

**The Reporter:  
What He Writes**

It was after dinner on the city editor's night off and the man of municipal "beats" and three alarm fires was growing reminiscent.

"Considering the interest of the average reader in all branches of things literary, it has always been a surprise to me how little is known of what might be called the 'mechanical end' of writing," he began. "For example, who are our champion writers, judging from the standpoint of numbers of words turned out in a given time? What is the limit of human capacity in bringing thought to paper? To what extent does practice facilitate quick writing? Under what pressure and under what adverse conditions are the stories often written, and what is the effect of the strain on the human system when driven to the utmost in this line of work?"

"Ask almost any fairly well posted person who is the champion producer of words, and likely he'll tell you 'Marion Crawford,' who seems to have set himself a standard of two novels a year. Or Clyde Fitch, the playwright, some may say, relying on Mr. Fitch's ability to turn out a comedy or a melodrama with every manhole cover blown off in New York's streets. But the champion of all writers, three or four times over, is the star reporter on almost any of the big New York papers. Take the work of a star and it is no exaggeration to credit him with an average of two newspaper columns of reading matter a day. Days there will be when his story does not pan out and when he goes home with but a half column to his credit. But the next day, or the following one, will bring up the average—say 3,000 words, or, in appreciable measure, at least forty inches a day. That means during a week—for the star usually works seven days, taking a day off once a month or so—the man turns out 21,000 words, or a little more than twenty-three feet of matter. In a month or thirty days he produces 90,000 words, or 100 feet of newspaper literature. And figuring this by the year, he runs out 1,080,000 words to a length of 1,200 feet—in other words, the equivalent in number of words to twelve novels of the length of 'Soldiers of Fortune,' strung in a strip about two

inches wide from Thirtieth street to Thirty-sixth street, on Broadway.

"Vast figures, these, when you come to consider them, and naturally they suggest the limit of human capacity in recording thought. But there arises the question whether your man writes by hand or by typewriter. No matter whether the star uses a machine or not, it is necessary that he be a quick writer. Contrary to general impressions, the star reporters of today do not use shorthand except on rare occasions, if, indeed, they understand stenography at all. The exceptions are when a speech is to be taken verbatim, and even here the expert longhand man will work as accurately, though with greater expenditure of labor, than his colleague who uses the pothooks. But there are two sides to reporting by shorthand ordinarily. In the first place, a speaker, be he ever so trained, will rarely make a speech which is all 'meat' and worth reading. Unconsciously the shorthand man will take down all that is said, while invariably the longhand fellow will cull out what he wants on the spot, trusting to his notes and a trained memory to 'get there.'

"The other disadvantage to shorthand is that when a man reaches his office late and must dash off his story with one eye on the clock and the other on his work, and his mind on the concluding sentence, he has no time to translate pothooks. His notes, on the other hand, suggest the entire thread of the story, and he can sit down to his machine and rattle away, turning out, if necessary, a column of matter in from twenty to twenty-five minutes, if he is very expert.

"The man who writes a column in twenty minutes must not imagine that he will turn out two in forty minutes. A man with strong physique, with a clear brain, with his story well in hand and expert at the typewriter will find that his ability to grind out newspaper literature at top speed decreases at almost arithmetical progression. If the first column takes twenty minutes, the second will take at least twenty-five minutes, the third thirty minutes, and so on up to seven columns as one night's work—an entire page of report—which was made during the first Molineux trial, and stands, I think, as a record.

"As to writing by hand, of course the work is both more laborious and more time consuming. Most New York reporters can turn out a column by hand within an hour. Many can turn out two

columns in two hours, but the fellows that can write four columns in four hours you can count on the fingers of one hand. You can see, there is where the limit of human endurance comes in, a point which probably never even occurred to you in connection with writing.

"It is this strain which requires that a reporter be clear, not only in the upper story, but as well physically. At that many of the men break down from time to time and disappear from the Row to build up again. Altogether pardonable when you come to consider that frequently a reporter works anywhere from twelve to fifteen hours, and even to eighteen and twenty hours a day—depending upon the size of the thing that has broken loose.

"Only through practice can a man gain that confidence in himself which enables him to sit down without getting rattled to dash off a story without ever seeing a line until it is in the paper next morning. I have known men to write under high pressure, trying to catch the last edition with an important story, when everybody in the shop seemed to be 'up in the air' except the man at the keys of the machine. I have seen a night city editor himself stand over a man like that and hurry and urge him along and clip off the copy as fast as it appeared over the roll of his typewriter; and still the writer sat calm and rattled on his machine to make your head swim without seeming to see the crazy man alongside.

"But there are other conditions, equally distressing, which the reporter must learn to face, and which he does face so often that from time to time he suffers his periodical breakdown. For instance, the men who followed Jerome through his campaign speeches had one of the hardest jobs on record. From place to place they followed the strenuous campaigner, riding in an especial automobile, trailing behind him through crowds at political meetings, writing while standing up with elbows locked against squirming, cheering crowds, and picking words between applause and writing out their speeches while the brass bands droned noises preparatory to the next speaker.

"It's a lively game from end to end, and one, I often thought, the public would be interested in if it could really look behind the scenes. I remember one time we printed a pretty, dainty love story turned out by a young man on our staff, probably the prettiest thing of its kind we ever had. Afterward I learned that

it had been written while seated on a heap of pine coffins. It was this way: The writer had a story in mind, but had not been able to find time to write it until at the time of the North German Lloyd fire he was sent on board the sunken steamer Saale to report the recovery of bodies. Barring the grewsomeness of the job, I don't suppose human mortal ever was more tickled at an 'assignment.' Out on the breezy river during the hot period of July, when the city sweltered, what more could a fellow want? So, between the acts he picked out a heap of waiting coffins as the only clean thing to sit on aboard the fire-ridden hulk, and there he wrote his love story, which was reprinted in nearly a score of western papers."—New York Commercial Advertiser.

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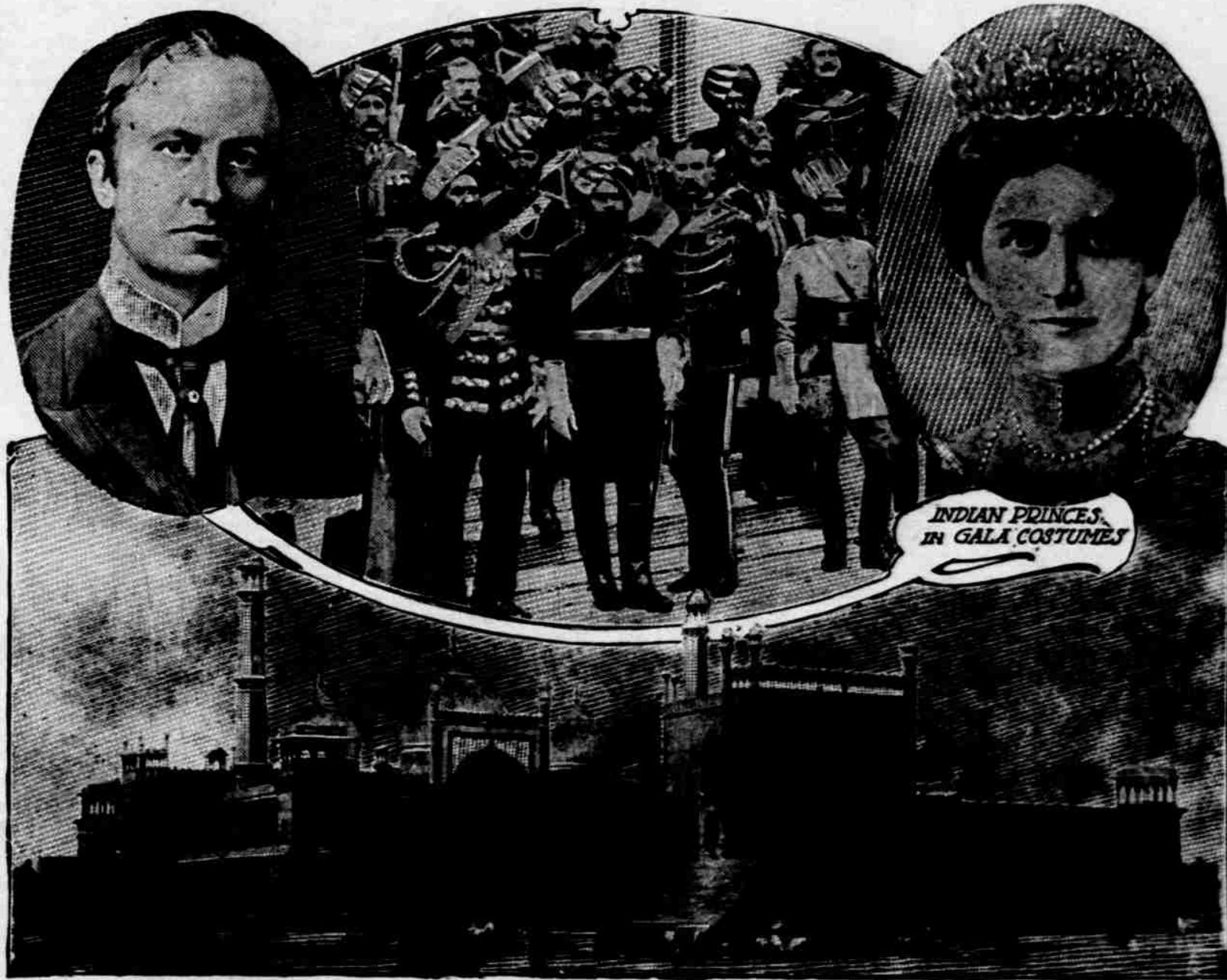
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