Esteemed Contemporaries

By JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

(Author of "Mr. Pratt," "Cap'n Eri," etc.).

WHAT is this we hear? What mean these subterranean rumblings and earth-shakings, disturbing the quiet of our prosperous and enterprising community? Why this muttering of distant thunder, striking alarm (?) to our peaceful breasts and causing the price of eggs at White's drop from twenty-five to twenty cents a dozen? (See ad. on page 4 of this issue.) Hush! Whisper it not in Gath; there are rumours of a resurrection in our midst. Our late esteemed contemporary, the "Gazette," which, after a protracted lapse into a state of suspended animation, was, as we all supposed, laid tranquilly to rest in the graveyard of buried hopes but a few short months ago, stirring in its tomb. There are whispers that it is to rise, phoenix-like, from its ashes, to convulse us with its wisdom and refresh our memories with its humour.

"No one seems to know who is responsible for this bringing of the dead to life, who is to reverse the work of the sexton, or to act as financial godfather at the rechristening. And, after all, is the question so much 'Who?' or 'When?' as 'Why?' In the name of common sense 'Why?' We pause, awaiting a reply and further developments. Meanwhile the "Breeze" will continue to cool the fevered brows of expectant watchers at regular weekly intervals. As we have intimated before, now is the time to subscribe."

Benjamin Phinney, editor and proprietor of the "Trumet Weekly Breeze," having thus brought his screed to a conclusion, wiped his pen upon the editorial trousers, leaned back in his chair with his shirt-sleeved arms behind his head, and chuckled. He reread the effusion, and chuckled again. He was wondering if the sarcasm were too pointed.

Ben had owned and edited the "Breeze" for nearly two years. The paper, its name and its success—judged by Trumet standards the latter was not to be sneezed at—were the product of his ingenuity and perserverance and a little of Uncle Holway's money. When Phinney, senior, died, after his disastrous failure in business, he left his son with a goodly collection of debts, an unfinished course in college, and a taste for journalism. To Uncle Holway—"Uncle" by courtesy; he was Ben's second cousin—the young man imparted his desire to shine in the newspaper world.

"Want to get on a daily paper, do you?" observed Uncle Holway. "From what I hear, a reporter's wages are pretty small to begin on. The thing to do is to start a little paper of your own somewheres. Then, if you're good for anything, you can make a decent living—for the country—and get to be somebody in your town. I'll back you for a year or so at that. It's all I can afford to do, besides paying what you owe already."

Uncle Holway had a business friend who owned a summer bungalow at Trumet. This friend suggested the village as a place where a live weekly was badly needed. So to Trumet came Ben. The first thing that struck him when he got off the train was a September no'theast gale. Therefore the new paper was christened the "Breeze."

When the "Breeze" first began to blow it had a competitor, the "Trumet the end of a year the "Gazette" was staid and dull and non-enterprising. Its editor was an elderly bachelor named Caleb Foster. The "Breeze" was not dull, and it certainly was not staid. At the end of a year the "Gazette" was at its last legs. On these it limped along for eight more months. Then it gave up the ghost—or seemed to do so—and its editor departed to live with his married sister near Boston. Its advertising and its subscribers came to the "Breeze," and Ben was able to pay the first instalment of the debt to Uncle Holway.

Having, after reflection, decided to let the editorial stand as it was written, Mr. Phinney filled his wheezy brier pipe and proceeded to go over the latest contribution from the "Breeze's" correspondent at Wellmouth Port. And then was heard the sound of large and weighty boots upon the stairs leading from the street to the sanctum.

The editor turned his chair as the door opened.

"Hello, Shake!" he observed gleefully. "How goes it? Is the muse working overtime? Has Pegasus been pegging again?"

It was the local poet who had called. Nearly every village possesses a poet, and Trumet, with the customary enterprise so often mentioned in the "Breeze," possessed a unique sample. He lived with his widowed mother in a little one-storey house on the "shore road." His name was Zebedee Gott, but in the course of time and under a succession of local treatments by local humourists, this name had vanished, and, after Zebb had answered to hails of "Browning," "Tennyson," "Longfelow," and the like, "Shakespeare" had taken its place. This had been familiarly curtailed to "Shake." Poetry so far was purely a labour of love for "Shake." He earned what little money he did earn by casual work alongshore. But he aspired to higher things.

In answer to Mr. Phinney's questions Shake smiled undecidedly. He rubbed his talented brow with one red hand and smiled still more.

"Got another outbreak of genius concealed about your person, Shake?" asked the editor.

"Wa-all," drawled the poet. "I don't know's I know exactly what you mean, Mr Phinney. You're such a funny joker I can't always sight what you're drivin' at. I just dropped in to ask if you'd heard the news about the 'Gazette.'"

"Shake, you disappoint me. I have heard the news about the 'Gazette.' But never mind news now. The important question is: Have you burst into song? Got another poem for me, Shake?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Phinney," said the bard of Trumet; 'I have got a little piece of poetry that I made up last night. I called it 'Beautiful Sunset in Higgins' Cove.' I read it to mother, and she guessed likely 'twas lovely. Want me to read it to you?"

Ben's reply was an enthusiastic affirmative. He enjoyed Shake's poetry. It appealed to his well-developed sense of the ridiculous. He had published two or three of the effusions in the "Breeze," purely for his own gratification.

The genuis cleared his throat and began:

Higgins's Cove in our town
Is a lovely place, all up and down.

"I mean it's kind of hilly round the edges," he explained.

The grass is green, the trees are fine,
Bein' principally scrub oak and pitch pine.
The water splashes on the beach,
Altogether it is a treat.

"Good!" interrupted Ben. "Magnificent! It's not every common or garden poet who could get away with a rhyme like that. That poem is mine. The "Breeze" will publish it immediately, at once, right off quick— some of it, at least. Come; let's have it."

But the poet, although he beamed with pride at his companion's praise, did not transfer the scroll.

"Wa-ll, Mr. Phinney," he stammered. "I don't know. It seems to me that—that is, mother she says, long's I've got the poetry disease so bad, I'd ought to get paid somethin' for my poems. I've give you consider'ble many for nothin' and she says what's the use of braggin' about havin' brains in your head if you don't make nothin' out of 'em. She ——"

"Shake, don't be mercenary; don't. Genius should be above gold. An ode like that is beyond price. I couldn't pay you for it. I couldn't really. Let's have it."

But to Ben's great surprise, Shake folded the foolscap, and returned it to his pocket.

"No," he said, with determination; "mother said not to. I cal'late, Mr. Phinney, I'll wait a spell and try it on the 'Gazette.' Maybe the new editor over there'll pay ——"

"The 'Gazette!'" laughed Ben. "Why Shake, the 'Gazette' is ——"

He paused. Footsteps were again ascending the stairs; this time, however, they were light and were accompanied by the rustle of skirts. The door opened and a young lady appeared. Mr. Phinney looked at her and rose hurriedly. She was a stranger in Trumet; her clothes alone would have proclaimed that fact. Also she had brown eyes and brown hair and — Ben groped for his coat.

"Pardon me," said the young lady. "Are you the editor of the 'Breeze' ?"

Mr. Phinney admitted it. Then he was conscious of his pipe, and tossed that fragrant comforter into the waste-basket. Luckily the basket had just been emptied.

"Don't rise, Mr. Phinney," said the caller. "May I sit down? I want to speak with you for a moment on business."

Without waiting for a reply, she seated herself in the visitor's chair, beside the editorial desk. Ben sat down also. Then he noticed t hat the poet was still present and staring, open-mouthed.

"Shake," he said, "trot along now, that's a good fellow. "We'll settle that matter some other time. Good-bye.'

Shake slowly departed, still staring.

"Now, Miss —er—" began the editor.

"My name is Foster," said the young lady. 'I am a niece of Mr. Caleb Foster, who used to live here in Trumet. Uncle Caleb was editor of the 'Gazette,' you remember."

Ben remembered. Brown was a nice colour for eyes, he decided.

"Yes," continued Miss Foster. "Well, uncle was obliged to discontinue his paper for the time, owing to ill health, and came to live with mother and me at Cambridge. But he never intended to give up the 'Gazette' entirely. He always meant to come back and continue it when he was well once more. However, his health is no better, and I'm afraid it never will be. He still owns the 'Gazette' property here, and it was that which I wished to speak to you about."

Ben tried not to smile, but he couldn't help it. He knew what the "Gazette" property was—an old-fashioned press, a few battered type-cases, and the type, and a dilapidated building with a mortgage on it; these were about all.

Miss Foster may have noticed the smile, but she went serenely on.

"Now, Mr. Phinney," she said, "I have looked this property over, and I have talked with uncle, and he has decided to make you, as the owner of the only other paper in town, a proposal. For 2000 dollars he will sell you the entire outfit, goodwill and all, and will agree not to resume publication."

Ben gasped. Then he asked solemnly, "Does the mortgage go with the rest of the outfit?"

"No," replied Miss Foster, with just a suspicion of a twinkle in the brown eyes; "he will take care of the mortgage with a portion of the two thousand. There is an alternative proposition," she continued. "That is, consolidation. If you will give him a half-interest in the new company, the 'Gazette' and "Breeze" may consolidate as one publication and control all the business."

She spoke as if the business was likely to be world-embracing. Mr Phinney laughed aloud. The young lady showed signs of impatience.

"Is it funny?" she inquired.

"Please forgive me. I didn't mean to. But it is funny, just a little. If I had two thou—that is, if I were disposed to buy the property you mention, I'm afraid we couldn't come to terms. Your uncle's price seems a little high, to me. Old iron and lead are worth about a half cent a pound, I believe, and I doubt if even the good-will weighs enough to make up the difference. As for consolidation—well, we have already consolidated, in a way. The 'Breeze' has the subscribers and the advertising. The "Gazette" has—has—well, it has the mortgage. I——"

Miss Foster rose.

"Then you refuse both propositions?" she said.

"I—I guess I do. I hope I haven't offended you. I've spoken rather plainly, but your uncle's proposition is—pardon me—is——"

"It wasn't uncle's altogether. I am responsible for a share in it. Good morning, Mr Phinney."

"I hope, Miss Foster, you aren't offended because I——"

"Not at all. I expected you to decline. The townspeople have told me—have told me various things. The "Gazette will resume publication at once."

"Frankly, Miss Foster—and as a friend of your uncle's—I wouldn't advise him to——"

"Of course you wouldn't. Good morning."

She moved toward the door. Ben hastened to open it.