

NEWSPAPER WORK.

I. LIMITATIONS OF TRUTH-TELLING.

BY EDWARD F. ADAMS.

SOMETHING less than two years ago, at an age whose exact figure is of no public interest, but which may be described as a period at which it is useless to pretend to be young, while there is no desire to pretend to be old, I was pitchforked into an editorial position on one of what we are accustomed to call "our great modern journals." The idea of filling such a place had never occurred to me; but within a few seconds after the proposal was made it was mentally accepted, although for the looks of the thing I believe that I deferred an actual acceptance for several minutes—as long as I dared to risk the chance of the proposal being withdrawn. For the truth is, although I had never proposed to myself this exaltation,—having spent my previous life in the sordid pursuit of "business,"—I was secretly of the opinion that the only people in the world whose lives were passed in the enjoyment of unalloyed pleasure were the members of the editorial staff of a great modern journal. Having accepted the unlooked-for offer, within a week I entered upon my new duties.

The translation from the business turn of mind to the lofty and unselfish train of thought which, I assumed, must reign in the breast of an editor, was not easy. My first day was pay-day, and my first thought was, Where does the money come from? There were a lot of people on the paper to "draw down" weekly pay; and the thing that impressed me was the smooth and regular working of the financial machine, which regularly, in all weathers and at all times, ground out this multitude of weekly salaries. The delivery was as monotonous and me-

chanical as that of the great mint around the corner, and the hidden source of supply as mysterious. I saw an army of well-fed men take their turn at the windows; I knew of the daily expenditure for news, telegraph tolls, white paper, and miscellaneous supplies. I saw the long row of linotypes and the wonderful presses, and knew something of their cost; and I knew that the machine I was observing had ground out the money to pay for them and for the tall building which contained them. Then and there I resolved to go straight to the business manager for a detailed statement of cost and prices, for a magazine article. Upon reflection, I didn't go, but I still regard that sudden impulse to make copy as some evidence that until then I had missed my vocation. Having observed and reflected sufficiently upon the outward workings of the machine of which I had become a part, I went up in the elevator to my little den near the roof, to begin to think thoughts. I was greatly impressed with my responsibility, and resolved to lose no time in transmuting the mutton chops and rolls which had been my breakfast into glowing words which should help to make the printed pages of next morning's paper worthy of the nickels which must be gathered to pay my salary.

I should say that I was engaged to write only upon a special line of topics, of which the managing editor imagined me to know something, and to which certain space was devoted, which I was to fill at my discretion. Beyond this, if I did anything, it was as a volunteer. I had no hours to keep except those of pay-day. All that was required was that my "stuff" should be on the galleys when wanted. Newspaper men will recognize this as a "soft snap" in journalism, offset, however, by a corresponding modesty in compensation. I should hate to have to live on what I can earn by this kind of journalism. Few lines of work covered by daily journals can be adequately discussed without impinging on the domain of economics and politics. Mine was no exception. In entering upon my duties I had received but one instruction: "Find out the truth and tell it." This was delightful, for I took it seriously, and fully in accord with my lofty con-

ception of editorial duties, and of the pure and serene ether of Truth in which I conceived editors to live and move and have their being. Inspired by this noble emotion, I took my pen and wrote an editorial. Resting from my labors, I remembered the suggestion of the managing editor that I keep a close watch of the editorial columns, in order, as he said, "to avoid any inconsistency of expression." Surely this was sensible. Although all truth is consistent with all other truth, yet of a number of us in equally eager search for the article some one might miss a little, or inadvertently so express himself as to appear to have missed it, and thus open our armor to the javelins of the jeering and unprincipled sheet on the opposite corner. So I took up the file and turned over the pages, and upon the editorial page of the second number back I found an exceedingly vigorous article taking a view of my subject diametrically opposite to the conclusion I had reached, and intimating grave doubts as to the moral sanity of all who pretended to disagree with it. An allusion recalled to me that it was merely upholding the soundness of a minor plank in the last platform of the great Democratic party, of which I am an unworthy member, and for whose nominees, God willing, I expected to vote. Here was a pretty mess! Although an ardent seeker after truth, I am not a roaring idiot, and I promptly recognized that the particular dish of truth which I had just prepared would be sadly inopportune just then in the editorial columns of the *Advocate and Harbinger*. I also got my first lesson in the matter of the limits within which truth may be told in a public journal. As a private citizen, I may and do denounce any portion of the platform of a political party, which on the whole I deem it best to support, but for a great daily paper to do so is to commit hara-kiri. The platforms of political parties are necessarily filled with compromises on minor points, in order to hold together enough of those who agree in the more important matters to carry an election. Such agreements, when made, must be kept, and a journal which professes to support a party must do so unreservedly, even if

in some points it does not reflect the opinions of a single person connected with it. Political journals may be undesirable, but while they exist they must fulfil their missions; and in the long run the consensus of a great political party is perhaps as reliable as the individual judgment of a newspaper proprietor, unless the latter is a very able and honest man. At any rate I was connected with a political journal, and therein found my first limitation to the telling of truth. My first editorial went into the waste basket.

A day or two later I had occasion to deal with another subject which I certainly understood, and as to which there would be no disagreement among disinterested persons who are familiar with it. Unfortunately, however, the truth in this case, as often happens, was not in accord with the current popular prejudice. Here, thought I, was my long-sought opportunity to set the world right, and in a glow of enthusiasm I wrote an editorial, which was a trumpet blast of no uncertain sound. There was no politics in this, and I was sure I had found my field. This was surely what I had been born for. What the managing editor wanted was the man who knew and had the courage to say,—and I was he. Tomorrow the *Advocate and Harbinger* should show the world how to champion fearlessly an unpopular cause. And I went home happy. On the way I met a friend, an editor whom I had known for a long time, and took occasion to compliment him on the stand he had been taking on a certain matter of popular interest. His was not a political paper; he was himself a proprietor, and could say what he pleased. He laughed quietly at my compliments, but said he feared he did not deserve them, as he was going to quit. Every one of the editorials which I had liked had brought him a dozen "stops" and no new subscriptions that he could trace to them. His partners were "kicking," and he himself was tired of it. If he were rich, he said, he might undertake to reform the world, but for a man of moderate means to attempt it meant disaster to himself, with little accomplishment. The fact was that

no newspaper could live long and prosper, which habitually went contrary to the prejudices of its subscribers.

This set me thinking. If I knew the proprietor of the *Advocate and Harbinger*, and I thought I did, he was a man who would be very glad indeed to see right triumphant and virtue prosperous everywhere, but yet by no means glad enough to see it done at the expense of the popularity of the *Advocate and Harbinger*. On the contrary, I was very sure that he would interpret his implied contract with his subscribers to mean that he should give them the stuff they liked to read, and that he would feel no call to engage in any kind of a crusade for reforms in which he had no personal interest, and which would merely invoke a languid approval from a certain number of his readers, and active hostility on the part of others. It therefore at once occurred to me that I had discovered another limitation to the truth which I could be permitted to tell in a newspaper, and this was that it must be only that kind of truth which the general public desires to read. I therefore went back to my den and put another editorial in the waste basket. And in this I was not only wise, but right. I was wise, because the proofs of the work of a new hand would quite certainly be carefully looked to by the managing editor, and in this case killed; and I was right, because even if it had escaped him and got in, nobody has a right to go out reforming at other people's expense without their consent. Having agreed to take this man's money, it was my duty to give him such service as he desired, and if I did not like it, to quit. And this was none the less true because if I did not give the desired service, I should have to quit. It was my duty to help from the start, not to hinder.

Neither do I see how it is possible for the proprietor of any paper to do otherwise than cater to the wishes of his readers, except upon the theory that his journal is to be run for the benefit of mankind regardless of personal consequences. The fact is, that truth cannot be told constantly without raising up enemies, while the disinterested majority of mankind give

no corresponding support. There seems to be practically no way to make sure of the regular collection of the funds necessary to pay-day, except by the avoidance of attacks upon vested interests. Once or twice in a generation a strong man may appear, whose personality may attract support for a really independent journal, but these instances are too few to be considered. There are great profits in frauds and shams, and they who live by them have profits to divide, which more honorable men have not. Without the aid of advertisers who wish to sell property for more than it is worth, I do not know that pay-day would always be pay-day.

Everybody knows that adulteration and poor workmanship infest all branches of trade. This general statement any journal may safely venture, but when it begins to assist the public by pointing out particular shams, it does so at great peril; and there is really a monetary interest at the bottom of all subjects of general discussion. The public does not sustain the truth-teller or the more decent journals.

I know a city in which, at one time, the daily papers seemed to vie with each other as to which could come the nearest to the line of indecency which would exclude them from the mails. The women of the city rose up in protest, and mass meetings were held to denounce the offences of the press. At the height of the excitement a change of ownership took place in one of these journals, and the new proprietor, possibly as a matter of business, took sides with the women, denounced his contemporaries, and engaged to and did run a perfectly clean paper. After a few months of trial, and an active canvass on that basis, the proprietor told me that he had not won over a single subscriber whose subscription could be traced to the cause, while his saloon and barber-shop patronage fell off to nothing, and his sales to mill hands were seriously impaired. He said he presumed he did get some, but he never knew them. At considerable expense he had lists made of the men and women prominent in the "clean paper" agitation, including a long list—many thousands—of those who had registered themselves in the move-

ment, compared his own carrier's books, and made a deliberate set to get the subscriptions of these people who were taking the papers they denounced. He got substantially none of them; only the ordinary changes took place which are constantly going on. And yet his paper was as good as the others, and clean. He was utterly disgusted. He said these reformers were humbugs. Every one of them really wanted the nasty stuff which they were getting. He seemed to be right, for in a few weeks more the whole thing dropped.

The fact is that every community makes its own press. What the papers give people is really what they want. In public meetings they may say they do not want it; but their subscriptions say they do. The long list of clergymen and society leaders who were taking the papers they denounced, and refused to change to one equally good in all things except sensationalism, convinced me that newspaper men know their business. I doubt if there are three papers in America whose course on any non-political subject in which the proprietor has no pecuniary interest cannot be changed by a hundred "stops" for an identical stated course. That the daily press is what we find it, is due to the fact that "stops" do not come.

And this being the case, I do not see how a daily journal can be conducted as an impartial investigator and champion of the truth as it is discovered. The necessities of pay-day will prevent it. The public has come to demand from the daily press what it costs large daily expenditure to provide. That expenditure can only be met by maintaining a circulation which shall be a basis of profitable advertising rates. If the general public does not find what it wants in the journal, the circulation cannot be maintained; if the income falls off, expenses must be reduced; then the paper becomes dull, for the brightest men will go where the largest salaries can be paid. Then those who would be its staunchest supporters leave it in flocks, and there inevitably follows a change of character, if not a change of ownership. It is the inexorable pay-day which so impressed me at my first entrance into journalism which controls the character of the press. I am con-

vinced that the ideal newspaper can no more be made a source of personal profit than the ideal university.

The ideal newspaper, if we ever have it, will be endowed. I suppose some benevolent billionaire will some time do it. I believe it would be as useful an application of money as may be found. The obvious difficulty is to arrange for a suitable directory whose single duty would be the choice of the editor-in-chief and the business manager. There would be no "policy" to dictate, since the one instruction would be that which I received, "to find the truth and tell it;" but in this case it would not be given in the Pickwickian sense. Such a board would necessarily be, in the majority, ex-officio, probably presidents of colleges, and librarians of great libraries, and, with these in the majority, might safely be made self-perpetuating as to the minority. The salaries of the editor-in-chief and the business manager should be such as to make them the great prizes of journalism. Within their spheres they should have absolute power. The profits with the income of the endowment should go to some designated public purpose. If there should be a deficit, the income of the endowment would make it up. If I were a benevolent billionaire, I now think I would do this. Whether it were pecuniarily profitable or not, it would modify the character of all daily journalism.

It will be seen that I no longer have illusions as to the limitations of truth-telling in journalism. So far as the salaried editor is concerned, he has not, by virtue of his position, the power to tell any truth or express any opinion. Incidentally he may do, and much of the time he does, both. But what he knows or what he thinks does not necessarily determine what he writes. What he writes is determined by the managing editor, who expresses the wish of the proprietor. Whoever does not wish to write on these terms should not enter journalism. Of course managing editors have common sense, and are personally good fellows and gentlemen, and do not habitually and wantonly set the gentlemen in the editorial rooms to writing what they abhor. They usually have at command those who can express the desired views

con amore, but when the exigencies of the service require it, the salaried editor must write what is ordered, or quit. And he seldom quits.

If I was impressed on the first day with the effectiveness of the financial end of the newspaper machine, I was equally impressed, as I gradually became acquainted with it, with the relentless grinding of its interior works. Picking up at random yesterday's sixteen-page paper, I find it to contain, exclusive of advertising, about 130,000 words, less cuts and head-lines. The Sunday paper will contain more than twice as many. Comparing this with Butcher and Lang's translation of the *Odyssey*, which lies upon my table, I find that the latter contains only about 200,000 words. Every day the staff of this journal writes a book two-thirds as large as the *Odyssey*, and every Sunday one a good deal larger, and nearly all about what happened the day before. Our journal is run to make money, and there is no surplus of attachés. Every man has his duty and must do it every day. When he goes to his desk he does not know what he is to write about, but he does know that about so much copy will be demanded, clear and interesting, and not a surplus word. The writer has no choice of subjects or of time. We go to press at three o'clock, and the ideas which have not yet occurred to him must be in the forms at that time. If he knows little or nothing of the subject, so much the worse for him. He must scabble the harder, and find out. That he does not "feel in the mood" does not count. "Moods" themselves do not count. Creative work is not expected or desired, but plain common-sense discussion of current affairs, with no errors of fact. This he can do, and this he must do, sick or well. Under the stress of these circumstances, the romance of editorship promptly disappears, or rather is found not to exist. It is hard, grinding, inexorable work. Of such work as I have done in this world, sawing cord-wood comes the nearest to it. The difference in the thickness, toughness, and shape of the different sticks gives the same kind of relief from monotony that attends the writing of editorials. Only, in sawing wood

there is a pleasure in the increasing pile of finished work behind you, and the diminishing pile of work before you. And next week you may not be sawing wood. But in editorship, what you have done is whisked out of sight and forgotten of all men. What is before you, you cannot see. But you know you will be at it next week, and that it will never end. There is doubtless a pleasure in creative work. There is a certain agreeableness even in such writing as I am now doing, simply because I wish to, and which may or may not even be printed. But the only pleasure I can conceive of in writing editorials for daily journals is the knowledge that pay-day is weekly and certain.

It will be remembered that I am writing as one in the business but not of it. I suppose no one of strong will and beginning late in life can become a real newspaper man. I only write what I seem to see. There is, after all, a pleasure in all work well done, and very likely my comrades, if I may so call them, like their jobs. For myself, I am mildly tolerated about the editorial rooms as one who is there and to be made the best of. I am permitted freely to express my opinion on current topics, but I think the office boy who brings in visitors' cards to us would have quite as much weight in council. He may at least some time become a newspaper man, while I never can. And it is only newspaper men who can take the right view of things. We recognize each other as good fellows, and would be mutually helpful should occasion require; but I am made to feel that between me and them there is a great gulf fixed. It is when I stray into the news rooms that I am at my worst. There I have absolutely no standing at all. I am simply sat upon. A "pointer" given by one of our sharp elevator boys would be jumped at and followed up, but my opinion of what is "news" could not get even passing attention. The newspaper world has a cult of its own, into which the profane may not lightly pass. But mostly they are wholesome fellows, and I like them. And I also enjoy such work as I do in journalism, while I am per-

mitted to do it, recognizing that I am any day liable to be pitchforked out as I was pitchforked in.

SAN FRANCISCO.

II. REPORTERS AND OVERSUPPLY.

BY JOHN LIVINGSTON WRIGHT.

Twenty men were recently discharged in one day from the editorial staff of a New York morning daily. In another late incident, after the visit home of the proprietor, the entire staff of one of the sheets that he owned was thrown out. In Boston a certain daily let out seven as the result of an afternoon's moves. In Chicago an editor and a half-dozen subordinates together took their departure on a recent morning (by request). A decade ago these happenings would have created much comment along the "Newspaper Rows" of the cities mentioned. To-day, when a modern daily may average a discharge of from five to nine reporters or copy-readers a week, or the incoming of a new business manager means an overhauling even in the editorial department, such happenings meet with but little notice among newspaper workers. Why? Fundamentally because of the overwhelming supply of reporters. An editor in any of the metropolitan centres of to-day would have no more hesitation, if he chanced to feel in the mood, in ordering out seven or eight men than in hurriedly clearing waste "copy" from his desk. For he knows that, early next morning, perhaps twenty men, not freshlings, but capable writers and copy-handlers, would be in his office beseeching him for the positions vacated, and in a half-hour he could have new-comers doing efficiently the work performed by those ejected the day before. This is not exaggeration, but the present truth, as any metropolitan newspaper man, be he with position or without, well knows.

The whole situation, discomfiting as it is, is due to this fact, that the larger cities throughout the United States are over-