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THE WANING POWER OF THE PRESS

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AFTER the last ballot had been cast and counted in the recent mayoralty contest in New York, the successful candidate paid his respects to the newspapers which had opposed him. This is equivalent to saying that he paid them to the whole metropolitan press; for every great daily newspaper except one had done its best to defeat him, and that one had given him only a left-handed support. The comments of the mayor-elect, though not ill-tempered, led up to the conclusion that in our common-sense generation nobody cares what the newspapers say.

Unflattering as such a verdict may be, probably a majority of the community, if polled as a jury, would concur in it. The airy dismissal of some proposition as "mere newspaper talk" is heard at every social gathering, till one who was brought up to regard the press as a mighty factor in modern civilization is tempted to wonder whether it has actually lost the power it used to wield among us. The answer seems to me to depend on whether we are considering direct or indirect effects. A newspaper exerts its most direct influence through its definite interpretation of current events. Its indirect influence radiates from the amount and character of the news it prints, the particular

features it accentuates, and its method of presenting these. Hence it is always possible that its direct influence may be trifling while its indirect influence is large; its direct influence harmless, but its indirect influence pernicious; or *vice versa*.

A distinction ought to be made here like that which we make between credulity and nerves. The fact that a dwelling in which a mysterious murder has been committed may for years thereafter go begging in vain for a tenant, does not mean that a whole cityful of fairly intelligent people are victims of the ghost obsession; but it does mean that no person enjoys being reminded of midnight assassination every time he crosses his own threshold; for so persistent a companionship with a discomforting thought is bound to depress the best nervous system ever planted in a human being. So the constant iteration of any idea in a daily newspaper will presently capture public attention, whether the idea be good or bad, sensible or foolish. Though the influence of the press, through its ability to keep certain subjects always before its readers, has grown with its growth in resources and patronage, its hold on popular confidence has unquestionably been loosened during the last forty or

fifty years. To Mayor Gaynor's inference, as to most generalizations of that sort, we need not attach serious importance. The interplay of so many forces in a political campaign makes it impracticable to separate the influence of the newspapers from the rest, and either hold it solely accountable for the result, or pass it over as negligible; for if we tried to formulate any sweeping rules, we should find it hard to explain the variegated records of success and defeat among newspaper favorites. But it may be worth while to inquire why an institution so full of potentialities as a free press does not produce more effect than it does, and why so many of its leading writers to-day find reason to deplore the altered attitude of the people toward it.

Not necessarily in their order of importance, but for convenience of consideration, I should list the causes for this change about as follows: the transfer of both properties and policies from personal to impersonal control; the rise of the cheap magazine; the tendency to specialization in all forms of public instruction; the fierceness of competition in the newspaper business; the demand for larger capital, unsettling the former equipoise between counting-room and editorial room; the invasion of newspaper offices by the universal mania of hurry; the development of the news-getting at the expense of the news-interpreting function; the tendency to remould narratives of fact so as to confirm office-made policies; the growing disregard of decency in the choice of news to be specially exploited; and the scant time now spared by men of the world for reading journals of general intelligence.

In the old-style newspaper, in spite of the fact that the editorial articles were usually anonymous, the editor's name appeared among the standing notices somewhere in every issue, or was so

well known to the public that we talked about "what Greeley thought" of this or that, or wondered "whether Bryant was going to support" a certain ticket, or shook our heads over the latest sensational screed "in Bennett's paper." The identity of such men was clear in the minds of a multitude of readers who might sometimes have been puzzled to recall the title of the sheet edited by each. We knew their private histories and their idiosyncrasies; they were to us no mere abstractions on the one hand, or wire-worked puppets on the other, but living, moving, sentient human beings; and our acquaintance with them enabled us, as we believed, to locate fairly well their springs of thought and action. Indeed, their very foibles sometimes furnished our best exegetical key to their writings.

When a politician whom Bryant had criticised threatened to pull his nose, and Bryant responded by stalking ostentatiously three times around the bully at their next meeting in public, the readers of the *Evening Post* did not lose faith in the editor because he was only human, but guessed about how far to discount future utterances of the paper with regard to his antagonist. When Bennett avowed his intention of advertising the *Herald* without the expenditure of a dollar, by attacking his enemies so savagely as to goad them into a physical assault, everybody understood the motives behind the warfare on both sides, and attached to it only the significance the facts warranted. Knowing Dana's affiliations, no one mistook the meaning of the *Sun's* dismissal of General Hancock as "a good man, weighing two hundred and fifty pounds, but . . . not Samuel J. Tilden." And Greeley's retort to Bryant, "You lie, villain! willfully, wickedly, basely lie!" and his denunciation of Bennett as a "low-mouthed, blatant, witless, brutal scoundrel," though not

preserved as models of amenity for the emulation of budding editors, were felt to be balanced by the delicious frankness of the *Tribune's* announcement of "the dissolution of the political firm of Seward, Weed & Greeley by the withdrawal of the junior partner."

With all its faults, that era of personal journalism had some rugged virtues. In referring to it, I am reminded of a remark made to me, years ago, by the oldest editor then living, — so old that he had employed Weed as a journeyman, and refused to hire Greeley as a tramp printer, — that "in the golden age of our craft, every editor wore his conscience on his arm, and carried his dueling weapon in his hand, walked always in the light where the whole world could see him, and was prepared to defend his published opinions with his life if need be." Without going to that extreme, it is easy to sympathize with the veteran's view that a man of force, who writes nothing for which he is not ready to be personally responsible, commands more respect from the mass of his fellows than one who shields himself behind a rampart of anonymity, and voices only the sentiments of a profit-seeking corporation.

Of course, the transfer of our newspapers from personal to corporate ownership and control was not a matter of preference, but a practical necessity. The expense of modernizing the mechanical equipment alone imposed a burden which few newspaper proprietors were able to carry unaided. Add to that the cost of an ever-expanding news-service, and the higher salaries demanded by satisfactory employees in all departments, and it is hardly wonderful that one private owner after another gave up his single-handed struggle against hopeless financial odds, and sought aid from men of larger means. Partnership relations involve so many risks, and are so hard to shift

in an emergency, that resort was had to the form of a corporation, which afforded the advantage of a limited liability, and enabled a shareholder to dispose of his interest if he tired of the game. Since the dependence of a newspaper on the favor of an often whimsical public placed it among the least attractive forms of investment, even under these well-guarded conditions, the capitalists who were willing to take large blocks of stock were usually men with political or speculative ends to gain, to which they could make a newspaper minister by way of compensating them for the hazards they faced.

These newcomers were not idealists, like the founders and managers of most of the important journals of an earlier period. They were men of keen commercial instincts, as evidenced by the fact that they had accumulated wealth. They naturally looked at everything through the medium of the balance-sheet. Here was a paper with a fine reputation, but uncertain or disappearing profits; it must be strengthened, enlarged, and made to pay. Principles? Yes, principles were good things, but we must not ride even good things to death. The noblest cause in creation cannot be promoted by a defunct newspaper, and to keep its champion alive there must be a net cash income. The circulation must be pushed, and the advertising patronage increased. More circulation can be got only by keeping the public stirred up. Employ private detectives to pursue the runaway husband, and bring him back to his wife; organize a marine expedition to find the missing ship; send a reporter into the Soudan to interview the beleaguered general whose own government is powerless to reach him with an army. Blow the trumpet, and make ringing announcements every day. If nothing new is to be had, refurbish something so old that people have forgotten it,

and spread it over lots of space. Who will know the difference?

What one newspaper did, that others were forced to do or be distanced in the competition. It all had its effect. A craving for excitement was first aroused in the public, and then satisfied by the same hand that had aroused it. Nobody wished to be behind the times, so circulations were swelled gradually to tenfold their old dimensions. Rivalry was worked up among the advertisers in their turn, till a half-page in a big newspaper commanded a price undreamed of a few years before. Thus one interest was made to foster another, each increase of income involving also an increase of cost, and each additional outlay bringing fresh returns. In such a race for business success, with such forces behind the runners, can we marvel at the subsidence of ideals which in the days of individual control and slower gait were uppermost? With the capitalists' plans to promote, and powerful advertisers to conciliate by emphasizing this subject or discreetly ignoring that, is not the wonder rather that the moral quality of our press has not fallen below its present standard?

Even in our day we occasionally find an editor who pays his individual tribute to the old conception of personal responsibility by giving his surname to his periodical or signing his leading articles himself. In such newspaper ventures as Mr. Bryan and Mr. La Follette have launched within a few years, albeit their motives are known to be political and partisan, more attention is attracted by one of their deliverances than by a score of impersonal preachments. Mr. Hearst, the high priest of sensational journalism, though not exploiting his own authority in the same way, has always taken pains to advertise the individual work of such lieutenants as Bierce and Brisbane; and he, like Colonel Taylor of Boston,

early opened his editorial pages to contributions from distinguished authors outside of his staff, with signatures attached. A few editors I have known who, in whatever they wrote with their own hands, dropped the diffusive "we" and adopted the more direct and intimate "I." These things go to show that even journalists who have received most of their training in the modern school appreciate that trait in our common human nature which prompts us to pay more heed to a living voice than to a talking-machine.

While we are on this theme it may be asked whether the same conditions which brought Greeley and Raymond and Bryant to the fore may not recur and produce successors of their strain. It is hard to imagine such a possibility. Where should we look to-day for moral issues like those which stirred the souls of men as long as Negro slavery survived, and while our republic was passing through its strictly experimental stage? It was the controversies then waged which gave birth, or new life, to newspapers afterward famous. In politics, party lines have crossed and recrossed each other till they are now almost indistinguishable. We have the currency question and the protective tariff, it is true, but both lie too close to the pocket-nerve to be capable of exciting a pure impulse of chivalry. Anti-imperialism seems to have lost its inspiration with the eclipse of Aguinaldo. Woman suffrage and the labor problem involve the expansion of conventional privileges rather than the assertion of natural rights. Civil-service reform is working out its own salvation; so is the restriction of child labor. The Indians are in process of rapid absorption into the body politic. As to the liquor evil, popular opinion seems to favor fighting it with medical science and in the schools rather than by prohibitory legislation. So there is little encourage-

ment for the journalistic knight-errant anywhere along the line.

The importance of a responsible personality finds further confirmation in the evolution of the modern magazine. From being what its title indicates, a place of storage for articles believed to have some permanent value, the magazine began to take on a new character about twenty years ago. While preserving its distinct identity and its originality, it leaped boldly into the newspaper arena, and sought its topics in the happenings of the day, regardless of their evanescence. It raised a corps of men and women who might otherwise have toiled in obscurity all their lives, and gave them a chance to become authorities on questions of immediate interest, till they are now recognized as constituting a limited but highly specialized profession. One group occupied itself with trusts and trust magnates; another with politicians whose rise had been so meteoric as to suggest a romance behind it; another with the inside history of international episodes, another with new religious movements and their leaders, and so on.

What was the result? The public following which the newspaper editors used to command when they did business in the open, but which was falling away from their anonymous successors, attached itself promptly to the magazinists. The citizen interested in insurance reform turned eagerly to all that emanated from the group in charge of that topic; whoever aspired to take part in the social uplift bought every number of every periodical in which the contributions of another group appeared; the hater of monopoly paid a third group the same compliment. What was more, the readers pinned their faith to their favorite writers, and quoted Mr. Steffens and Miss Tarbell and Mr. Baker on the specialty each

had taken, with much the same freedom with which they might have quoted Darwin on plant-life, or Edison on electricity. If any anonymous editor ventured to question the infallibility of one of these prophets of the magazine world, the common multitude wasted no thought on the merits of the issue, but sided at once with the teacher whom they knew at least by name, against the critic whom they knew not at all. The uncomplimentary assumption as to the latter always seemed to be that, as only a subordinate part of a big organism, he was speaking, not from his heart, but from his orders; and that he must have some sinister design in trying to discredit an opponent who was not afraid to stand out and face his fire.

Apropos, let us not fail to note the constant trend, of recent years, toward specialization in every department of life and thought. There was a time when a pronouncement from certain men on nearly any theme would be accepted by the public, not only with the outward respect commanded by persons of their social standing, but with a large measure of positive credence. One who enjoyed a general reputation for scholarship might set forth his views this week on a question of archæology, next week on the significance of the latest earthquake, and a week later on the new canals on the planet Mars, with the certainty that each outgiving would affect public opinion to a marked degree; whereas nowadays we demand that the most distinguished members of our learned faculty stick each to his own hobby: the antiquarian to the excavations, the seismologist to the tremors of our planet, the astronomer to our remoter colleagues of the solar system. It is the same with our writers on political, social, and economic problems. Whereas the oldtime editor was expected to tell his constituency what

to think on any subject called up by the news overnight, it is now taken for granted that even news must be classified and distributed between specialists for comment; and the very sense that only one writer is trusted to handle any particular class of topics inspires a desire in the public to know who that writer is before paying much attention to his opinions.

The intense competition between newspapers covering the same field sometimes leads to consequences which do not strengthen the esteem of the people at large for the press at large. Witness the controversy which arose a few months ago over the conflicting claims of Commander Peary and Dr. Cook as the original discoverer of the North Pole. One newspaper syndicate having, at large expense, procured a narrative directly from the pen of Cook, and another accomplished a like feat with Peary, to which could "we, the people," look for an unbiased opinion on the matters in dispute? An admission by either that its star contributor could trifle with the truth was equivalent to throwing its own exploit into bankruptcy. So each was bound to stand by the claimant with whom it had first identified itself, and fight the battle out like an attorney under retainer; and what started as a serious contest of priority in a scientific discovery threatened to end as a wrangle over a newspaper "beat."

Then, too, we must reckon with the progressive acceleration of the pace of our twentieth-century life generally. Where we walked in the old times, we run in these; where we ambled then, we gallop now. It is the age of electric power, high explosives, articulated steel frames, in the larger world; of the long-distance telephone, the taxicab, and the card-index, in the narrower. The problem of existence is reduced to terms of time-measurement, with the

detached lever substituted for the pendulum because it produces a faster tick.

What is the effect of all this on the modernized newspaper? It must be first on the ground at every activity, foreseen or unforeseeable, as a matter of course. Its reporter must get off his "story" in advance of all his rivals. Never mind strict accuracy of detail — effect is the main thing; he is writing not for expert accountants, or professional statisticians, or analytic philosophers, but for the public; and what the public wants is not dry particulars, but color, vitality, heat. Pictures being a quicker medium of communication with the reader's mind than printed text, nine tenths of our daily press is illustrated, and the illustrations of distant events are usually turned out by artists in the home office from verbal descriptions. What signifies it if only three cars went off the broken bridge, and the imaginative draftsman put five into his picture because he could not wait for the dispatch of correction which almost always follows the lurid "scoop"? Who is harmed if the telegram about the suicide reads "shots" instead of "stabs," and the artist depicts the self-destroyer clutching a smoking pistol instead of a dripping dirk?

It is the province of the champion of the up-to-date cult to minimize the importance of detail. The purpose of the picture, he argues, is to stamp a broad impression instantaneously on the mind, and thus spare it the more tedious process of reading. And if one detail too many is put in, or one omitted which ought to have been there, whoever is sufficiently interested to read the text will discover the fault, and whoever is not will give it no further thought anyway. As to the descriptive matter, suppose it does contain errors? The busy man of our day does not read his newspaper with the same

solemn intent with which he reads history. What he asks of it is a lightning-like glimpse of the world which will show him how far it has moved in the last twelve hours; and he will not pause to complain of a few deviations from the straight line of truth, especially if it would have taken more than the twelve hours to rectify them.

This would perhaps be good logic if the pure-food law were broadened in scope so as to apply to mental pabulum, and every concocter of newspaper stories and illustrations were compelled to label his adulterated products. Then the consumer who does not object to a diet of mixed fact and falsehood, accuracy and carelessness, so long as the compound is so seasoned as to tickle his palate, could have his desire, while his neighbor who wishes an honest article or nothing at all could have his also. As it is, with no distinguishing marks, we are liable to buy one thing and get another.

The new order of "speed before everything" has brought about its changes at both ends of a newspaper staff. The editorial writer who used to take a little time to look into the ramifications of a topic before reducing his opinions to writing, feels humiliated if an event occurs on which he cannot turn off a few comments at sight; but he has still a refuge in such modifying clauses as "in the light of the meagre details now before us," or "as it appears at this writing," or "in spite of the absence of full particulars, which may later change the whole aspect of affairs." No such covert offers itself to the news-getter in the open field. What he says must be definite, outright, unqualified, or the blue pencil slashes remorselessly through his "it is suspected," or "according to a rumor which cannot yet be traced to its original source." What business has he to "suspect"? He is hired to know. For what, pray, is the

newspaper paying him, if not for tracing rumors to their original source; and further still, if so instructed? He is there to be not a thinker but a worker; a human machine like a steam potato-digger, which, supplied with the necessary energizing force from behind, drives its prods under nature's mantle, and grubs out the succulent treasures she is trying to conceal.

Nowhere is the change more patent than in the department of special correspondence. At an important point like Washington, for instance, the old corps of writers were men of mature years, most of whom had passed an apprenticeship in the editorial chair, and still held a semi-editorial relation to the newspapers they represented. They had studied political history and economics, social philosophy, and kindred subjects, as a preparation for their life-work, and were full of a wholesome sense of responsibility to the public as well as to their employers. Poore, Nelson, Boynton, and others of their class, were known by name, and regarded as authorities, in the communities to which they daily ministered. They were thoughtful workers as well as enterprising. They went for their news to the fountain-head, instead of dipping it out of any chance pool by the wayside. When they sent into their home offices either fact or prophecy, they accompanied it with an interpretation which both editors and public knew to be no mere feat in lightning guesswork; and the fame which any of them prized more than a long calendar of "beats" and "exclusives" was that which would occasionally move a worsted competitor to confess: "I missed that news; but if ——— sent it out, it is true."

When, in the later eighties, the new order came, it came with a rush. The first inkling of it was a notice received, in the middle of one busy night, by a

correspondent who had been faithfully serving a prominent Western newspaper for a dozen years, to turn over his bureau to a young man who up to that time had been doing local reporting on its home staff. Transfers of other bureaus followed fast. A few were left, and still remain, undisturbed in personnel or character of work. Here and there, too, an old-fashioned correspondent was retained, but retired to an emeritus post, with the privilege of writing a signed letter when the spirit moved him, while a nimbler-footed successor assumed titular command and sent the daily dispatches. The bald fact was that the newspaper managers had bowed to the hustling humor of the age. They no longer cared to serve journalistic viands, which required deliberate mastication, to patrons who clamored for a quick lunch. So they passed on to their representatives at a distance the same injunction they were incessantly pressing upon their reporters at home: "Get the news, and send it while it is hot. Don't wait to tell us what it means or what it points to; we can do our own ratiocinating."

Is the public a loser by this obscuration of the correspondent's former function? I believe so. His appeal is no longer put to the reader directly; he becomes the mere tool of the newspaper, which in its turn furnishes to the reader such parts of his and other communications as it chooses, and in such forms as best suit its ulterior purposes. Doubtless this conduces to a more perfect administrative coördination in the staff at large, but it greatly weakens the correspondent's sense of personal responsibility. Poore had his constituency, Boynton had his, Nelson had his. None of these men would, under any conceivable stress of competition, have wittingly misled the group of readers he had attached to himself; nor would one of them have tolerated any tam-

pering in the home office with essential matters in a contribution to which he had signed his name. Indeed, so well was this understood that I never heard of anybody's trying to tamper with them. It occasionally happened that the correspondent set forth a view somewhat at variance with that expressed on the editorial page of the same paper; but each party to this disagreement respected the other, and the public was assumed to be capable of making its own choice between opposing opinions clearly stated. A special virtue of the plan of independent correspondence lay in the opportunity it often afforded the habitual reader of a single newspaper to get at least a glance at more than one side of a public question.

Among the conspicuous fruits of the new régime is the direction sometimes sent to a correspondent to "write down" this man or "write up" that project. He knows that it is a case of obey orders or resign, and it brings to the surface all the Hessian he may have in his blood. If he is enough of a casuist, he will try to reconcile good conscience with worldly wisdom by picturing himself as a soldier commanded to do something of which he does not approve. Disobedience at the post of duty is treachery; resignation in the face of an unwelcome billet is desertion. So he does what he is bidden, though it may be at the cost of his self-respect and the esteem of others whose kind opinion he values. I have had a young correspondent come to me for information about something under advisement at the White House, and apologize for not going there himself by showing me a note from his editor telling him to "give the President hell." As he had always been treated with courtesy at the White House, he had not the hardihood to go there while engaged in his campaign of abuse.

Another, who had been intimate with

a member of the administration then in power, was suddenly summoned one day to a conference with the publisher of his paper. He went in high spirits, believing that the invitation must mean at least a promotion in rank or an increase of salary. He returned crest-fallen. Several days afterward he revealed to me in confidence that the paper had been unsuccessfully seeking some advertising controlled by his friend, and that the publisher had offered him one thousand dollars for a series of articles — anonymous, if he preferred — exposing the private weaknesses of the eminent man, and giving full names, dates, and other particulars as to a certain unsavory association in which he was reported to find pleasure! Still another brought me a dispatch he had prepared, requesting me to look it over and see whether it contained anything strictly libelous. It proved to be a forecast of the course of the Secretary of the Treasury in a financial crisis then impending. "Technically speaking," I said, after reading it, "there is plenty of libelous material in this, for it represents the Secretary as about to do something which, to my personal knowledge, he has never contemplated, and which would stamp him as unfit for his position if he should attempt it. But as a matter of fact he will ignore your story, as he is putting into type to-day a circular which is to be made public to-morrow, telling what his plan really is, and that will authoritatively discredit you."

"Thank you," he answered, rather stiffly. "I have my orders to pitch into the Secretary whenever I get a chance. I shall send this to-day, and to-morrow I can send another saying that my exclusive disclosures forced him to change his programme at the last moment."

These are sporadic cases, I admit, yet they indicate a mischievous tendency; just as each railway accident is

itself sporadic, but too frequent fatalities from a like cause on the same line point to something wrong in the management of the road. It is not necessary to call names on the one hand, or indulge in wholesale denunciation on the other, in order to indicate the extremes to which the current pace in journalism must inevitably lead if kept up. The broadest-minded and most honorable men in our calling realize the disagreeable truth. A few of the great newspapers, too, have the courage to cling still to the old ideals, both in their editorial attitude and in their instructions to their news-gatherers. Possibly their profits are smaller for their squeamishness; but that the better quality of their patronage makes up in a measure for its lesser quantity, is evident to any one familiar with the advertising business. Moreover, in the character of its employees and in the zeal and intelligence of their service, a newspaper conducted on the higher plane possesses an asset which cannot be appraised in dollars and cents. Of one such paper a famous man once said to me, "I disagree with half its political views; I am regarded as a personal enemy by its editor; but I read it religiously every day, and it is the only daily that enters the front door of my home. It is a paper written by gentlemen for gentlemen; and, though it exasperates me often, it never offends my nostrils with the odors of the slums."

This last remark leads to another consideration touching the relaxed hold of the press on public confidence: I refer to the topics treated in the news columns, and the manner of their presentation. Its importance is attested by the sub-titles or mottoes adopted by several prominent newspapers, emphasizing their appeal to the family as a special constituency. In spite of the intense individualism, the reciprocal independence of the sexes, and the

freedom from the trammels of feudal tradition of which we Americans boast, the social unit in this country is the family. Toward it a thousand lines of interest converge, from it a thousand lines of influence flow. Public opinion is unconsciously moulded by it, for the atmosphere of the home follows the father into his office, the son into his college, the daughter into her intimate companionships. The newspaper, therefore, which keeps the family in touch with the outside world, though it may have to be managed with more discretion than one whose circulation is chiefly in the streets, finds its compensation in its increased radius of influence of the subtler sort. For such a field, nothing is less fit than the noisome domestic scandals and the gory horrors which fill so much of the space in newspapers of the lowest rank, and which in these later years have made occasional inroads into some of a higher grade. Unfortunately, these occasional inroads do more to damage the general standing of the press than the habitual revel in vulgarity. For a newspaper which frankly avows itself unhampered by niceties of taste can be branded and set aside as belonging in the impossible category; whereas, when one with a clean exterior and a reputation for respectability proves unworthy, its faithlessness arouses in the popular mind a distrust of all its class.

And yet, whatever we may say of the modern press on its less commendable side, we are bound to admit that newspapers, like governments, fairly reflect the people they serve. Charles Dudley Warner once went so far as to say that no matter how objectionable the character of a paper may be, it is always a trifle better than the patrons on whom it relies for its support. I suspect that Mr. Warner's comparison rested on the greater frankness of the bad paper, which, by very virtue of its

mode of appeal, is bound to make a brave parade of its worst qualities; whereas the reader who is loudest in proclaiming in public his repugnance for horrors, and his detestation of scandals, may in private be buying daily the sheet which peddles both most shamelessly.

This sort of conventional hypocrisy among the common run of people is easier to forgive than the same thing among the cultivated few whom we accept as mentors. I stumbled upon an illuminating incident about five years ago which I cannot forbear recalling here. A young man just graduated from college, where he had attracted some attention by the cleverness of his pen, was invited to a position on the staff of the *New York Journal*. Visiting a leading member of the college faculty to say farewell, he mentioned this compliment with not a little pride. In an instant the professor was up in arms, with an earnest protest against his handicapping his whole career by having anything to do with so monstrous an exponent of yellow journalism. The lad was deeply moved by the good man's outburst, and went home sorrowful. After a night's sleep on it, he resolved to profit by the admonition, and accordingly called upon the editor, and asked permission to withdraw his tentative acceptance. In the explanation which followed he inadvertently let slip the name of his adviser. He saw a cynical smile cross the face of Mr. Hearst, who summoned a stenographer, and in his presence dictated a letter to the professor, requesting a five-hundred-word signed article for the next Sunday's issue and inclosing a check for two hundred and fifty dollars. On Sunday the ingenuous youth beheld the article in a conspicuous place on the *Journal's* editorial page, with the professor's full name appended in large capitals.

We have already noted some of the effects produced on the press by the hurry-scurry of our modern life. Quite as significant are sundry phenomena recorded by Dr. Walter Dill Scott as the result of an inquiry into the reading habits of two thousand representative business and professional men in a typical American city. Among other things, he discovered that most of them spent not to exceed fifteen minutes a day on their newspapers. As some spent less, and some divided the time between two or three papers, the average period devoted to any one paper could safely be placed at from five to ten minutes. The admitted practice of most of the group was to look at the headlines, the table of contents, and the weather reports, and then apparently at some specialty in which they were individually interested. The editorial articles seem to have offered them few attractions, but news items of one sort or another engaged seventy-five per cent of their attention.

In an age as skeptical as ours, there is nothing astonishing in the low valuation given, by men of a class competent to do their own thinking, to anonymous opinion; but it will strike many as strange that this class takes no deeper interest in the news of the day. The trained psychologist may find it worth while to study out here the relation of cause and effect. Does the ordinary man of affairs show so scant regard for his newspaper because he no longer believes half it tells him, or only because his mind is so absorbed in matters closer at hand, and directly affecting his livelihood? Have the newspapers perverted the public taste with sensational surprises till it can no longer appreciate normal information normally conveyed?

Professor Münsterberg would doubtless tell us that the foregoing statistics only justify his charge against Amer-

icans as a people; that we have gone leaping and gasping through life till we have lost the faculty of mental concentration, and hence that few of us can read any more. Whatever the explanation, the central fact has been duly recognized by all the yellow journals, and by some also which have not yet passed beyond the cream-colored stage. The "scare heads" and exaggerated type which, as a lure for purchasers, filled all their needs a few years ago, are no longer regarded as sufficient, but have given way to startling bill-board effects, with huge headlines, in block-letter and vermilion ink, spread across an entire front page.

The worst phase of this whole business, however, is one which does not appear on the surface, but which certainly offers food for serious reflection. The point of view from which all my criticisms have been made is that of the citizen of fair intelligence and education. It is he who has been weaned from his faith in the organ of opinion which satisfied his father, till he habitually sneers at "mere newspaper talk"; it is he who has descended from reading to simply skimming the news, and who consciously suffers from the errors which adulterate, and the vulgarity which taints, that product. But there is another element in the community which has not his well-sharpened instinct for discrimination; which can afford to buy only the cheapest, and is drawn toward the lowest, daily prints; which, during the noon hour and at night, finds time to devour all the tenebrous tragedies, all the palace scandals, and all the incendiary appeals designed to make the poor man think that thrift is robbery. Over that element we find the vicious newspaper still exercising an enormous sway; and, admitting that so large a proportion of the outwardly reputable press has lost its hold upon the better class of readers, what must

we look for as the resultant of two such unbalanced forces?

Not a line of these few pages has been written in a carping, much less in a pessimistic spirit. I love the profession in whose practice I passed the largest and happiest part of my life; but the very pride I feel in its worthy achievements makes me, perhaps, the more sensitive to its shortcomings as these reveal themselves to an unprejudiced scrutiny. The limits of this article as to both space and scope forbid my following its subject into some inviting by-paths: as, for instance, the distinction to be observed between initiative and support in comparing the influence of the modern newspaper with that

of its ancestor of a half-century ago. I am sorry, also, to put forth so many strictures without furnishing a constructive sequel. It would be interesting, for example, to weigh such possibilities as an endowed newspaper which should do for the press, as a protest against its offenses of deliberation and its faults of haste and carelessness, what an endowed theatre might do for the rescue of the stage from a condition of chronic inanity. But it must remain for a more profound philosopher, whose function is to specialize in opinion rather than to generalize in comment, to show what remedies are practicable for the disorders which beset the body of our modern journalism.

TURTLE EGGS FOR AGASSIZ

BY DALLAS LORE SHARP

IT is one of the wonders of the world that so few books are written. With every human being a possible book, and with many a human being capable of becoming more books than the world could contain, is it not amazing that the books of men are so few? And so stupid!

I took down, recently, from the shelves of a great public library, the four volumes of Agassiz's *Contributions to the Natural History of the United States*. I doubt if anybody but the charwoman, with her duster, had touched those volumes for twenty-five years. They are an excessively learned, a monumental, an epoch-making work, the fruit of vast and heroic labors, with colored plates on stone, showing the

turtles of the United States, and their embryology. The work was published more than half a century ago (by subscription); but it looked old beyond its years — massive, heavy, weathered, as if dug from the rocks. It was difficult to feel that Agassiz could have written it — could have built it, grown it, for the laminated pile had required for its growth, the patience and painstaking care of a process of nature, as if it were a kind of printed coral reef. Agassiz do this? The big, human, magnetic man at work upon these pages of capital letters, Roman figures, brackets, and parentheses in explanation of the pages of diagrams and plates! I turned away with a sigh from the weary learning, to read the preface.

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