

## Bigler's Barometer.

BY SAM DAVIS.



EXISTED contemporaneously with Bigler in Virginia City, and recall the circumstance with some little degree of pride.

We all had our vices in those days, and while not mentioning my own, I will take the liberty of stating that gambling was Bigler's.

His never-ceasing desire to make merchandise out of the bad judgment of other people was notorious, and I am frank to admit that on more occasions than I would care to enumerate I have fallen a victim to his extraordinary tendencies in that direction.

Yet I feel that a proper regard for his memory compels me to say that in his halcyon days he scorned the slightest approach to underhanded play on his own part, nor would he tolerate it for a single moment in others. I recall, as I write, how he once killed a man who had cheated him at cards at the Ozark saloon at Carson City, the place of my present abiding. He had lost a couple of thousand, for which he cared little, and was proceeding on the quiet tenor of his cocktail route, when he chanced to learn, by the merest accident — he was not the man to go prowling about searching for ill of his kind — that his antagonist had resorted to the desperate extremity of nailing a rabbit foot under the table where the game had been in progress, hoping thereby to reap unfair advantage for his own unworthy ends by hoodooing his opponent. It was this reliable revelation that caused Bigler, after several minutes of mature reflection, to return to the scene of his undoing, and shoot a hole into Miles Hickey, which, according to the report of the coroner's jury, resulted in the death of the latter gentleman. Next day when before the magistrate, he remarked that his case was of such a nature that he would need no attorney, and making a statement of the simple facts as near as he could recall them, was interrupted during the recital, by the information that he was

discharged, as the honorable court had no further business with the case except to read a sharp reproof to the officious district attorney for obtruding it upon the court, at a positive expense to overburdened taxpayers. Even the plea of the dead man's attorney, that the deceased had a large family to support, was swept aside by the court as having but scant relevancy to a matter which was pure and simple self-defense, and nothing else that the court knew of.

The killing of Hickey, however, did not seem to satisfy Bigler, as it did not bring back the money he had lost, and he seemed to think the State should reimburse him. As no move was made in that direction, he vowed that, as cheating was recognized in Nevada, he should in the future take care of himself, and other people could do the same.

He lost at cards and he lost at stocks, and finally had to hire himself out to Jack Bradley as a common hostler. They had known each other in the mines, and been chummy in the old days, but Bradley had become a millionaire now, and there was a gulf between them. The only common ground they met on was the inborn disposition each had to gamble on anything that possessed the slightest ingredient of chance. Bradley considered himself something of a weather sharp, and liked above anything to bet on the possibilities of a rainstorm. He used to bet Bigler a month's salary or any part of it on the weather, and Bigler, being dead game after the manner of his class, never failed to come to the center when bantered by his employer. He sometimes won, and sometimes lost, but in the long run found that he was working for Bradley for nothing. Noting the habits and peculiarities of Bradley, he made an important discovery. It was nothing less than the fact that a few days before the weather was bad Bradley became very logy in his walk, and that prior to clear weather he was light headed or "nutty," so to speak. Pondering on this circumstance, Bigler figured out the scientific reason of it. Bradley had worked in a Virginia City pan mill before he was wealthy, and had become salivated with quicksilver. In this way he had been transformed into a human barometer, a natural product, as one might say, and much more reliable and sensitive than the manufactured article.

The way in which the quicksilver mounted to his head or settled in his lower extremities was a most positive indication of weather events; the prognostication never went astray, and his spirits rose and fell with the mercury.

After Bigler had figured this down to an allspice, he came to the center in great shape when his employer wanted to gamble on the weather. But he went into the game intelligently and with proper forethought. He let Bradley win a few small bets while he was experimenting with his system, and then lay back for big money.

The system worked like a charm, and when he was losing his money, betting the wrong way on purpose, he felt happy, for he knew just what a fine financial future was ahead of him. He allowed himself to lose so many times that he finally got odds of ten to one, and then he made ready for his series of grand coups. When he saw Bradley getting gay and predicting that the Populist party would carry thirty-four States in the Union, he considered it about time to bet on fair weather, as Bradley's talk showed very plainly that the mercury was getting to his head, and fair weather was a dead certainty. So he went over to Dun's saloon and borrowed the money to put up the spot cash. He won a cool thousand, and this made old Bradley mad and reckless, and filled with a desire to get even. When a man gets in this condition he becomes an easy game, and a certain prey to designing enemies.

Bigler went at his man while the demon of a desire to get even had full possession of him, and in a short year had his money and his real estate safe in his pocket, so to speak.

Recalling the way Bradley had given him employment in his days of poverty, he generously reciprocated the favor, and put his old employer at work on the horses the latter had once owned. In this way he had a more favorable opportunity than ever to study the weather through Bradley, — he called him Jack now, — and soon acquired a local reputation for being the greatest weather prognosticator of the far West.

It was not long, however, before he began to weary of his limited orbit, and his friends encouraged him in the ambition to fill a wider sphere, secretly hoping, of course, that the sphere aforesaid

would prove too big for him to fill. They urged him to go in and make a national reputation, and cast all the other weather prophets in the shade.

Spurred on by such encouragements, he finally got the Nevada legislature to memorialize Congress to give Bigler a chance to forward a few sample prophecies to the weather bureau at Washington, just to show the department how the thing was done. The memorial also set forth the great advantages to agriculture of having a reliable weather man on deck in place of the old skates who were at that time drawing salaries to deceive the people.

In due course of time Bigler received notice that the department was ready to receive his weather prognostications. This concession had been brought about through the untiring exertions of Senator Jonas, who had left a senatorial poker game at Willard's in order to bring the matter before the attention of the government.

This honor somewhat excited Bigler, and he began to talk in his sleep. He always made Bradley sleep in the same apartment, — for old acquaintance's sake, he said, but really to have him where he could study his changes of mercurial altitude, — and he gave forth so much weather in his somnambulistic trances that Bradley began to listen.

When he heard him mutter night after night, "If Jack only knew what was in him; if he only knew the cinch I have," and talk of that kind, Bradley went on a mental prospecting tour over himself, and like a flash he hit on the fact that he was loaded up with quicksilver, and the miserable ingrate he had called his friend had been utilizing him as a human barometer. The whole solution of the mystery came to him as rapidly as the returns on election day, that are posted up in New York several hours before the polls have closed in California. He began to wonder if the Lord would ever allow him to be sufficiently satiated with the satisfaction that was undeniably his due.

At first he decided to squash off the earth, as he would a noxious insect, the man who had robbed him of his wealth and reduced him to the level of a stable chambermaid, but after reflection he concluded to resort to strategy, and first break him of his reputation and humble him in the eyes of all the world while in the zenith of his fame.

It was easy enough. All he had to do was to pretend the quicksilver was in his head when it was in his feet, and *vice versa*. He began practising how to be hilarious when actually depressed, and how to be melancholy when, in reality, he was brimming with levity. The last was a simple matter, for he was naturally of a morbid disposition; but to appear hilarious when actually depressed required greater histrionic effort. Finally, however, by practise, and the assiduous study of the humorous columns of the local press, and Joe Miller's jest book, he became a master of dissimulation.

The time arrived for Bigler to send on his first national prophecy — he was prognosticating for a continent now, and feeling nervous.

He watched Bradley like a cat. Bradley was also a good deal excited, for he realized it was the final struggle of their wits.

Although his spirits were at the top notch, he began at breakfast to complain of cold feet, and all day he grew more pensive and melancholy.

That night he asked Bigler to untie his shoe, advancing as a reason that he was unable to lift his foot up and lay his ankle over the other knee. When he crawled into bed he hinted at a desire to commit suicide.

This last remark was enough, and Bigler, rushing to the telegraph office, wired his first prophecy — a list of predictions of cloudbursts and cyclones, tempered with hail and lightning, that would have raised the hair of the American people in every town and hamlet and sent half the population to their cyclone cellars and storm caves if the papers had ever gotten hold of it. The fact that the weather department keeps its forecasts out of the press until they are over-ripe, so to speak, was all that saved it. Immediately there began such a spell of heavenly weather that Jack Bradley had to buy lead insoles for his shoes to keep himself from jumping up and down. Then came the change. He suddenly felt the subtle fluid surging into his feet, and it dropped with such a thud that only by a superhuman effort could he act chipper and happy, and reel off the jokes he had mastered. However, his desire for revenge, aided by his artistic temperament, brought him through. After three or four anxious hours, during which Bradley

saw with horror his meteorological instrument getting gayer every moment, this false prophet, now reduced to the pitiful necessity of hedging, rushed away again and sent off a second message. He said that the cyclone he had expected had met with a counter current and caromed off to the North Pacific Ocean, where it was churning a hole in the water and destroying the ships that were *en route* for the Arctic regions. The country could now look for a long spell of serene, delightful weather such as it had not experienced for years.

Scarcely had the bulletin been issued when the storm of the century burst upon the country and destroyed thousands of lives and millions of dollars' worth of property.

This disaster proved fatal to Bigler. Being a proud man, and unwilling to give up without a struggle, he decided to cut loose from Bradley, strike out independently, and go into training as a barometer himself. But as his age and dignity made the long preparatory course at the pan mill out of the question, he tried to hasten nature by adding a capsule of the desired element to his daily bill of fare ; and died within a year, a victim to overweening scientific ambition.

Meantime, Bradley, awakened at last to the mine of wealth within him, decided to work it on his own account, and, fearing a repetition of the Bigler episode if he remained on his native heath, smuggled himself through the French Custom House, and is now at large somewhere in Europe. For that reason, if any one should, in the course of foreign travels, run up against a middle-aged, nervous, stoop-shouldered man, of markedly mercurial spirits, who wishes to bet on the weather, he'll do well to save his money. The man is no other than Bradley, the original and only Human Barometer ; — and he's betting on a sure thing.

