

### **A Critique of *The Boom in the "Calaveras Clarion"***

Bret Harte's *The Boom in the "Calaveras Clarion"* is a short story that takes place in a mining camp during the time of the California Gold Rush. Communication is theme of this story that focuses on words, specifically words printed in a newspaper. The author placed his thesis statement in the dialogue of the foreman character who declares, "Folks talk a heap o' the power o' the Press!--I tell ye, ye don't half know it."

Beginning with a legend of a "nest-building blue jay" that flies into the printing room of the *Calaveras Clarion* and steals a vowel "with an air of deliberate selection," the tale ends with a happy reunion precipitated through the wording of a personal notice.

Not merely dialogue but *words* help establish the characters. We meet the main character of the piece, a young newcomer serving as temporary editor, fretting over changing the adjective "ignominious" to either "ingenuous" or "ingenious" in his editorial after overhearing the foreman and printer discussing a previous editor who was shot after his proofreader changed "ingenuous" to "ignominious."

Printed words are in the center of this story's conflict which concerns the Dimmidges, a feuding miner husband and his wife. The reader learns that the husband lived twenty miles from the *Clarion's* office, but his wife moved back to her parent's home three thousand miles away. There were plenty of rural and urban newspapers available for the Dimmidges' to use, but, like the blue jay, they each deliberately selected the *Calaveras Clarion*.

The printed words of Mr. Dimmidge's advertisement resulted in the profitable "Boom" or unexpected increase in sales for the *Clarion* – not for *what* was written but for *how* it was

written. The editor composed the wordy, legalese-replete formal ad, and, once he understood that Dimmidge was ready to pay an exorbitant fee, the foreman suggested using a large, bold type with an illustration of a runaway slave.

Six weeks later, the enigmatic and strangely articulate Mrs. Eliza J. Dimmidge appeared at the newspaper office. Ironically, her follow-up advertisement which was much more informal and extemporaneously worded but equally as large and ridiculously illustrated, met with universal rejection by the *Clarion's* readers. Even the real editor, on leave in San Francisco, wrote to express his rejection of (what he perceived to have been) another attempt at an increase in subscriptions.

Serendipitously, the power of the press proved to be still potent. The couple who chose to expose their private grievances in large bold font were consequently reconciled by the small, almost ignored, printed words of the *Clarion's* personal notices. In Lizy Jane's own words,

*"I found out from that 'Personal' you showed me that this particular old fool was actooally jealous! ... And then I KNEW he loved me all the time."*