

JOURNALISM AS A CAREER

BY CHARLES MOREAU HARGER

IN a recent discussion with a successful business man concerning an occupation for the business man's son, a college graduate, some one suggested: 'Set him up with a newspaper. He likes the work and is capable of success.'

'Nothing in it,' was the prompt reply. 'He can make more money with a clothing store, have less worry and annoyance, and possess the respect of more persons.'

This response typifies the opinion of many fathers regarding a newspaper career. It is especially common to the business man in the rural and semi-rural sections. The dry-goods merchant who has a stock worth twenty thousand dollars, and makes a profit of from three thousand dollars to five thousand dollars a year, realizes that the editor's possessions are meagre, and believes his income limited. He likewise hears complaints and criticisms of the paper. Comparing his own placid money-making course with what he assumes to be the stormy and unprofitable struggle of the publisher, he considers the printing business an inferior occupation.

For this view the old-time editor is largely responsible. For decades it was his pride to make constant reference to his poverty-stricken condition, to beg subscribers to bring cord-wood and potatoes on subscription, to glorify as a philanthropist the farmer who 'called to-day and dropped a dollar in the till.' The poor-editor joke is as well established as the mother-in-law joke or the lover-and-angry-father joke, and

about as unwarranted; yet it has built up a sentiment, false in fact and suggestion, often accepted as truth.

To the younger generation, journalism presents another aspect. The fascination of doing things, of being in the forefront of the world's activities, appeals to young men and young women of spirit. Few are they who do not consider themselves qualified to succeed should they choose this profession. To the layman it seems so easy and so pleasant to write the news and comment of the day, to occupy a seat on the stage at public meetings, to pass the fire-lines unquestioned.

Not until the first piece of copy is handed in does the beginner comprehend the magnitude of his task or the demand made upon him for technical skill. When he sees the editor slash, blue-pencil, and rearrange his story, he appreciates how much he has yet to learn. Of this he was ignorant in his high school and his college days, and he was confident of his ability. An expression of choice of a life-work by the freshman class of a college or university will give a large showing for journalism; in the senior year it will fall to a minor figure, not more than from three to seven per cent of the whole. By that period the students have learned some things concerning life, and have decided, either because of temperament, or as did the business man for his son, for some other profession.

To those who choose it deliberately as a life-work, obtaining a position presents as many difficulties as it does

in any other profession. The old-time plan by which the beginner began as 'devil,' sweeping out the office, cleaning the presses, and finally rising to be compositor and writer, is in these days of specialization out of date. The newspaper business has as distinct departments as a department store. While a full knowledge of every part of the workings of the office is unquestionably valuable, the eager aspirant finds time too limited to serve a long apprenticeship at the mechanical end in order to prepare himself for the writing-room.

Hence we find the newspaper worker seeking a new preparation. He strives for a broad knowledge, rather than mechanical training, and it is from such preparation that he enters the newspaper office with the best chances of success. Once the college man in the newspaper office was a joke. His sophomore style was the object of sneers and jeers from the men who had been trained in the school of actual practice at the desk. To-day few editors hold to the idea that there can be no special preparation worth while outside the office, just as you find few farmers sneering at the work of agricultural colleges. It is not uncommon to find the staff of a great newspaper composed largely of college men, and when a new man is sought for the writing force it is usually one with a college degree who obtains the place. It is recognized that the ability to think clearly, to write understandable English, and to know the big facts of the world and its doings, are essential, and that college training fits the young man of brains for this. Such faults as may have been acquired can be easily corrected.

Along with the tendency toward specialization in other directions, colleges and universities have established schools or departments of journalism in which they seek to assist those stud-

ents who desire to follow that career. It is not a just criticism of such efforts to say, as some editors have said, that it is impossible to give practical experience outside a newspaper office. Such an opinion implies that news and comment can be written only within sound of a printing-press; yet a vast deal of actual everyday work on the papers themselves is done by persons outside the office.

About twenty colleges and universities, chiefly in the Middle West and Northwest, have established such schools. They range in their curriculum from courses of lectures by newspaper men continued through a part of the four-years' course, to complete schools with a systematic course of study comprehending general culture, history, and science, with actual work on a daily paper published by the students themselves, and on which, under the guidance of an experienced newspaper man, they fill creditably every department and assist in the final make-up of the publication. They even gain a fair comprehension of the workings of linotypes, presses, and the details of composition, without attempting to attain such hand-skill as to make them eligible to positions in the mechanical department.

These students, in addition to possessing the broad culture that comes with a college degree, know how to write a 'story,' how to frame a headline, how to construct editorial comment, and they certainly enter the newspaper office lacking the crudeness manifested by those who have all the details of newspaper style to learn. This sort of schooling does not make newspaper men of the unfit, but to the fit it gives a preparation that saves them much time in attaining positions of value. That a course of this kind will become an integral part of many more colleges is probable. When the million-

dollar bequest which Joseph Pulitzer of the New York *World* has promised Columbia University becomes available, a newspaper school of much greater proportions will be established, and this will give an impetus to the already well-marked tendency.

In these schools some of the most capable students enroll. They are the young men and young women of literary tastes and keen ambitions. They are as able as the students who elect law, or science, or engineering. From months of daily work in a class-room fitted up like the city room of a great newspaper, with definite news-assignments and tasks that cover the whole field of writing for the press, they can scarcely fail to absorb some of the newspaper spirit, and graduate with a fairly definite idea of what is to be required of them.

Then there comes the question, where shall the start be made? Is it best to begin on the small paper and work toward metropolitan journalism? or to seek a reporter's place on the city daily and work for advancement?

Something is to be said for the latter course. The editor of one of the leading New York dailies remarked the other day, 'The man who begins in New York, and stays with it, rises if he be capable. Changes in the staffs are frequent, and in a half-dozen years he finds himself well up the ladder. It takes him about that long to gain a good place in a country town, and then if he goes to the city he must begin at the bottom with much time wasted.' This is, however, not the essential argument.

Who is the provincial newspaper man? Where is found the broadest development, the largest conception of journalism? To the beginner the vision is not clear. If he asks the busy reporter, the nervous special writer on a metropolitan journal, he gets this

reply: 'If I could only own a good country paper and be my own master!' Then, turning to the country editor, he is told: 'It is dull in the country town — if I could get a place on a city journal where things are happening!' Each can give reasons for his ambition, and each has from his experience and observation formed an *ex parte* opinion. Curiously, in view of the glamour that surrounds the city worker, and the presumption that he has attained the fullest possible equipment for the newspaper field, he is less likely to succeed with satisfaction to himself on a country paper than is the country editor who finds a place in the city.

The really provincial journalist, the worker whose scope and ideals are most limited, is often he who has spent years as a part of a great newspaper-making machine. Frequently, when transplanted to what he considers a narrower field, which is actually one of wider demands, he fails in complete efficiency. The province of the city paper is one of news-selection. Out of the vast skein of the day's happenings what shall it select? More 'copy' is thrown away than is used. The New York *Sun* is written as definitely for a given constituency as is a technical journal. Out of the day's news it gives prominence to that which fits into its scheme of treatment, and there is so much news that it can fill its columns with interesting material, yet leave untouched a myriad of events. The New York *Evening Post* appeals to another constituency, and is made accordingly. The *World* and *Journal* have a far different plan, and 'play up' stories that are mentioned briefly or ignored by some of their contemporaries. So the writer on the metropolitan paper is trained to sift news, to choose from his wealth of material that which the paper's traditions demand shall receive

attention; and so abundant is the supply that he can easily set a feast without exhausting the market's offering. Unconsciously he becomes an epicure, and knows no day will dawn without bringing him his opportunity.

What happens when a city newspaperman goes to the country? Though he may have all the graces of literary skill and know well the art of featuring his material, he comes to a new journalistic world. Thus did the manager of a flourishing evening daily in a city of fifty thousand put it: 'I went to a leading metropolitan daily to secure a city editor, and took a man recommended as its most capable reporter, one with years of experience in the city field. Brought to the new atmosphere, he was speedily aware of the changed conditions. In the run of the day's news rarely was there a murder, with horrible details as sidelights; no heiress eloped with a chauffeur; no fire destroyed tenements and lives; no family was broken up by scandal. He was at a loss to find material with which to make local pages attractive. He was compelled to give attention to a wide range of minor occurrences, most of which he had been taught to ignore. In the end he resigned. I found it more satisfactory to put in his place a young man who had worked on a small-town daily and was in sympathy with the things that come close to the whole community, who realized that all classes of readers must be interested in the paper, all kinds of happenings reported, and the paper be made each evening a picture of the total sum of the day's events, rather than of a few selected happenings. The news-supply is limited, and all must be used and arranged to interest readers — and we reach all classes of readers, not a selected constituency.'

The small-town paper must do this, and because its writers are forced so to

look upon their field they obtain a broader comprehension of the community life than do those who are restricted to special ideas and special conceptions of the paper's plans. The beginner who finds his first occupation on a country paper, by which is meant a paper in one of the smaller cities, is likely to obtain a better all-round knowledge of everything that must be done in a newspaper office than the man who goes directly to a position on a thoroughly organized metropolitan journal. He does not secure, however, such helpful training in style or such expert drill in newspaper methods. He is left to work out his own salvation, sometimes becoming an adept, but frequently dragging along in mediocrity. When he goes from the small paper to the larger one he has a chance to acquire efficiency rapidly. The editor of one of the country's greatest papers says that he prefers to take young men of such training, and finds that they have a broader vision than when educated in newspaper-making from the bottom in his own office.

It is easy to say, as did the merchant concerning his son, that there are few chances for financial success in journalism. Yet it is probable that for the man of distinction in journalism the rewards are not less than they are in other professions. The salaries on the metropolitan papers are liberal, and are becoming greater each year as the business of news-purveying becomes better systematized and more profitable. The newspaper man earns vastly more than the minister. The editor in the city gets as much out of life as do the attorneys. The country editor, with his plant worth five thousand dollars or ten thousand dollars, frequently earns for his labors as satisfactory an income as the banker, while the number of editors of country weeklies who have a profit of three thousand dol-

lars or more from their papers, is astonishing.

It is, of course, not always so, any more than it is true that the lawyer, preacher, or physician always possesses a liberal income. When the city editor makes sport of the ill-printed country paper, he forgets under what conditions the country editor at times works. A prosperous publisher with sympathy in his heart put it this way: —

'The other day we picked up a dinky weekly paper that comes to our desk every week. As usual we found something in it that made us somewhat tired, and we threw it down in disgust. For some reason we picked it up again and looked at it more closely. Our feelings, somehow or other, began to change. We noted the advertisements. They were few in number, and we knew that the wolf was standing outside the door of that little print-shop and howling. The ads were poorly gotten up, but we knew why. The poor fellow did n't have enough material in his shop to get up a good ad. It was poorly printed — almost unreadable in spots. We knew again what was the matter. He needed new rollers and some decent ink, but probably he did n't have the money to buy them. One of the few locals spoke about "the editor and family." So he had other mouths to feed. He was burning midnight oil in order to save hiring a printer. He could n't afford it. True, he is n't getting out a very good paper, but at that, he is giving a whole lot more than he is receiving. It is easy to poke fun at the dinky papers when the waves of prosperity are breaking in over your own doorstep. Likely, if we were in that fellow's place we could n't do as well as he does.'

The profession of the publicist naturally leads to politics, and the editor is directly in the path to political preferment. The growth of the primary

system adds greatly to the chance in this direction. One of the essentials of success at a primary is that the candidate have a wide acquaintance with the public, that his name shall have been before the voters sufficiently often for them to become familiar with it. The editor who has made his paper known acquires this acquaintance. He goes into the campaign with a positive asset. One western state, for instance, has newspaper men for one third of its state officers and forty per cent of its delegation in Congress. This is not exceptional. It is merely the result of the special conditions, both of fitness and prominence, in the editor's relation to the public.

This very facility for entering politics is perhaps an objection rather than a benefit. The editor who is a seeker after office finds himself hampered by his ambitions and he is robbed of much of the independence that goes to make his columns of worth. The ideal position is when the editor owns, clear of debt, a profit-making plant and is not a candidate for any office. Just so far as he departs from this condition does he find himself restricted in the free play of his activities. If debt hovers, there is temptation to seek business at the expense of editorial utterance; if he desires votes, he must temporize often in order to win friendships or to avoid enmities. Freedom from entangling alliances, absolutely an open way, should be the ambition of the successful newspaper worker. Fortunate is the subordinate who has an employer so situated, for in such an office can be done the best thinking and the clearest writing. Though he may succeed in other paths, financially, socially, and politically, he will lack in his career some of the finer enjoyments that can come only with unobstructed vision.

It is not agreed that everyday news-

paper work gives especial fitness for progress in literature. The habit of rapid writing, of getting a story to press to catch the first edition, has the effect for many of creating a style unfitted for more serious effort. Yet when temperament and taste are present, there is no position in which the aspirant for a place in the literary field has greater opportunity. To be in touch with the thought and the happenings of the world gives opportunity for interpretation of life to the broader public of the magazine and the published volume. Newspaper work does not make writers of books, but experience therein obtained does open the way; and the successes, both in fiction and economics, that have come in the past decade from the pens of newspaper workers is ample evidence of the truth of this statement.

It is one of the criticisms of the press that it corrupts beginners and not only gives them a false view of life, but compels them to do things abhorrent to those possessed of the finer feelings of good taste and courtesy. The fact is that journalism is, to a larger degree than almost all other businesses or professions, individualistic. It is to each worker what he makes it. The minister has his way well defined; he must keep in it or leave the profession. The teacher is restrained within limits; the lawyer and physician, if they would retain standing, must follow certain codes. The newspaper worker is a free lance compared with any of these.

The instances in which a reporter is asked to do things in opposition to the best standards of ethics and courtesy are rare, — and becoming rarer. The paper of to-day, though a business enterprise as well as a medium of publicity and comment, has a higher ideal than that of two decades ago. The rivalry is greater, the light of competition is stronger, the relation to the pub-

lic is closer. Little mystery surrounds the press. Seldom does the visitor stand open-eyed in wonder before the 'sanctum.' The average man and woman know how 'copy' is prepared, how type is set, how the presses operate. The newspaper office is an 'open shop' compared with the early printing-offices, of which the readers of papers stood somewhat in awe. Because of this there is less temptation and less opportunity for obscure methods. The profession offers to the young man and young woman an opportunity for intelligent and untainted occupation. Should there be a demand that seems unreasonable or in bad taste, plenty of places are open on papers that have a higher standard of morals and are conducted with a decent respect for the opinions and rights of the public.

Nor is it necessary that the worker indulge in any pyrotechnics in maintaining his self-respect. The editor of one of the leading papers of western New York quietly resigned his position because he could not with a clear conscience support the nominee favored by the owner of the paper. He did nothing more than many men have done in other positions. His action was not proof that his employer was dishonest, but that there were two points of view and he could not accept the one favored by the publisher. Such a course is always open, and so wide is the publishing world that there is no need for any one to suffer. Nor can a paper or an editor fence in the earth. With enough capital to buy a press, some paper, and to hire a staff, any one can have his say — and frequently the most unpromising field proves a bonanza for the man with courage and initiative.

In a long and varied experience as editor, I have rarely found an advertiser who was concerned regarding the editorial policy of the paper. The ad-

vertiser wants publicity, he is interested in circulation — when he obtains that he is satisfied. Instances there are where the advertiser has a personal interest in some local enterprise and naturally resents criticism of its management, but such situations can be dealt with directly and without loss of self-respect to the publisher. Not from the advertiser comes the most interference with the press. If there were as little from men with political schemes, men with pet projects to promote, men (and women) desiring to use the newspaper's columns to boost themselves into higher positions or to acquire some coveted honor, an independent and self-respecting editorial policy could be maintained without material hindrance. With the right sort of good sense and adherence to conviction on the part of the publisher it can be maintained under present conditions — and the problem becomes simpler every year. More papers that cannot be cajoled, bought, or bulldozed are published to-day than ever before in the world's history. The 'organ' is becoming extinct as the promotion of newspaper publicity becomes more a business and less a means of gratifying ambition.

Publishers have learned that fairness is the best policy, that it does not pay to betray the trust of the public, and journalism becomes a more attractive profession exactly in proportion as it offers a field where self-respect is at a premium and bosses are unconsidered. The new journalism demands men of high character and good habits. The old story of the special writer who, when asked what he needed to turn out a good story for the next day's paper, replied, 'a desk, some paper, and a quart of whiskey,' does not apply. One of the specifications of every re-

quest for writers is that the applicant shall not drink. Cleanliness of life, a well-groomed appearance, a pleasing personality, are essentials for the journalist of to-day. The pace is swift, and he must keep his physical and mental health in perfect condition.

That there is a new journalism, with principles and methods in harmony with new political and social conditions and new developments in news-transmission and the printing art, is evident. The modern newspaper is far more a business enterprise than was the one of three decades ago. To some observers this means the subordination of the writer to the power of the publisher. If this be so in some instances, the correction lies with the public. The abuse of control should bring its own punishment in loss of patronage or of influence, or of both. The newspaper, be it published in a country village or in the largest city, seeks first the confidence of its readers. Without this it cannot secure either business for its advertising pages, or influence for its ambitions. Publicity alone may once have sufficed, but rivalry is too keen to-day. Competition brings a realizing sense of fairness. Hence it is that there is a demand for well-equipped young men and clever young women who can instill into the pages of the press frankness, virility, and a touch of what newspaper men call 'human interest.'

The field is broad; it has place for writers of varied accomplishments; it promises a profession filled with interesting experiences and close contact with the world's pulse. It is not for the sloth nor for the sloven, not for the conscienceless nor for the unprepared. Without real qualifications for it, the ambitious young person would better seek some other life-work.

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