

PROOF-READING AND PUNCTUATION

THE following paper was read by Mr. H. C. Bell, of the *Mail* at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Press Association:—

The subject which you have honored me by requesting a paper upon is one that has been so often and so ably treated of by far more competent men than myself that I can scarcely hope to say anything new about it. The American Cyclopædia gives the following definition of the duties of a proof-reader:—

"Very rare qualifications are requisite to be an excellent corrector of the press, or proof-reader. Besides a familiar knowledge of the language in which the work is written, and of the technicalities of the typographical art, which is essential, and extensive and accurate information on general subjects, which is constantly useful, there is especially demanded an extreme precision in the habits of the eye. Hence the term 'typographical eye,' which implies the power of at once perceiving all the letters of which each word is composed, grasping the sense of each sentence, and following the succession of ideas through a paragraph or chapter."

This is a very good definition in concise form, though more applicable to book-work than morning newspaper work, the latter being the branch of work to which my remarks will apply. As some whom I am addressing may not be familiar with the routine of a large newspaper office I may briefly describe it. The proofs are pulled in galley form on a galley press, and sent to the head proof-reader, who divides them among his assistants, having regard, where possible, to their special knowledge of the subject-matter, it being obvious that one man may be better posted on some subjects than on others. The copy for each proof accompanies the proof-sheet. The copy is taken by the copy-holder and arranged in proper sequence, and the proof-reader reads from the proof, making the necessary typographical corrections as he proceeds, the copy-holder looking over the copy and checking him where deviations occur. When finished the proof is sent to the compositor for correction, being then again pulled and returned to the proof-reader to be revised—that is, to see that all the marks have been correctly made. In case of a very "dirty" proof—one unusually thick with corrections—a second revise is sometimes necessary; but on morning newspaper work this is the exception rather than the rule, compositors being generally careful, and time being too valuable to waste on any work that can be avoided.

The qualifications necessary to a good newspaper proof-reader are almost innumerable. He must be well educated, well read in the classics as well as the current literature of the day, be a thorough

grammarian, and—a *sine qua non* in my opinion—a practical printer. He should have some knowledge of the leading foreign languages, know something of Latin, and be well acquainted with the numerous French and Latin quotations so frequently used, conversant with the prominent public affairs of every part of the civilized world, familiar with all the "ologies" and "isms," and able to correct any error in technical terms relating to any trade or profession. And, having this knowledge, it must be always at the tips of his fingers, so to speak, available for immediate use, for on a newspaper, especially as the time for going to press draws near, there is scarcely time to think, still less to make reference to dictionaries or other books of reference.

The responsibility of the proof-reader is practically limitless. The editor, the reporter, the advertiser—all these may make mistakes, which are considered pardonable or excusable on the ground of hurry in writing; but the proof-reader—never. And this leads to the consideration of the difficulties he has to contend with, and their name is legion. A few of them are imperfect proofs, illegible handwriting, inaccurate editing and reporting, wrong spelling of names and localities, and bad grammar. As before remarked, all these things are pardonable in everybody but the proof-reader, but he, poor devil—if he passes anything it is simply gross carelessness, and he gets slated accordingly, for an error once printed has a most unearthly knack of coming to the front and catching everybody's eye.

Regarding punctuation, one of the most important points in correctly conveying an author's meaning, it is utterly impossible to lay down any hard-and-fast rule. Each article, each sentence even—has to be judged by itself. Broadly speaking, however, there are two well-defined systems, wide and close punctuation, the former making use of commas as little as possible; the latter using them whenever possible, and as a consequence entailing frequent use of the semicolon. My preference is for the wide system—that is, using as few commas as the matter permits, and making short sentences. The close system has a tendency, to say the least, to make an article read in a stilted and pedantic manner, though this of course is purely a matter of opinion. The colon is a mark that can be used to great advantage in implying "namely," or "as follows;" in adopting the wide system of punctuation it will rarely be found necessary to use it otherwise. The em dash largely supersedes the parenthesis, and is useful for enclosing explanatory parts of a sentence or for indicating a sudden change of subject; but it is not necessary to use a comma as well. As before said, however, no rule can be laid down; experience and an appreciation of the author's subject—putting yourself in his