pockets, but shaking them off he yelled for the police and grabbed up a club and laid around him. As they fell back he pursued, and he soon drove them out of the yard, although they drove him into the house by bombarding him with cans and bottles. He found Mrs. Bowser still up, and was carrying his swelled nose and scratched face upstairs when she called:

"Was that an earthquake I heard out there just now, dear?"

"None of your business!" he replied, as he continued on his way.

Elevator Boy

He Tells of the Man Who Did Not Confide in Him.

(Copyright, 1906, by Ruby Douglas.)

IF I ever become a business man and rent an office in a skyscraper I shall lose no time in calling the elevator boy up to rooms and taking him into my confidence. Sorrow is almost sure to come to those tenants who do not, and a cataclysm surely awaits the man who deliberately seeks to deceive the boy in the cage. We have just had another instance of it in our building.

When old Mr. Fosdick, agent for a suspender factory, took offices with us I liked his benign and fatherly appearance. He looked innocent and truthful. The very next day old Mr. Graham, agent for a banana syrup company, moved in on the floor above. He also looked fatherly and benign and innocent hearted, and I was rejoiced that two such tenants should come to us. Mr. Fosdick had scarcely got settled when he called me up to his office and said:

"Sammis, I have been making some inquiries about you. I find that every one about the building is in love with you. You are said to be trustworthy, reliable, and a boy who minds his own business."

"Yes, sir. I have my little ways, sir," I replied, as modestly as I could.

"And you are the lady son of a struggling widow, are you not?"

"Yes, sir. My mother is struggling in the most paieful manner. I should be, too, but a gigantic mortgage on the house has got me pinned down so hard and fast that I can't even kick."

"I'm! We must see to that. The knowledge appeals to my sympathies, Sammis, would you take me for a man of sympathies—a man who feels for the whole human race about him?"

"SAMIS, WOULD YOU TAKE ME FOR A MAN OF SYMPATHIES?"

"I should, sir. It sticks out all over you."

"Thanks. I see that I am not mistaken in you. Down the hall, Sammis, down at No. 275, there is a young woman. She is doing typewriting, I believe."

"Yes, sir; Miss Benson, sir."

"I was noticing the sad expression on her face this morning. She seems to wear a hopeless air, as if the future held nothing for her. As a man full of sympathy for the unfortunate I feel it my duty to—to—"

"To invite her to go to lunch with you," I filled in.

"Well, not at the very outset, Sammis—not at the outset. She might construe my sympathies into impertinence. If you should mention my name to her—carry her a bouquet or two or a theater ticket—let her know that I was thinking of her——"

"I understand, sir, and it shall be done. You are not married, of course."

"Well—um—er—I am a lone man in the world. Yes, I am a lone man, Sammis, and as the young woman referred to is a lone woman it is only natural that we should be drawn toward each other. By the way, have you come down to old Graham yet?"

"What is it, sir?"

"I saw the old rascal making eyes at this very young woman the other day. He's seventy if he's a day, and if he hasn't been a rascal all his life, then I can't read human nature. You might drop the young woman a word of warning about him, Sammis."

"I will, sir."

"That's all, Sammis. I place myself unreservedly in your hands, and have given you my full confidence."

It was only the next day that old Mr. Graham sent for me and went over almost the same words. He, too, thought the young woman in No. 275 had a hopeless, helpless look, and should be cheered up with bouquets, theater tickets and luncheons. When he got around to old Mr. Fosdick he said:

"Sammis, there is a villain unadulterated. He is sly, crafty and heartless. If he has not committed murder it is only because he fears the law. He's over sixty years old, and the idea of his flirting around at that age, as I am told he does, is enough to make the heart ache. If you should discover that he is goo-gooing at the typist——"

"I will stop it at once, sir," I replied.

"That's it, Sammis, at once. You are one boy out of a hundred. I shall give you my full confidence and trust you to the limit. Keep your eye on old Fosdick and report if he tries any of his wicked schemes."

It was only three or four days later when old Mr. Fosdick's wife came down to the skyscraper. I knew it was his wife, but he hustled her out as soon as he could, and when she had gone he said to me:

"That was my grandmother, Sammis. The dear old lady came down to ask me to invest som' money for her."

Three days later a woman came to the building asking for old Mr. Graham. He happened to be out, and after waiting a while she said to me:

"You tell my husband when he comes in that I have been here, and that if he doesn't send me ten dollars today I'll have him in court for non-support."

I didn't tell him, but he learned some way that she had been there, and he explained to me:

"Sammis, that was my housekeeper. I was in arrears to her for salary, but had forgotten it. If she spoke of me as her husband she did it unconsciously. Women often speak that way, you know."

Then I saw that both of these fatherly and benign old men had deceived me. Instead of taking me into their confidence they had deceived me and made a guy of me. Two bouquets from old Mr. Fosdick I chucked into the ash can, and followed it with one from old Mr. Graham. The box of candy from the latter I divided with one of the boys. I had been betrayed, and I wanted revenge. I sawed wood and said nothing for a week. Then I felt it my duty toward humanity to tell old Mr. Fosdick that old Mr. Graham had called him a wolf in sheep's clothing.

"What! What's that!" he exclaimed in reply. "Why, the miserable old fraud, but I'll pull his nose for him! Think of a man of his age, Sammis, and a married man at that, making eyes at a young and helpless woman! Calls me a wolf, does he? Knows that I am on his trail and wants to bluff me off. By thunder—!"

That same afternoon old Mr. Graham was told that old Mr. Fosdick had referred to him as an attenuated and doddering old scoundrel, and he brought his fist down on his desk and shouted:

"By the seven bulls, but he'll go down on his knees to me for that! What! A reprobate dare to talk about me like that! Just wait till I come across him!"

The meeting took place next forenoon in one of the corridors. They were trying to keep out of each other's way when they met. Then they began to sneer and to call names, and finally came to blows. One had his nose skinned and the other his eye blacked, and it was the young woman typist who said to the tenants gathered around:

"Why don't you men take hold of these two old bums and throw them downstairs?"

Next day the two old men moved out. They went down in my cage separately. Mr. Fosdick had a tear in his blackened eyes as he put his hand on my shoulder and said:

"Sammis, I made a great mistake when I thought to deceive you. Never again will I withhold my innermost thoughts from an elevator boy."

Old Mr. Graham seemed angry at first, but soon melted, and as he caressed his skinned nose he sadly whispered to me:

"I brought it on myself, Sammis. I go hence. I go to some other elevator boy, but I have learned my lesson. I am going into the heartpouring business from now on." SAMMIS,

The Elevator Boy.

The Jamestown Exposition.

When the Jamestown exposition was planned to be held next summer, supporters could not dream of its rivaling in magnificence the world's fairs of Chicago and St. Louis, says the World's Work. But this did not preclude a distinctive exposition of another kind, one that should give the most impressive lesson in historic education ever set before exposition sightseers. So, it was planned to make this Ter-Centennial Exposition illustrate the nation's story. It will be a colonial affair. Georgian architecture and garden effects nowhere reached such a point of excellence as in colonial America, and at no time was this art more pure than in the early days of Jamestown. The grounds on which the exposition will be held are enclosed by a fence of roses, trumpet vines, Virginia creeper and honeysuckle. Instead of deal-boards a mass of flowers and verdure will intervene between the outside world and the colonial city within. The flowering vines will be strung on wires a modern innovation, but nothing of the metal may be seen by next year, only the lofty pine posts at intervals of ten feet.

Colonel Bunker

He Tells About His P. and P. Bills.

(Copyright, 1906, by C. H. Sutcliffe.)

"I WAS elected to the senate of my native state soon after the wah, suh," said Colonel Bunker, after he had drained his glass and pushed it aside in a reluctant way. "The nomination was given me by acclamation, and I was elected, with thousands of votes to spare. One of the several things I had determined on befo' taking my seat was to put a stop to the destruction of two certain southern institutions. I refer, suh, and I refer with pride, to the 'possum and the persimmon. They have been part and parcel of the true south ever since there was a south. They have been entwined in its folklore and interwoven in its legends. When our 'possums and persimmons go, then the songs that have been sung around the world must go.

"WE FIRED TOGETHER AT THE WORD"

"Freed from all restraint by the wah, our darkey population were devastating our country of its 'possums and persimmons. I determined to stop this in my own state. Hence the introduction at an early stage of my P. and P. bill, as it came to be known. That bill called for certain restrictions and for certain pains and penalties, and provoked widespread comment. Only a few of the people were with me at first. There was a shout of laughter as the bill was introduced, and within the next ten days I was being referred to in print and otherwise as 'Possum Bunker, Persimmon Bunker and other kinds of Bunker. In two weeks mo' than thirty possums were sent to me from different parts of the state.

"It was a situation, suh. Was Colonel Bunker equal to it? I must either force the people to respect that bill or be ridiculed out of public life. One mawning I dropped in to see the editor of a paper who was having a powerful lot to say about 'Possum Bunker. He had published a cartoon depicting my head and face attached to the body of a 'possum. When I had been admitted to his presence I said:

"'Suh, the cartoon of Colonel Bunker is a great hit—a great hit. I called to congratulate you on your enterprise.'

"'All in the way of fun, you know, colonel,' he replied.

"'Certainly. I can appreciate humor, even when directed against myself. Good joke, suh—good joke. By the way, however, I have another.'

"'Then I shall be glad to publish it.'

"'I hope you will. It is this, suh. You are to turn out of bed tomorrow at an hour that will enable you to meet me at sunrise in Carter's grove. I will have pistols there. We will each have a second. Ten paces will be paced on, and at the word we will bore each other with a bullet. It will be the best joke of the yeah, suh!'

"'Good Gawd! Colonel, but you don't advert to a duel,' he gasped.

"'Oh, no, no, no, no. It's what they call a shooting match. We laugh as we take our places. We laugh as we shoot at each other. We fairly scream with laughter as one of us is borne home on a shutter.'

"'Look here, Colonel, said the editor, as he gnawed at his moustache, 'there may be something in your P. & P. bill that I have overlooked. Would you mind sitting down and giving me some pointers?'

"I had made my point—made my point, suh, and I sat down and went over the matter with him.

"Point 1—The south cannot do without its colored population.

"Point 2—The 'possum and the persimmon are all that stand between a negro to the north and the present situation.

"Point 3—Remove the 'possum and the persimmon and you remove our servants and laborers.

"Point 4—Remove our servants and laborers, and you cannot replace them, and we must fail.

"'By the eternal, suh!' said the editor, when I had stated my case, 'you are ten times right, and the P. & P. bill must go through. It will be the salvation of the whole South. Colonel Bunker, heah is my hand. I apologize, suh!'

"I left the office with glowing heart," said the colonel; "but the battle was not yet won. The paper came out and supported the bill, but Senator Jim Pharso, for one, continued to make fun of and burlesque it. When he had carried it so far as to refer to me on the floor of the senate as 'Possum Bunker,' I sauntered around until I met him and then carelessly inquired:

"'By the way, senator, did you ever have a fair shot at a possum?'

"'Um! Can't say that I did,' he replied.

"'If you will be in Carter's grove at sunrise tomorrow mawning I'll guarantee you a shot at ten paces. My friend is Majah Twiller.'

"That's all that was said, suh, but the senator twigged. He had been challenged, and an hour later he sent his friend. None of us spoke to outsiders about the affair, and at sunrise the four of us were quite alone. I didn't care to kill the senator, suh, and I think he intended no wound rather than kill. It was a pretty affair. We fired together at the word, and while his bullet ticked my hip mine went crashing through his shoulder. He was in bed and cared for befo' the news became public. Even befo' he left the field he had half acknowledged to being in the wrong. The P. & P. bill began to look up. Newspapers sent for statistics and members came to me for information. Even the governor began to sit up and take notice.

"It was when the bill came before the committee of the whole for general discussion that I submitted my points and found another enemy. Senator Parsloe, from one of the back counties, wanted to amend the bill so as to protect the swamp owls of the state from chills and fever. I could only take it as a personal insult. As soon as I could reason him I quietly reminded him that there was nothing in common between swamp owls and possums, and that we had better settle any differences at Carter's Grove. He simply nodded his head. He was a game man, suh, and a game man don't waste his words. He was a young man, and a man who wanted to make a reputation, and he had determined to shoot to kill. I saw it in his eye as he faced me.

"I like to think of that affair, suh. He missed me, and I wounded him in the side. He called for another fire, and he missed me and received another wound. He called for a third, and I left a bullet in his shoulder and got a scratch on the hip in return. A game man, suh. His wounds sent him home for the rest of the session, but he continued to oppose my bill until the very last. He contended that the hooting of the swamp owl was a source of joy to the colored population, and that the health of the bird should be an object of state solicitude.

"I had no further duels over the bill. The press and the legislators sat themselves down to seriously consider it, and in every instance it was discovered that I had diagnosed the case correctly. One had only to go among the colored population to ascertain that I had. Thousands of them rose up and declared that if the possum and the persimmon went they would go too. The bill passed by a large majority, suh, and the governor signed it, and personally congratulated me. I made it a penal offense to injure or destroy a persimmon tree at any season of the year, and a like offense to disturb or capture the possum except during certain months.

"The results mo' than met my anticipations. Possums and persimmons increased in the most beautiful ratio. Our uneasy colored population settled down almost at once, and was added to by hundreds from other states. From time to time colonies of negroes have left the south for the west, but never from our state, suh.

"Give the negro possums and persimmons in plenty and you can't tear him from his soil. Take them away from him and you make him a yearner and a wanderer. Keep it ever in mind, suh—let it be a watchword to all, 'Possums and Persimmons.' The yam is a thing of delight, and the watermelon maketh the soul glad, but when you want a contented colored population——

"Thanks, suh. I was about to suggest that another cocktail would fill the aching void and render life worth the living, and I find it at my elbow, at my elbow, suh!"

Spiritual Need.

George O'Donnell, the actor, tells the following story of his four-year-old niece, whose mother is the wife of a clergyman.

One night Edith wasn't feeling very well and so was put to bed rather early. As her mother was about to leave her, she called her back.

"Mamma, I want to see papa."

"No, dear," her mother replied; "your father is busy and must not be disturbed."

"But, mamma," the child persisted, "I want to see him."

As before, the mother replied, "No; your father must not be disturbed."

"Mamma," declared her daughter, solemnly, "I am a sick woman and I want to see my minister."—Harper's Weekly.

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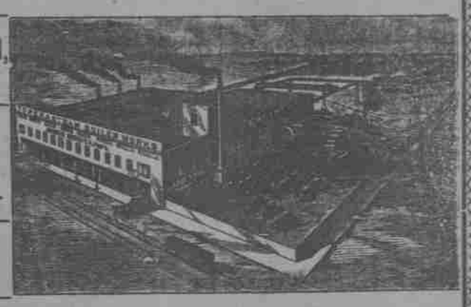

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