

# The Confessions of a Managing Editor

By the Desk Man on a Paper Run by the Business Office

(From Collier's Weekly)

NOTE—This article is not fiction. It is just about what it purports to be—the frank confession of a real managing editor. For obvious reasons, he cannot give his name nor yet that of his paper, and he has disguised some of the names and incidents—but in no case enough to mar the essential truth of the incidents which he describes.

One day ten years ago, after an office shakeup, the publishers of a newspaper on which I was then reporting called me into his private office and said:

"I've decided to make you managing editor."

I stammered a grateful thanks.

"But before you take charge," he said, "I want to make a few things plain to you." One thing on his mind was the question of policy. "I want all the news," he went on, "and I want it well displayed. I want a clean paper—one that can be read by the young people in any home. That is to say, also, I want you to keep in mind the moral responsibility we owe to the public. Moreover, I want the paper to be an active force in city affairs, and, needless to say, I want a paper fair to everyone."

"An ideal paper," I thought. "One thing more," he said. "We are way behind where we ought to be in circulation. The trouble is we haven't been getting out a real, live newspaper. In other words, I look to you for a bigger circulation. If you don't get it for me, I'll try someone else on the desk!"

"Giant Despair"

I went home to my wife that night walking on air. By a turn in the wheel of fortune I had become managing editor of our leading city newspaper.

Sole dictator, my employer told me, of the news columns! What greater responsibility could any man ask? A city of some 200,000 was mine to conquer, and I was eager for the conflict.

Little knowing what obstacles were before me, I at once set out on my pilgrimage. For a while I walked freely an open road. Then, at the next turn, suddenly I found myself face to face with a Giant Despair. It is of this Giant that I am now led to write, not because I see in my own ten years an extraordinary adventure, but because my experience is, in one way or another, the experience of numberless other managing editors throughout the country. I refer in particular to the conditions under which I get out a newspaper. I take my orders, so to speak, from the business office.

Let us see how it works out, not only for the managing editor, but for the readers, for the advertisers, and for the public in general.

Shortly after I took charge, my attention was called to the dramatic column. None of our local papers, I noticed, gave what I considered an honest, fair, impartial criticism. If a bad show came to town, for example, no paper had the courage to say it was a bad show. Here was a chance, then, to strike a responsive chord in the hearts of several thousand weekly theatregoers. Accordingly, I told the dramatic critic and his staff that thereafter I wanted a spade called a spade.

It so happened at just that time two shows of a vicious type descended upon us, and whereas the other papers smoothed over their rottenness with phrases of double meaning, we came out, on the other hand, and spoke the truth as we

saw it. The response in the popular heart was far beyond my fondest hopes. Numberless readers patted us on the back and praised our independence.

Then something happened. Presently the business manager came to me with a worried look.

"Manager Smith of the Broadway Theatre," he said, "threatens to cut down the size of his display ad on Sunday."

"Why?" said I.

"He says you're roasting him too much. He was down here last night talking it over with the old man, and the old man wants to see you; I suppose about this trouble."

The old man was the publisher.

I went to his private office.

"You are doing splendidly with the paper," he said, "but there is one thing I want to speak to you about. Mr. Smith of the Broadway Theatre was down here last night. He says you are treating him rather harshly."

"He had a couple of bad shows here

Just about this same time we printed an item in which there appeared the name of a certain hardware merchant, incidentally an advertiser in our paper. The publication of the item for some unknown reason aroused his ire, and he gave vent to his feeling by ordering his advertisement out of the paper.

"What can we do about it?" said the business manager, all broken up. "He spends \$300 a year with us."

"What does he want done?" I answered.

"He doesn't want anything done. But it occurs to me we might give him a good write-up on his business. Why not get his photograph and a good sketch of him, with an account of his rise to a successful merchant, for the Sunday paper?"

"We could do it," I said, "except for the fact that he isn't a successful merchant."

"Never mind about that. We've got to do something for him, the old man

After I had read over the rules, the publisher started off on what appeared to be an academic discussion of journalism, winding up with the point that in order to get out a successful paper all the various departments must work hand in hand; that is, the circulation, the editorial, the business, the advertising, etc.

"You understand?" said the publisher.

No, as a matter of fact, I didn't see what he was driving at until a moment later he led up to another, and this time an unwritten law for the news department. This unwritten law was to go into effect at once. It was the result of my innocent experience with the Broadway Theatre and the popular hardware dealer. It provided that whenever we had an item of news affecting an advertiser this item was first to be submitted to the business office for approval.

"You understand?" went on the publisher, confidentially. "We depend upon the advertisers to pay your salaries in the editorial room, and we can't afford to make enemies of them. In other words, no matter what anyone says, a man can't afford to quarrel with his bread and butter."

**One Eye on the News, the Other on the Advertiser**

Following this conference, all my desk men, under orders, kept one eye on the news, the other on the advertiser. With what result? On one occasion, I remember, we got a story about a boy who, while working beside an unprotected elevator shaft, fell three flights to the cellar, and escaped with only a broken leg. One point of interest was the unprotected elevator shaft. As the firm advertised with our paper, we sent the story down to the business office for approval. It never came back.

Another time a small fire broke out in the top floor of a cheap department store. No one was hurt and no stock was damaged. The item was worth about twenty lines, and it was written for its face value. We submitted it to the business office,

and after a consultation with the firm, the office returned it, with the following note:

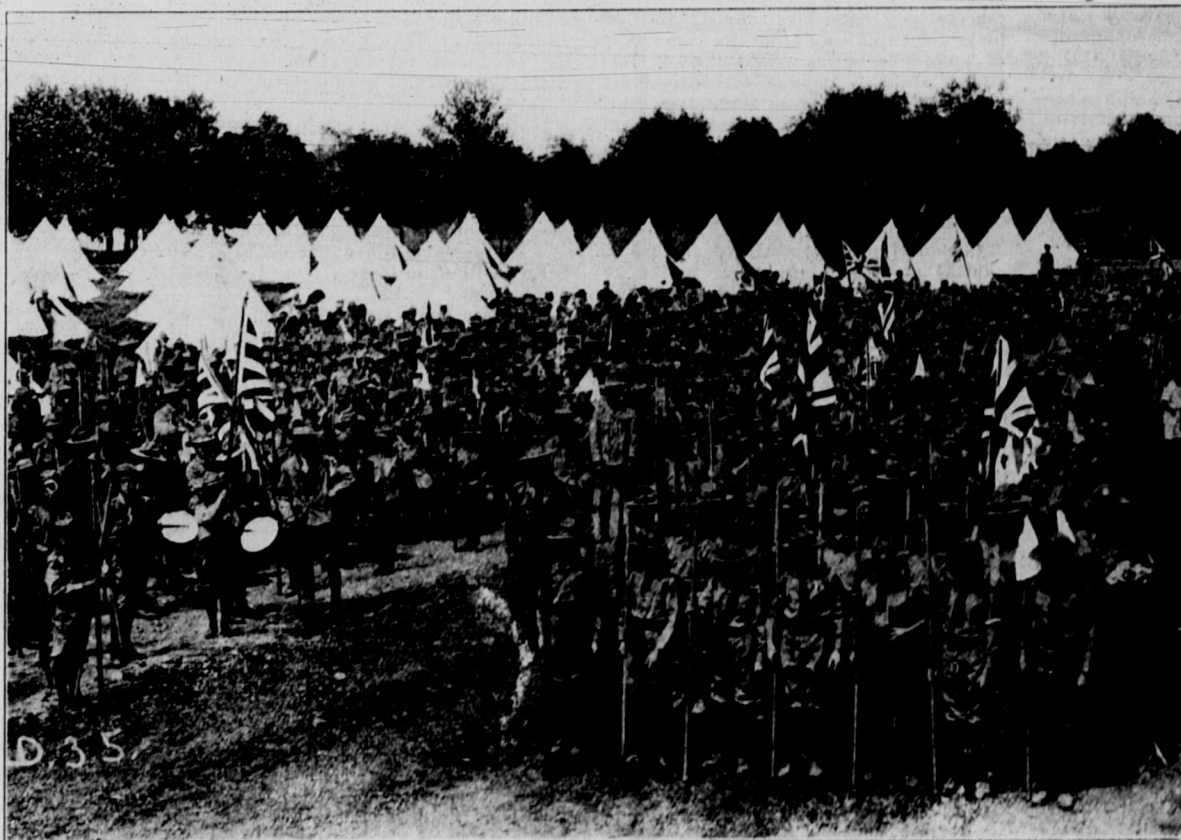
"Use a double line, black type heading, and have some one pad it out for half a column. Make it appear the stock was damaged."

The reason was apparent the following day when the department store carried a special half-page advertisement headed:

"Extraordinary Fire Sale!"

Once there came to my desk a letter from an influential respected citizen calling attention to the exorbitant rates demanded by our lighting company. Here was a chance, then, to make our paper "an active force in city affairs." On my own responsibility I printed the letter in full, and at the same time went to the lighting company for their side. They wouldn't say anything. The next day I set out to get further facts on the lighting monopoly. I had already outlined my plan of campaign, when I got

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THE BOY SCOUT MOVEMENT IN CANADA

During the progress of the Canadian National Exhibition 5,000 Scouts were reviewed by the Governor-General.

last month," I answered, "and we merely told the truth about them."

"Yes, I know, but Mr. Smith, you see, is a little sensitive."

"The great trouble with the newspapers in this city," I said, "is they have never told half the truth about the shows that come here."

"Yes, we want the truth," said the publisher, "but for the present just let up on the Broadway Theatre. Mr. Smith came down here last night with tears in his eyes, and I promised him we wouldn't be so severe next time. He is one of our best advertisers, and naturally, we can't afford to antagonize him."

**The Advertiser Again**

I argued for a free and fearless criticism, but on leaving the private office I found I had been beaten in my fight with a Giant Despair. The Giant Despair was the business office. I carried my orders to the dramatic editor, and to the next bad show at the Broadway Theatre we gave a good notice.

says. Maybe this will please old Hardware and save us the advertising?"

**Smoothing Down Advertisers**

Accordingly, the following week the special-feature section of our Sunday issue devoted a valuable column of space to the promising career of an otherwise unknown hardware merchant—"The Popular Hardware Merchant of the Twenty-third Ward," as we called him. He was satisfied and went on paying us \$300 a year.

After we had smoothed out the popular hardware dealer, the publisher one day sent for me, saying he desired to have a number of rules posted in the city department.

He handed me the following:

**Rules for the City Staff**

GET THE NEWS, AND GET IT FIRST  
WRITE ONLY WHAT CAN BE READ  
AT THE FAMILY CIRCLE.  
ALWAYS BE SURE OF YOUR FACTS.  
ALWAYS BE FAIR.  
ALWAYS GIVE BOTH SIDES OF THE STORY.