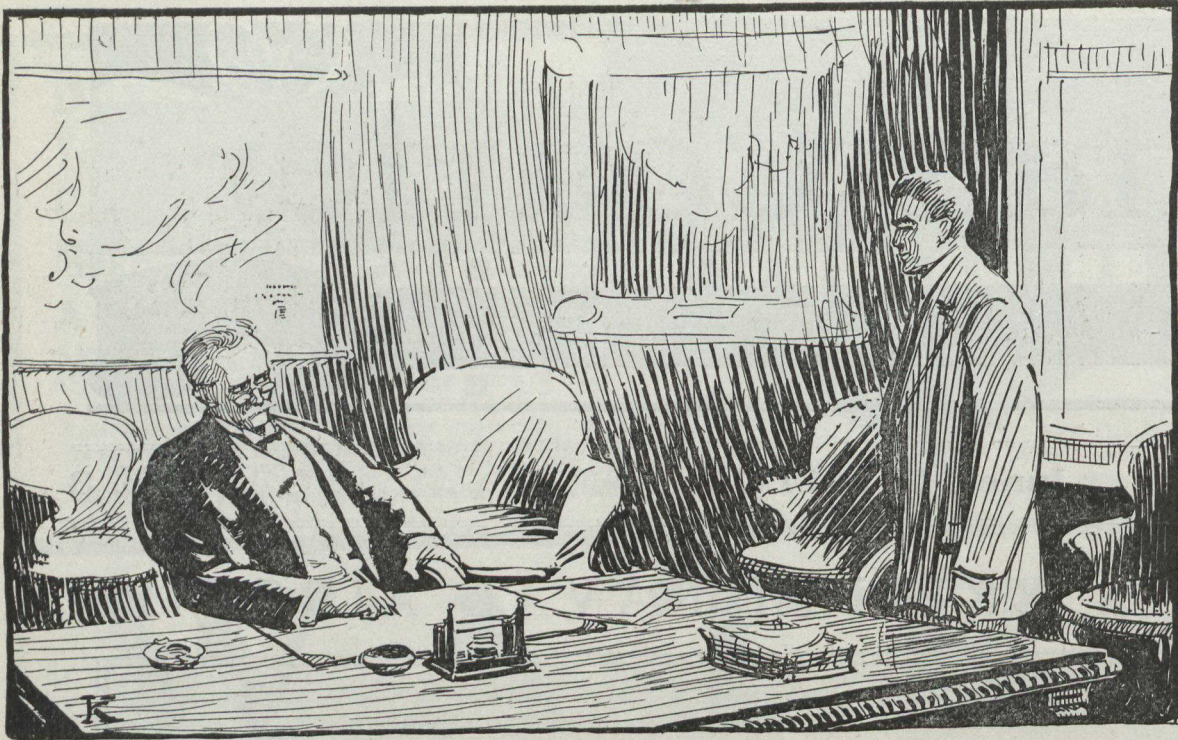




Interviewing the man who is "too busy" to talk; and doesn't want to anyway.

THE NEWSPAPER REPORTER

The Work on His Beat and How He Goes About It

By W. A. CLARKE

"I DON'T see how you reporters manage to be always on hand when something's happening," is a remark that has been made to probably nearly every reporter who has been in newspaper work for more than a short time. The answer is that reporters are by no means "always on hand when something's happening." By keeping track of all announcements of important meetings and other events a city editor can have his reporters "on the job" in a good percentage of instances when news is available, but much of the news is obtained at second-hand. The reporter who covers "police, fires and hospitals" gets to many things in his line if he knows about them in time and if they are of considerable importance, but he obtains news of the minor accidents, small fires and unimportant police doings by calling upon or telephoning to doctors and hospital attendants, fire department officials and police officials. So it is, though usually to a lesser degree, in the other assignments. The bigger events are covered direct if time and opportunity can be made, but news of events of lesser importance is obtained by interviewing somebody who was present at them.

The reporter who has a good "nose for news" and who has worked out a good system of reporting, will get to a larger number of important events and will get to many of them earlier than the poor reporter. The city editor and other members of the staff sometimes give a reporter tips that will enable him to be on the job early for many things that he has to report, but to a great extent the reporter has to "work up a good connection" with people who are in a position to know when things will happen and who can give a good account of events with which they are connected. Also, in order to be successful, a reporter must be a good anticipator. He must be able to put two and two together and to know the answer quickly. "Coming events cast their shadows before," concerning many things that a reporter must cover, and so he must be a good student of shadows. A chance remark or a combination of circumstances that may hold no significance for the average outsider or for other reporters, will often set the good reporter thinking and result in his getting an exclusive story or at least in his being better and earlier prepared to handle it than if he couldn't interpret the signs that point to the probability of "something doing."

"History repeats itself" in news, and so many a reporter gets many a news item simply by remembering that a certain thing happened a year ago.

Again, a fair proportion of the news is of the "follow up" variety. There are few events or happenings yielding big stories to-day that will not yield more news—though often of lesser importance—tomorrow.

By acting in accordance with the foregoing and other circumstances, a reporter gets an early "line" on much news, gets more and better stories than

many of his competitors, and gets the proud reputation of being "a good digger."

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GENERALLY speaking, the work of a reporter on his beat consists in reporting meetings and other events and in interviewing. Reporting meetings is considered not particularly difficult, but there are nerve-racking exceptions, as, for example, when there's "a fight" at the meetings. At many meetings a reporter hasn't time to take notes and write his account later. In such circumstances he must write "running copy," which means that he must write his account as the meeting progresses and only take notes of names, figures and other things that would slip his memory almost instantly. At very important meetings, trials, investigations and so forth, each newspaper may be represented by several reporters, who take turns in reporting. Even then it is customary to write "running copy," the changing of reporters being necessary to allow each to go quickly over the part that he has reported to see that it reads correctly. Sometimes reporters who know shorthand, or professional shorthand men, employed for the occasion, are assigned to important meetings, but many city editors prefer for general work men who don't know shorthand, the reason being that the men who know shorthand naturally depend much on their notes and so are not likely to be able to work quickly and accurately when there's no time to take notes.

Reporting police court is a ticklish job for a man at all nervous, because libel suits have a habit of lurking in police court reports. Much of the report must be written while the court is actually in session, and if the court proceedings are long and important the reporter must practically keep "up-to-date"—that is, he must write the news as fast as it is happening. To write quickly an interesting, accurate account and at the same time hear and even see what is happening as the court proceedings at time get considerably ahead of him is no light task.

In reporting courts—especially police courts—a reporter is often asked to keep out somebody's name. After one or two such experiences he takes the wise course, which is to write the proceedings without heeding any such request further than to tell the pleader to see the city editor.

Practically every reporter is at some time or other requested to get out of a meeting. If he has the right to be present he does well to quietly and courteously but firmly insist on remaining. If he has no right there and can't persuade the meeting to let him stay, he gets out and afterwards interviews people who can, and perhaps will, tell

him what happened. As in so many other cases concerning reporting, he must not be easily put off—or put out—but must do his utmost to get the good report that is expected of him.

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INTERVIEWING runs all the way from very easy to very difficult. Some people are so eager to talk that the problem is how to keep them to the point and get away from them in time to write the interview. Others positively have "nothing to say," and the reporter must not take "No!" for an answer till he feels sure that no other reporter could get the interview.

It is in interviewing that much of a reporter's skill is brought to bear. A contractor naturally doesn't want to talk if on a job of his there has been an accident injuring a man or more, but in some cases he will talk if he is reminded that he would want to find in the paper full details of an accident happening on some other contractor's job. Other people will yield to such an appeal as "We want to get a correct account of this, and you are the person that can give it." The reporter must try to overcome a great variety of obstacles and objections. In a legitimate sense he must be "a good jollier," and he must be a good actor. In many cases he must get people to forget for the time that he is a reporter, and one great help to that is to not whip out a pad or book to take notes.

The good reporter studies how and where various types of men can be best approached, and, having gained an audience, he must quickly size up how to hold his man and get him to talk. Some people "fall" for flattery, but others want to be talked to in a straightforward, businesslike way.

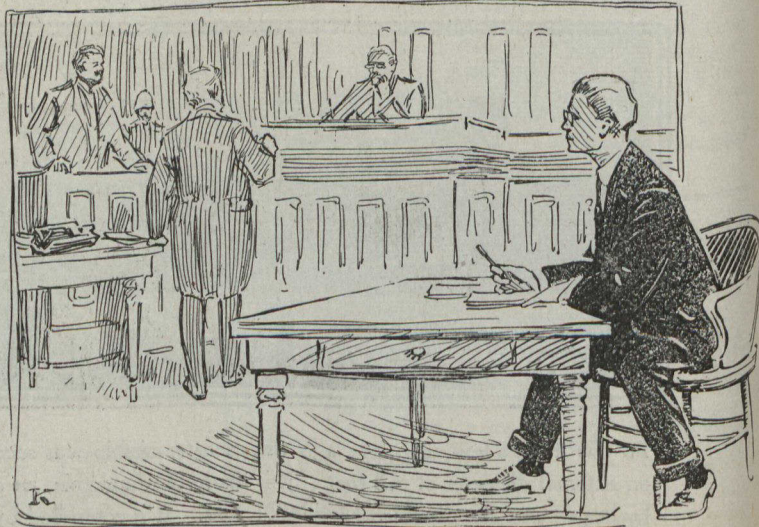
Interviewing the big busy man usually means that a reporter must "think of his feet," make a mental note, as the interview proceeds, of what he can use, keep the interviewed one to the point, and interview him so rapidly and earnestly that the talk will not be chopped off by a polite intimation that the interview is over. If a reporter tries to interview a man of importance he is usually sure of a story, for even the refusal to talk is a news item—sometimes a big one.

Handling big fires, riots, bank runs, police raids, bad accidents and other big things means working quickly. Each reporter is out to get a story better than that of his competitors, and he knows that usually there is no time and no opportunity to go over the ground twice in reporting such happenings. Here, as always, he is out for the news, the whole news and nothing but the news. Always he is aiming to get and write a "human interest story," that will gain and hold the reader's attention. And every day he tries to scoop his competitors and not be scooped himself. That is, he tries to get an exclusive story, or, in newspaper language, "put one over" on the other paper's reporters on his beat and to not have any of the others "put one over" on him.

Generally speaking, a good day's work means good results, but the peculiar thing about reporting is that a man may work extremely hard and intelligently only to find, when the other papers are "on the street," that he has been scooped so badly that it looks as if he had been home in bed asleep; also on some days, when he is "loafing on the job," the fact that he is in the wrong place at the right time may mean the getting of an exclusive story.

Not to be scooped is contentment; to scoop the other fellows is joy—joy in which the only touch of sadness is the knowledge that the scooped ones are feeling pretty miserable and probably "getting their calls" from disgusted city editors.

The next article will deal with a number of interesting special features of a reporter's work.



How it feels to report police court and other courts.