

# THE PARALYSIS OF THE PRESS

BY GAYLORD M. FULLER

ONE night twenty-five or thirty years ago the business manager of a New York morning newspaper wandered out of the proper area of his activities into the city room. In those ancient days the editorial staff still had a wholesome and fitting contempt for all those engaged below-stairs in the more sordid parts of newspaper-making, and so his presence was treated with the resentful indifference which it deserved. The man from the business office, in spite of the obtuseness characteristic of his kind, was not unaware of this attitude, and he went about cautiously, stopping to chat for a moment here and there at the desk of an editor or copy-reader whom he knew. At the desk of the telegraph editor his attention was caught by a spike on which was impaled sheet after sheet of special telegrams. His curiosity was aroused and he ventured to ask a few questions. When he learned that that was the "dead spike,"—that hundreds, even thousands of words of telegraph matter for which the *Morning Clarion* had paid good money were being thrown away nightly, either because the stories had not come up to expectations, or because something more lively and important had come in later,—when the business manager heard this his soul was wounded and shocked, and he resolved then and there that something should be done about it.

Something *was* done about it, or rather, it was attempted and blocked. It was attempted again and opposed again, but as the years went on the opposition became fainter and fainter, perhaps through sheer weakness and weariness. To-day the business manager walks into the editorial

rooms, not with a fearful hesitating step, but with the assurance and boldness of one in command. That first, faint challenge in the matter of telegraph tolls made a breach in the editorial defenses, and in the course of time the whole position was lost. Slowly but certainly, as the fumes of commercialism penetrated to the remotest crevices, every lingering spark of vibrant life which had dwelt there was extinguished, and the inequalities and idiosyncrasies which had formerly adorned and enlivened the journalistic scene were reduced to a smooth surface of monotonous mediocrity. The newspapers have followed the trend of the times toward mass production, consolidation, coöperative marketing, lower costs, high profits, mechanical progress and mental stupefaction. They used to spread ideas; they now only make profits.

No newspaper man with a memory can avoid making comparisons between the New York newspapers of twenty-five years ago and those of the present. But who can point out any improvement that is not wholly material? There are now daily papers of 56 pages, and there are roto-gravures, improved color-processes, pictures by telegraph, head-setting machines, autoplates, automobile and airplane deliveries, and a score of other mechanical advances, but who can name a single improvement on the human side, that is, in journalistic craftsmanship? Has anything worth while succeeded the sparkling deviltry of the old *Sun*, or the virile crankiness of the old *Evening Post*? Where are we to look for vehement, militant political independence and disinterested champion-

ship of the public weal since the *World* joined Tammany Hall?

The newspapers of New York, indeed, all exhibit marked symptoms of a complication of paresis and cardiac enfeeblement. The infection of prosperity has not only softened their moral fibre, it has weakened their hearts, so that the murmur of leaky valves is distinctly audible. For if the soul of a paper is conviction and singleness of purpose, its heart is faithful and fearless reporting. There can be no real newspaper without news, and there can be no news without reporters to gather it. Good reporting is now fast becoming as obsolete as liberty. News is not the obvious but the true, and truth lies at the bottom of a well. It is the duty and the delight of a first-rate reporter to discover it and bring it to the surface—but in these days the reporter is content to sit on the curb and speculate as to what lies in the nether darkness without risking the dangers of the damp descent.

## II

It is no reflection on the present generation of reporters to say this, for it is not their fault. They are as fine and capable a lot of prospects as ever entered the profession, but the training and the opportunity are lacking. Greed makes hurry and indifference. Formerly one glanced at the evening papers solely for a tip as to what was happening and waited for the morning papers to get a comprehensive story of it, but now, with the morning papers for sale on the street only two or three hours after the last evening extras, they present only rehashes of the afternoon news, without any additional facts or any improvement in the narration. They are hustled on to the street because the business office wants more sales. It wants to catch the night crowds from the theatres, and it is willing to sacrifice the whole character and individuality of the paper to do it.

There has been a transition from personal journalism to commercial standardization.

The old way meant competition in ideas and in enterprise. The owners, who were usually also trained editors, strove to make their papers different, raced for precedence in the presentation of important news, and struggled for leadership in the shaping of public policies. Rivalry was fierce. No first edition ever went out of the office save into the mails unless by the treachery of an employé. There was acute anxiety to know what the other fellow had on you, and a sizable sum would be paid for a first edition of his paper if it could be obtained. The city edition of a morning paper was not on the street until 3 o'clock or 3:30, and important stories were often held for it in order to outwit competitors. It was a rapid, earnest, intense game, as engrossing as stud poker, and the men who played it had as fine an *esprit* as ever animated a crack regiment. The goal was to excel, to surpass in the highly human qualities of originality and intelligence.

But with a changed purpose at the top, with big profits the dominant and often only aim, every incitement to effort was crushed and obliterated. The smugness of greed settled over American journalism and stifled it. There ceased to be any individual pride, any self-esteem. With the first editions of the morning papers on the street before the screams of the last evening extra have died away, and second editions on sale by the time the old-time first editions went to press, every editor knows almost instantly what the other one has, and he does not much care. An exclusive story is now a mischance, not a calculation. Reporters on different papers, once bitter rivals, have become coadjutors. Instead of digging alone in secret, they foregather and divide.

It is a pleasant but not an elevating habit. Rival reporters come together on a story. They question their news source as a body, and if there are other aspects of the case to be investigated, they assign one of their number to each and appoint a later rendezvous. The outcome is a composite account which appears with negli-

gible variations in all the papers. Zeal to outstrip the other fellow is replaced by a community spirit which is satisfied with perfunctory performance and divided glory. The method is known to the bosses and not condemned. Instead, in some instances, they have tried to take advantage of it. If men from three different papers, for example, are covering one court and are known to compare notes, some thrifty city editor will pull his reporter off the beat to do something else and rely on the opposition reporters to give his man the court story when he gets back. In one known case the obliging reporters, jealous of their ease and their rights, finally decided to teach the thrifty city editor a lesson, and so scooped him on an important story.

This indifference and sloth are manifest again in the complacent reception that is given to "handouts," *i.e.*, propaganda articles which men sworn to Service prepare in convenient form for the newspapers—and their employers. Not long ago I was present in an office whither the reporters had been summoned to receive an announcement by an exalted personage. The thing was done in the most approved modern manner. Instead of having to fight their way into the great presence as of old, the reporters as they arrived were deferentially ushered by an attendant into a splendidly furnished ante-room with a large, polished table surrounded by heavy, comfortable chairs. In a short time the magnate's secretary came in, as is the mode, unctuously greeted the assembled pressmen and deposited boxes of cigarettes and cigars on the table. Neither cigarettes nor cigars were offered to the visitors by the secretary. They were simply placed there in plain sight, for it was assumed by the patronizing mind of Big Business that Lazarus would eagerly go to anything that fell from the rich man's hand.

Twenty or thirty minutes after the time set for the interview—punctuality being the politeness of mere kings, and not of American magnificoes—the great person

arrived, attended by the oily secretary, amid a fluttering of manifolded sheets which he grasped in his hands. He sat down at the head of the table as the copies of his announcement were distributed, leaned back majestically and began to talk in meaningless generalities. The reporters perused the document rapidly and listened to the great man's discourse. His announcement had some news value, even in the way it was stated, but it was recking with buncombe. Yet of all the dozen reporters present not one roused himself to ask the pertinent questions which would have quickly punctured the fraud. Their apathy was certainly not due to lack of intelligence; they simply knew that their offices would be entirely satisfied with a digest of the handout and a short introduction. So what was the use of bothering further?

### III

All this, as I have said, is not the fault of the new generation of newspaper men. They are probably just as capable of creditable performance as those of earlier days, but they do not get the hard training in a highly competitive field. They pocket the handouts now in fashion because their superiors are content with them, and because there is no incentive to go behind them. Persistent, indefatigable delving for the truth passed out at about the time men took to wearing pants and toting golf-bags.

If some impetuous neophyte, or some old timer suffering a revival of thwarted enthusiasm, should ferret out a good story and then want to write it, what chance would he have today to get space enough to swing his eager pen? One might suppose that with fifty-two pages in which to roam he would be permitted to operate without any danger of cramping his style. Fifty-two pages mean 416 columns. But of them 286 are advertising, and 48 more are devoted to stock markets and sports, leaving only 82 columns to record the news of the entire world. A paper perfectly accom-

modated to the demands of the broker mind! Only one-fifth of the cumbersome mass devoted to reading matter! Perhaps, after all, the publisher knows his public and the proportion is adequate.

One remembers the splendid reportorial work done years ago on the Guldensuppe murder mystery and the Marion Clark kidnapping, when reporters solved crimes for the police and performed great services to the public and achieved precedence for their papers. One recalls the digging out of the facts about the wrecking of the New Haven Railroad, which led to a congressional investigation, and other similar pieces of first-rate work. They were the result of intense application, tireless research, and a zeal to run every trail to its end. The reward was a task well done, and a beat for the paper.

That sort of thing is seldom accomplished now. If a story breaks for the evening papers the mornings are almost always satisfied with a perfunctory rewrite of it, with no further development of its hidden or untold phases. And when some piece of intelligent, energetic reporting is miraculously done, such as the discovery of the murderers of the Frank boy in Chicago, a performance for which the Pulitzer prize was awarded to two Chicago reporters, the languid exponents of the inert and ponderous modern school attack it because it is not true reporting! Their arguments would have given the prize to the writer of a beautifully written account of the annual convention of the Women's Knit Underwear Manufacturers' Association.

To this new cult of lofty detachment exertion is repugnant. It would never soil its pink finger-nails with the stains of vulgar diligence. It has an awesome respect for dollars and such a crawling reverence for place and authority that it never asks an awkward question or permits an examination into motives. It is pleased with the world as it is, and with itself, and it would no more challenge the acts of the existing order than it would think of laying aside its walking-stick or its spats.

#### IV

While lack of initiative at the top and the prevalence of handouts have thus destroyed enterprise in news-getting, another influence has spoiled its written presentation. The telephone, in spite of its marvelous aid in the swift collection of news, has been poisonous to lively and truthful reporting. It has separated the writer from his subject. No rewrite man, taking the facts over the telephone, no matter how brilliant and skilful he may be, can possibly give to a story the same flavor of reality that it can get when written by the man who saw it with his own eyes. He is serving warmed-over victuals, and no garnishment of rhetorical parsley or paprika can give them the taste of freshness. Imagine Velasquez painting a portrait from a radioed description!

The difference between an eye-witness account and one that has been relayed is the difference between the human, personal politics of the old Amen Corner in the Fifth Avenue Hotel and the mimeographed product of contemporary campaigns. In the Amen Corner you met daily the bosses and the bosslets. You not only received your news from the boss's own lips, but you saw the twinkle or the wink that accompanied it. You got the asides, the dropped confidences, the mannerisms, all the earthy frailties with which to fill in the picture and make it living. Now, all these vitalizing elements have been eliminated by the telephone, by the mimeograph, by the radio and by the publicity man. Speeches and statements must be had by the morning papers for the first edition, which is on the street an hour or more before midnight. The politician, therefore, shuts himself up with his stenographer, gets what inspiration he can from the four walls of his room, and grinds out an advance speech. It cannot fail to be dull and uninspired, but the exigencies of a lazy press must be served. The lifeless document is then transmitted to the party press department to be manifolded, and

afterward copies are passed out to the waiting reporters. Each hurries his copy to his office, where it is put into type to await release. Later a few facts are telephoned in by the man who has been assigned to cover the meeting and the rewrite man prepares an introduction which is hitched on to the speech already set. Unless there should be some striking variations in the delivery, the canned speech remains undisturbed. The denaturing process is complete.

One hustling, determined, inquisitive reporter is worth more to a newspaper than a dozen solemn pundits in the editorial room, but what chance has he to distinguish himself in a day of predigested news and editorial paralysis? Formerly New York was the goal toward which every ambitious young reporter in the provinces fought his way. To work on a New York newspaper was at once an honor and an opportunity. It meant higher pay and further training in the most competitive and most highly satisfying sort of journalism. The New York papers profited by drawing the very best men from the interior—men who had been trained in the splendid school of the small paper of the small town. Their knowledge was practical and experimental, not theoretical. Now all that is of the past. There is no allurements any more in Park Row—no stimulating rivalry, no tempting salaries, no chance to earn distinction. The New York papers are gorged with advertising and make enormous profits, but the latter are all stuffed into the bulging pockets of the owners, while reporters and copy-readers have to meet rent and feed bills on the wages of linotype operators.

With the joy of contest and the opportunity to write almost wholly eliminated, what are the rewards which a young man entering the profession may look forward to today? He may look forward to revamping handouts and drawing his weekly carpenter's wage. He may hope for promotion, after long years, to one or another of the few well paid executive jobs, or to be-

coming one of the white-haired boys who sign their stuff. It is true that there is more signing of articles now than there was formerly, and if this is fame then there is gain in that respect. But it is a question whether the practice has shown any advantage over the old anonymity. Only too often the reporter who advances to signed stuff begins to rest on his laurels, without showing any visible desire to go further. Once his name is on the billboards he ceases to be a reporter and becomes an authority. He no longer merely records history; he passes on it. It is an affection that is incurable but not immediately fatal, and it has the anomalous characteristic of giving pain to the public with complete immunity for the diseased.

The newspapers themselves are not without their disappointments. Even in their general laxity they still appreciate competency, though their present methods do not produce it, and many a city editor trained in the old school wails over the material he now has to work with. Young applicants, instead of coming well-instructed from the smaller papers, swarm in from the schools of journalism and write, "Former President Eliot of Yale" and ask, "Who was P. T. Barnum?"

## V

Surveying the changed scene in New York one finds it spotted with the graves of dead game-cocks, among which waddle an indolent flock of fatted capons. The *Sun* was suffocated in the dull fumes of Munseyism, and the spirit of the *Post* has been petrified by Philadelphia sclerosis. In their place has come a quick fungous growth: the *Daily News*, the *Mirror* and the *Graphic*. Twenty-five years ago it was thought that the last degree in irresponsible exaggeration and cheap humbug had been reached in the Hearst newspapers, but how little one then knew what the future held of freakish wonders! We had not yet touched bottom. From Chicago came the first challenge: the *Daily News*. The Hearst



forces met it by faithful imitation, and so produced the *Mirror*. Another student of the mass mind went a step lower with the *Graphic*. The Hearst papers had formerly provided papers for those who move their lips when they read; the new sheets were suited to those who could not read at all.

Such are the surrogates for the journals of earlier days—the *Sun*, the *Globe*, the *Herald*, the *Mail and Express* and the *Press*. In those that have survived the boll-weevil of Munseyism there is discovered a vast increase in bulk with a saddening loss of flavor. Of the few old-timers left, the *Times* and the *American* are the only ones which do not suffer by comparison with the past—the *Times* because it has lived up to a consistent policy, and the *American* because of the contrast with its competitors. The former set out to be dull and ponderous, and it has attained its purpose with a fidelity and thoroughness justly commanding the admiration of all lovers of bulk and solidity. The latter, by reason of still lower forms of life coming in beneath it, has acquired the appearance of being raised to an eminence of conservative respectability.

It is doubtful if, being neuter, the *Times* could be anything but dull if it tried, but it must be given credit for sincerity, for it is dull by design. The *Tribune*, however, in arriving gradually at the same end, provokes only tears. In the days of its six broad columns and clear printing, it pre-

sented an appearance of dignity and respectability. Its editorials betrayed an adamantine partisanship, but they were vigorously written and there was never any wobbling. Although one never expected to find a news beat in it, yet occasionally, on some important Washington matter, one did. Looking back at it now, it seems like a big solemn mastiff—to which the *Tribune* of today compares as a small cross-bred pup, with all the irresolution and vealiness of mixed blood and immaturity. Like a pup it grabs a bone or an old shoe and is intensely, even desperately concerned with it for a while, and then it runs off after something else. It is a plexus of conflicting emotions without a directing intelligence.

But there is an explanation for everything. In exchange for the vigor of old editorial days and the persistent, penetrating inquiry of the news columns, the apologists for the present day newspaper offer its "tolerance." "Oh, yes," they say condescendingly, "that was all right for those barbarous days, but we have advanced since then. We have become refined and civilized, broader and more tolerant." How perfectly nice! How priggish and comfortable! The broad outlook of mercantile fear; the dread of offending a customer and losing a sale; the wise and lofty tolerance which permits the big advertiser to bestow on a publisher the universal American epithet of opprobrium without encountering resentment or inciting reprisal!

# THE CULT OF BEAUTY

BY MORRIS FISHBEIN

IN THE classified telephone directory of any large American city one comes casually on the heading Barber Colleges, and proceeds then through Barbers, Baths and Beauty Culture Schools to Beauty Parlors. Then one advances to Corsets and Accessories, to Cosmeticians and to Dermatologists—and begins to realize at last what a vast trade has grown out of the desires of Mr. Babbitt and his wife and daughters to enhance the physiognomies and figures with which a none too beneficent Providence endowed them. If one resides in a town in which the trade is backward, the promoters of comeliness may still be found under such old-fashioned headings as Hair Dressers, but where the cult of beauty has many shrines they hold forth in all the gaudy glory of Beauticians and Cosmetologists.

As with classifications, so with names. In all of the cities in which the beauty shops flourish their sign-boards display an extraordinary similarity. Consider these samples plucked from several lists:

Annie Laurie Beauty Parlor  
Belcarno Beauty College  
Bertha Betty Beauty-Spot Shop  
Betty Jane Beauty Shoppe  
Bonita Beauty Salon  
Fountain-o'-Youth  
Hollyd Obesity Salon (The first word is a contraction of Hollywood.)  
Babe's Beauty Shoppe  
Beau Ideal Shoppe  
Brush-Up Shop  
Brownatone Shop  
Char-Ming Beauty Shoppe  
Colton's Permanent Wave Shop  
The Fairest Marcel Shop  
Franco-American Beauty Shop  
Gotthart's Vienna Beauty Shop  
Hindu Rose Beauty Parlor  
Jean's System of Beauty  
La-Ann Beauty Shop

La-Blanche Beauty Salon  
Ladifair Shop  
Maison Gustav  
Maison de Sadie  
Miladi Beauty Shop  
Mi-Lady's Beauty Shop  
Mitzi Beauty Shoppe  
Paradise Beauty Shop  
Madam Pauline  
Peacock Beauty Shoppes  
Poudre Box Beauty Shoppe  
Premier Epilation Salon  
Sanitary Beauty Parlor  
Venus Beauty Parlor  
Your Style Beauty Shop

Here are parlors, colleges, shops, shoppes and salons, all conjuring with the magic word beauty and conducted by damsels variously yclept, whose names have undergone strange metamorphoses in accordance with the nature of their art. Here are Eva May, Emmie Lou, Frances Jeune, Helen Janice, Kathryn Ann, Beatrix, Elza, Cecile, Cecille, Ethyle Clair, Sadye, Ada Dolores, Estelle, Mae, Gladys, Gloria, Hazelle, Helyn, Hannelte, Myrtle, Jean Jonnie, Georgette, Arline, Kathlyn, Adoline, Marjorine and Neoma.

Proceeding through the telephone book, one reaches the heading Plastic Surgery, and comes upon the names of five or six medicos who, it seems, devote themselves to the removal of the redundant wrinkle, to restoring the aquilinity of misshaped proboscises, to the disposal of the fat resultant from too many calories, and to the miscellaneous alteration of countenances which, for one reason or another, seem to their possessors to be not what they ought to be. These learned gentry are obviously not to be listed with the ladies above mentioned, except in so far as they are also concerned with the glorification of American womanhood and woman-like man-