

THE NEWSPAPER AND ITS CRITICS.

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"THERE is in almost every city a daily newspaper of which [the] . . . business manager has no enterprise that rises above the level of blackmail. Its editor is alert for stories of crime, and sleepless in quest of scandal. The hanging of a criminal could call forth a special edition, while a Pentecost would be noted in a paragraph. The news of this paper is unclean, and its views purchasable. It keys its news to the tone of the vulgarian, who delights to read of lust and murder, and its views are determined by bargains made and cheques received in little rooms at the rear of the saloons. . . . The tendency of the time is downward."

This picture of daily journalism is painted by a writer in a recent issue of a Canadian literary periodical. Is it true to life? If it is, we have in our midst a monstrous being, a dragon of the prime, to be curbed, crushed, destroyed. If it is not, then a grave injustice has been done in placing before the reading public a distorted, almost unrecognizable, image of the daily press. I have no hesitation in saying that such injustice has been done, and that the picture is little better than a caricature. The artist, seeking strength, has lost all sense of proportion.

It must be freely acknowledged, however, that there is much to deplore in the character of the daily press of Canada and the United States, and that fair and discriminating criticism should be powerful as a corrective of many undesirable tendencies. The opinion of the disinterested observer is not to be despised, inasmuch as the question is one of literary intelligence and ethics. The newspaper writer is generally too close to his work to pass just judgment upon it. The man at a distance, viewing the canvas as a whole, its details lost, its lights and shadows intensified, its perspectives developed, is perhaps better qualified to speak as to the merits and shortcomings of the work. Newspaper men, therefore, while justified in resenting calumny posing as criticism, should give thoughtful heed to all comment on their work that bears the earmarks of knowledge, sympathy and discrimination.

That the people should manifest concern respecting the press is eminently fitting, for it is they who make it, and who suffer by its deficiencies, and they who benefit by the elevation of its character. They should not lose sight, however, of the peculiar conditions under which it is working, fair consideration of which must modify the severity of criticism. To illustrate. Canada is fortunate in possessing a population of high average morality and intelligence, and the papers serving such a constituency may not unreasonably be expected to measure up to a certain standard; but in regard to the press of the larger cities of the United States, where the extremes of morality and of depravity, of culture and of ignorance, jostle each other on the street, such expectation would manifestly be unreasonable. In obedience to a well-known natural law, each class finds representation in the press, and generalization in criticism becomes impossible. The distinction between classes of papers in basic, and not until the demand for the vicious and the sensational in periodical literature diminishes by reason of the elevation of the "submerged tenth" need the public look for the disappearance of a class of papers, which unthinking critics too often take as a type of the daily press.

The duties of the press are so multifarious, so all-embracing,

that criticism should, in justice, stay its pen until they have been considered. The press has become one of the moving forces of civilization. Its history during the nineteenth century is that of a creation rather than of an evolution. Steam, electricity, fast-running presses, and cheap paper, have united to produce an engine so powerful, so potential, that the compass of its influence, the pale of its possibilities, cannot be defined. It is intimately associated with every social, industrial, political, educational, and religious movement. It touches the life of the world at every point of possible contact. Like a river in flood time it has risen from point to point, to-day compassing heights that yesterday were thought to be far beyond its reach. The limits of its duties can never be sharply defined, for they change with the changing years. Looking backward over the two centuries since the press began to be a potent factor in the life of Anglo-Saxon communities, a steady development of function is to be noted, accommodating itself to the demands of the hour, even as the British constitution contemporaneously broadened and strengthened under stress of circumstance. Restriction gave way to freedom; the pamphleteer became a leader writer; news-giving developed into the chief purpose of the paper; the press became the handmaiden of Liberty; by its aid governments were changed, wars made, and peace restored. Relatively to its opportunities, the press of modern days may not, owing to its own deficiencies and the growing intelligence of the people, wield the influence that once it did, but the future holds no barriers within which it may be pent if it be but true to itself. But with such a history of exotic growth, with such a dowry of influence, is it any wonder if it has failed in part to fulfil the duties of its high calling? Vast temptations have followed in the train of vast powers and possibilities. The political adventurer, the commercial gamester, the capitalistic schemer, the slanderer, the blackmailer—all these have found in the press an instrument for the promotion of their selfish ends. Compared with its temptations, have not its failures and weaknesses been strangely few?

The right to criticise rests on the relation of the critic to the criticized. The closer the relationship the stronger the right. The interdependence of the community and the press endows the former with the right touching the press, but it also implies a duty, which may be defined as the duty of encouragement. From a weakling press only the work of weaklings may be expected. A community has no reason to expect strong, strenuous, and unselfish effort on its behalf from a press which it supports but grudgingly. The trend of circumstance in placing on the shoulders of the advertising public the responsibility for the maintenance of the newspapers is not free from objection. In the last analysis, no doubt, the purchasing community provides the means, but the immediate effect is a weakening of the ties that bind the reader and the paper, a loss on the part of the subscriber of the sense of proprietorship, and with it the consequent right to insist on a high quality of service. There must also be, in the publisher's eyes, a lessening in the importance of the reader. It has already come to this in the case of some papers, and every new subscriber implies an actual loss of money. Naturally, where the publisher's treasure is there will his heart be also, for the newspaper is at bottom a business enterprise, wholly dependent on the money received in return for its services as a news-gatherer and a publicity-giver. So from the public the press has a right to expect encouragement, and not alone of a sub-