

THE ETHICS OF JOURNALISM.

THE EDITOR OF THE TORONTO WEEK GIVES HIS VIEWS ON AN IMPORTANT QUESTION.



THE question whether the Fourth Estate is not really the most powerful of the four in these democratic days, is one which may well be left to the debating societies, but the great and still growing influence of the press, especially the periodical, and above all the daily press, is a truth so patent to everyone's observa-

tion that the mere statement of the fact seems a stale truism. There was force and suggestiveness in the sarcasm of the man who, when the mighty London Times was under discussion in its mightiest days, said to his admiring friends that having seen several of the leader-writers of the Thunderer, he could assure them that not one of them was more than ten feet high. Yet so far as he meant to convey the impression that the influence of their leaders upon the world of thought and action bore the same proportion to that of other men as their physical stature to that of others, he was conveying a wrong impression. Everyone knows that this is not the case, that a writer of moderate abilities, given access to the editorial columns of any of the great dailies in either hemisphere, at once gains a hearing, and an influence upon the popular mind and will out of all proportion to that which can be wielded by many a writer and thinker of greater ability who is obliged to come before the public in his own name, or over a fictitious signature.

It is not any part of our purpose just now to inquire into the cause or causes of this phenomenon. It may be, and, as a rule, probably is, largely due to the fact that there is usually at the head of such a paper one or more minds of unusual force and penetration, and of large acquaintance with public affairs, and that the staff writer, when not himself a man of this description, generally does but put into good newspaper English, or whatever the language may chance to be, the thoughts and opinions of this leading mind. We say "newspaper English" advisedly, because it must be admitted that the style of the great newspaper is *sui generis*, and is not to be acquired in a day or a year by any but those who have a special natural aptitude of a very marked kind. To a certain extent, too, it must be admitted that the great party newspaper derives much of its weight from the fact that it has, or is supposed to have, access to sources of information and inspiration which are denied to others. It is, however, one of the signs of the times, and a most healthful one, we believe, that the inspired party organ, which plays for the public delectation only the tunes which are set for it in high places, is fast falling into disuse. The tendency towards independent journalism has been especially marked in Canada within the last few years, and it goes without saying that a corresponding improvement is taking place in the character of the newspaper themselves.

But the special point to which we set out to call attention is the absence, among the members of the great fraternity of journalists, of anything like uniformity touching certain great questions of principle and practice in cases which must almost daily arise to perplex the wise and conscientious journalist. The members of other learned professions have usually their codes of professional ethics more or less clearly defined. Some

of these, it is true, may seem arbitrary, unnecessary, or even inane, to the minority and to the public, but none the less their observance is decreed, sometimes by a visible, sometimes by an invisible decree, or a well understood custom which has all the force of law. But in the wide field of newspaperdom every journal is, to a great degree, a law unto itself, amenable only to the judgments and tastes of the classes of readers for whom it caters. The writer remembers having, on one occasion, suggested to the manager and editor-in-chief of one of the most influential dailies in a large city, the propriety of suppressing reports of a certain kind, or at least of curtailing the amount of space given to them. The reply—and it was made by a man of principle, who, no doubt, sincerely desired to keep his paper upon a high plane—was to the effect that it had been found, or was believed to be, better, even from the ethical point of view, to keep up the large circulation of the paper for the sake of the good influence it would exert on the whole, and upon all classes of readers, than to adopt a course which would result in a large reduction in the number of its readers, and, consequently, a material narrowing of its sphere of influence. This was the obvious meaning, though these were not the exact words of the reply. We do not here undertake to show that there was fallacy or self-deception in them. We are not, in fact, attempting to lay down any system of ethics for journalists, but only to point out the need for such a code, covering at least some of the more prominent questions, to be accepted and followed by those who claim a place among reputable journalists.

We are by no means of the number of those who think it a comparatively easy matter to determine, having regard solely to the highest moral considerations, just what ought and ought not to be admitted to the columns of a newspaper or other periodical. The questions constantly arising are many and complicated. Merely to instance two or three of the most common: those touching the character of the advertisements which should be admitted, whether and to what extent the records of the police courts, the details of evidence given in the criminal courts, in divorce cases in court, or Parliament, the descriptions of horrible cases of murder, suicide, etc., should be published. On the one hand, parents and guardians must instinctively shrink from allowing children to defile their imaginations with such debasing pictures; on the other, no thoughtful person can deny that the prompt publication of the ascertainable facts with reference to a crime committed is often a most valuable aid in the detection and apprehension of the criminal. Moreover, it may be said, with some force, that to suppress the facts in criminal cases, and to forbid the publication of evidence in the courts, would be distinctly dangerous to society, as tending to the re-establishment of secret tribunals and star-chamber procedure. The light of publicity, say these reasoners, is the best and only sure safeguard of the liberties of the people, and of equality in the administration of justice.

One thing may be said with a good deal of confidence. There are certain classes of vicious and demoralizing practices whose success depends altogether upon publicity. For instance, the newspaper report is the very life of the revolting pugilism which from time to time occupies so large a place in the columns of almost all the dailies, without exception. It is difficult