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JOURNALISTIC ETHICS.

WALTER WELLMAN WRITES OF THE CODE OF THE PROFESSION.

It is Unwritten, but Every Self-Respecting Experienced Newspaper Man Knows It and Follows It—Some Instances of Good and Bad Journalism.

[Special Correspondence.]

WASHINGTON, May 15.—Is there such a thing as newspaper ethics? This is a question which a series of events have brought to the front in Washington. First, a number of the ancient and proper senators thought the newspaper men had no right to send out accounts of the proceedings of the senate in executive session, and they had an investigation which cost a good deal of money and resulted in a fine old farce. Then there came up the Cleveland-Dana episode in New York, which all the newspaper men and public men of Washington took the keenest sort of interest in. Finally, the press gallery committee, composed of newspaper men and elected by newspaper men, concluded to discipline a young correspondent who had made the mistake of sending out a brutal dispatch about the habits of a distinguished statesman. Perhaps nothing would have been thought or said of this incident but for the peculiar circumstances surrounding it. The scene was laid at the funeral of Senator Beck in the senate chamber.

According to the dispatch the statesman in question, who was a member of the funeral committee on the part of the house, staggered into the chamber, fell into a seat, sat there in a dazed condition, staggered out of the chamber when the ceremonies were concluded, fell in passing down the steps, and fell again at the railway station in attempting to board the train. This would have been brutal even if true, but it was false. While the committee of newspaper men in charge of the press gallery do not feel called upon to pass judgment on the truth or falsity of news sent out by gentlemen who enjoy the privileges of the gallery, nor to act as press censors in any sort of way, they have felt it their duty to inform the public that the corps of correspondents, of whom they are the official representatives, do not indorse newspaper invasion of private life.

Here we have the best of answers to the question and conclusive proof that there is such a thing as newspaper ethics. Journalism is a distinct profession, as is the profession of law or medicine. It ought to have its unwritten code of morals and practice. Its members are brought into intimate relationship with individuals daily in connection with important matters, and often with matters of delicacy as affecting reputation and peace of mind. The relationship which a lawyer bears to his client, or a doctor to his patient, is no more intimate or important than that which a journalist bears to the man whom he interviews or of whom he writes. If there are codes of ethics for the lawyer and doctor, there should be similar codes for the journalist. The journalist should know the morals of his profession, the amenities of his business, should always feel his responsibility and appreciate the dignity of his position in the social fabric. There is such a code in journalism, an unwritten code as all laws of professional ethics must necessarily be, but as yet it is indefinite and not well enough understood.

Here in Washington, however, where journalism is at its highest state of development in America, and that means in the world, I am happy to say that the ethics of the profession, this unwritten law, is constantly becoming better understood, and year after year is better respected. It is not enough that a Washington journalist must be a gentleman, as journalists everywhere should be—he must have a sense of honor that is keen and vigilant, not simply as a matter of policy, but of temperament and training. The days of bushwhacking journalism, of "fake" journalism, of extreme partisan and personal journalism, and above all of mendacious journalism, are at an end in the Capital City. And being at an end here means simply that they are rapidly coming to an end the country over, for Washington journalism is a reflex of the journalism of the nation. It draws its inspiration and its men from the provinces, and needs, moreover, constant renewal of the energy that comes from the rural press and the men that press has graduated into the wider field.

Journalism as seen at Washington has its ethics, but I do not feel competent to tell what that code of ethics is. Probably no two working newspaper men would describe it alike. But there are certain cardinal features of it known to us all, and of these we may speak. One of these was violated by the young man who is just now feeling the discipline of his fellows. The private lives of men and women are taboos subjects in the newspaper practice of the capital. If this were not so, and we all felt ourselves licensed as free lances, thousands of hearts would ache. Probably there is no place in the country where the private lives of well known persons offer such shining marks for criticism and exposition as here. I can count at a moment's notice at least a score of members of congress who live in a certain sense double lives—men who have both wives and mistresses.

If we were to tell what we know and make it a business to find out the things which we now only suspect, plenty of gray heads now held high would be humbled. Even women of the fairest fame would suffer. Luckily these are not legitimate subjects of newspaper writing. The press is constantly growing more just and more generous. It knows how to shut its eyes as well as to keep them open. I doubt if in our time another public man meet the fate of poor Riddleberger. That senator was anything but a drunkard. He was simply a drinking man who occasionally lost his head. When intoxicated he was ugly and willful. There are a dozen men in congress today who have the same fault, but the

press deals forbearingly with them. Had it been more lenient with Riddleberger he might have met a more happy fate. But he was picturesque. The press seized upon his first escapade, painted it in lurid colors, gave him a reputation which at that time he did not deserve, and he fell under the weight of obloquy thus thrust upon him. Being given the name he went in for the game and finally died of chagrin and a broken heart.

Newspaper men at Washington, as elsewhere, must keep confidences. This is one of the unwritten laws which is well understood and almost universally respected. Public men are not afraid to trust the writers. For instance, I called one recent evening on the speaker of the house. Conversation arose incidentally about some public men and measures, and the speaker talked very frankly, as is his wont. He criticized men of his own party in his characteristic savage fashion and without reserve. He made no request that this conversation be considered a private one—he instinctively knew that it was private and would not be printed or repeated. I could have created a mild sort of sensation by reporting what the speaker said, but of course I did not. This brings us to another phase of modern newspaper ethics. A man must know that he is being interviewed for publication. The gentleman of the modern press does not get his interviews clandestinely.

All conversations not understood from the circumstances or by express agreement to be for type are private. It is in applying this rule that one of the chief sources of trouble arises. The newspaper man is often puzzled to know what was intended for publication and what was not. That was the bone of contention in the Cleveland article in New York city. It is often the bone of contention in less celebrated cases. I am proud to say for the correspondents of Washington that the public men here find little cause of complaint in this regard. The political journalist, as a rule, not only respects confidence and is intrinsically honorable, but he exercises fine discretion in winnowing the proper and printable from the private.

Eavesdropping is also tabooed. The self-respecting journalist of these times will not hide himself away in closets, or glue his ear to keyholes. Rare stories are told of the manner in which big news has been obtained by these means, but most of these tales are of the old days. The good senators thought the Washington correspondents must have some such means of securing executive session secrets, but they were egregiously mistaken. The modern journalist will not eavesdrop, but he will deceive. He will not open another man's letter, but he will play a trick upon the other man if the man does not watch out.

This matter of newspaper ethics is sometimes very intricate and difficult to understand. The public may not be able to understand why a journalist, who would condemn listening at the key hole of a committee room door, could hire an employe of the government printing office to steal a copy of the president's message for him, but I can understand that, though I am not going to try to explain it. I would not listen at a key hole, but I would bribe a printer to steal a message for me, providing the message was worth it and the printer did not come too high. Journalists have gone out of the business of stealing president's messages, but they are still eager for tariff bills. The public is already familiar with the manner in which the McKinley tariff bill found its way prematurely to the press.

A Pacific coast correspondent borrowed the copy of a member of the ways and means committee to write a paragraph from, and copied the whole bill with a force of six typewriters. That, in my judgment, was fair journalism. So was the scheme set up by a couple of bright correspondents to get an advance copy of the Mills tariff bill when the public mind was filled with curiosity concerning that measure. They knew Mr. Mills had a copy of the bill from the printing office, and that therefore the bill was in type. Their plan was to telephone the foreman of the printing office about 5 o'clock in the afternoon by the Capitol telephone that Mr. Mills wanted a dozen more copies of the bill sent to his house at 8 o'clock that evening. When the messenger arrived at Mr. Mills' residence with the package of bills one of the conspirators was to be in hiding near the door. He was to have a small package in his hand. The conspirators thought that when the messenger rang the door bell and the servant came and opened the door there would be a fine opportunity to do business. The man in waiting was to rush up just as the messenger left, ring the bell again, and when the servant came to the door the second time, no doubt with the package in her hand, the conspirator was to hold out his little package and exclaim: "I have left you the wrong package. This is the one that belongs to Mr. Mills," and grabbing the bundle from the servant's hands beat a hasty retreat, as if trying to overtake the wagon, which by this time would be rolling down the street. In the package which the conspirator was to leave in exchange for the more precious one was to be some bills and reports, which Mr. Mills, even if he were in the house and looked them over, would not be suspicious of, as, of course, he had not expected any copies of the tariff bill and would not be suspicious of trickery. The printing office would be satisfied that it had done its duty, and next morning two enterprising journals would contain the Mills tariff bill in full, telegraphed by their agile correspondents.

The scheme did not work, for the simple reason that the printing office could not print the bills, and hence could not deliver them into the hands of the unsuspecting servant girl. It was a pretty plan, and I am sorry it did not work, for it was good journalism. The true journalist will not look in another man's desk for the biggest piece of news in the world, any more than a military commander will violate a flag of truce, but your good journalist will lead his enemy into ambush when he can.

WALTER WELLMAN.

AN INFANT IN CUSTODY.

Why Pretty Little Nellie Rudd is a Prisoner. Nellie Rudd is 3 years old, and a pretty, innocent little child, yet she is an inmate of the Will county jail, at Joliet, Ill., and must remain in custody of the sheriff for some time to come. A trial is pending for her possession between her mother, Kate Nelson, and her foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. Rudd. Nellie was born in the poor house. Three months after that event Miss Nelson signed the baby over to Mr. Van



NELLIE RUDD.

Arsdale, superintendent of a Chicago foundlings' home. He in turn transferred his charge to the Rudds, who have raised it thus far and have grown much attached to the winsome little thing. Nellie's father recently died and left \$1,500 to the mother for the benefit of the child. Miss Nelson's first move was to abduct Nellie.

The foster parents with officers followed the woman to Chicago, thence to Mokena and Utica and back to the poor house, where the child was recovered. The claimants then sought the courts. Nellie lay asleep in Mrs. Rudd's arms when the sheriff ordered her into the possession of the sheriff pending the trial. When a deputy sheriff took the child in his arms to carry it to the jail residence both women burst into tears. The foster parents failed to get an order of court when they adopted the child, relying on the papers signed by both the real mother and Superintendent Van Arsdale.

Babies "Hoodooed" by Reporters.

"Hoodoo" is a word that is generally thought to have its origin in the African term "vodoo." As any rate, no matter what its genesis, the expression implies the possession of malefic powers. A hoodoo is like one endowed with the evil eye—whatever attracts his attention meets disaster. The latest phase of the hoodoo business has to do with newspaper reporters, more particularly those pencil experts living in Cincinnati. The superintendent of the zoological garden at that place, Mr. Stephen by name, recently asserted in unambiguous language that the reporters killed babies. He recovered his listeners from their shock of surprise and horror by the supplemental statement that the babies were not human, and that the journalistic method was one of indirection. Then he continued:

As soon as any of our young animals get written up they die. Look at our giraffe. And when the giraffe hears we were not said not a word about them in public. One we left with his mother and the other I took and began to raise on a bottle.

One day one of the newspaper men came out and saw the giraffe baby getting its bottle. He wrote it up at length and the little thing couldn't stand it. It died at once. And so when we have more babies out here we will keep them under cover until they get big enough to stand the hoodoo of newspaper publicity.

A Physician's Estimate of Quinine.

Dr. William B. Clarke, of Indianapolis, Ind., well known as an alienist and authority on all matters relative to insanity, recently prepared a paper which he entitled "A Study of Suicide." One paragraph in the article cannot fail to be of general interest. It is this: I feel confident that a frequent cause of suicide has been, generally, if not entirely, overlooked, and so am impelled to utter a word of warning regarding it, viz., the reckless use of quinine, especially its use unauthorized by a physician. Any one who knows the pathogenic ability of quinine, or rather its ability to cause symptoms or perturbations in the well or nearly well person, especially brain and nerve symptoms, cannot deny that it possesses the power to produce a condition nearly allied to insanity, if, indeed, it practically falls at all short of insanity. In large doses it is a depressant, instead of a stimulant, contrary to the popular belief, and it is the most popular and universal every day amateur remedy. Everybody seems to take it, and for any and every ailment. It is the reasonably easy of proof that many insanities, suicides and murders can be traced directly to the ill advised and inordinate use of quinine.

Chicago's New Sub-Treasurer.

Uncle Sam is to have a new sub-treasurer at Chicago to look after the piles of money stored in the big government building. His name is Daniel Dustin. He was born at Topsham, Orange county, Vt., nearly seventy years ago, and was the seventh in a family of thirteen children. He graduated from Dartmouth college in 1846, practiced medicine four years, and then went to California, where he divided his time between doctoring, mining and politics until 1858, when he became a resident of Sycamore, Ill. He entered the civil war as a captain of volunteers, and when the contest ended held the rank of brigadier general. He has been an officeholder in DeKalb county, Ill., continuously since 1863.

Military Training of Dogs.

The French have found a new use for their dogs. They are being trained to act as sentinels. Two soldiers lead a dog to a place a mile from the starting point. Then one of the men turns back, and the canine is taught to track him. In scouting they are also expected to prove useful, for they search the fields and thickets indefatigably—soldiers in foreign uniforms being hidden as decoys during the lesson—and on finding an enemy at once run to their keepers, showing every sign of agitation. When the dogs are on drill they are objects of wonder and interest to all the vagrant curs of the neighborhood.

A Change in Floral Fashion.

Old fashioned flowers are coming into favor again with the residents of the big cities. Orchids and rare roses now have rivals in the daisy, "bachelors' buttons," "hen and chickens," the columbine, larkspur and hollyhock. It seems quite appropriate for society leaders to welcome back the flowers of their childhood and give them the place they so well deserve.

"Morally imbecile" is now said to be the correct phrase for describing men and women who are criminal or vicious.

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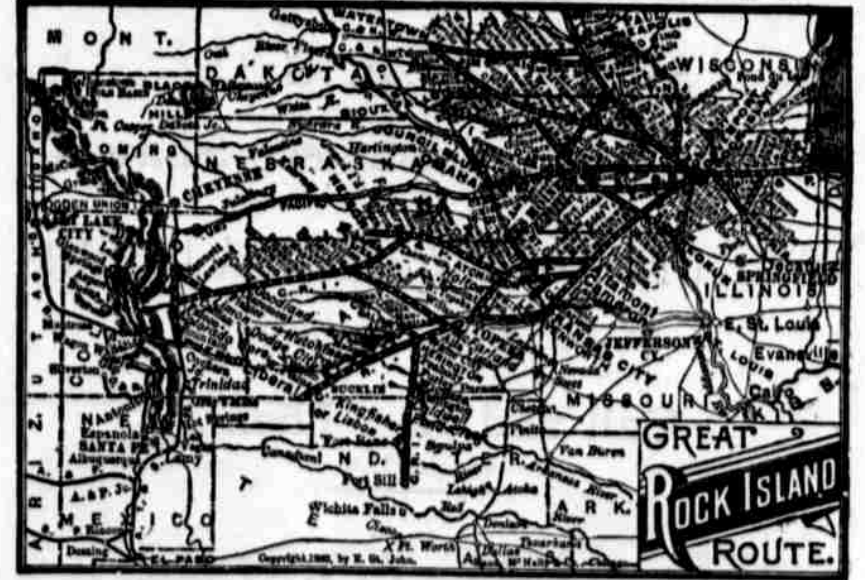
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