

THE CONFESSIONS OF A NEWSPAPER WOMAN

BY HELEN M. WINSLOW

I CAN scarcely remember the time when I did not intend to be a writer. In my childhood days I used to dream dreams of the time when my name should be as well known to other children as those of Louisa Alcott and J. T. Trowbridge were to me; and in my early girlhood I essayed a short story of less than mediocre merit and sent it off to a New York publisher, who deemed it worthy of so much less consideration than the trash he was publishing that it came back to cut short effectually my youthful ambitions. There was no further wooing of the muses, except in the matter of flowery "compositions," until after my school-days were well past. But the day of dreaming was never ended, and every dewy morning, every glowing sunset, every vine that trailed along the dusty roadside, was woven into a romance or a fugitive, unwritten bit of song. There came a day when the songs began to be written surreptitiously, for I was not in a literary atmosphere, and was as sensitive to criticism as when, at the age of nine, I had burst forth one spring afternoon with an ode to the insects that hummed around us, only to be jeered at by an unfeeling brother.

The time had come when I wanted to express myself on paper, and was beginning to do so, tentatively. Verses accompanied by pencil or charcoal sketches were made and hidden shyly away lest some one see them. How much better if I had gone on with them until something of real worth had come, and with it the courage to submit it to an editor. But by some accident of fate, there came an editor, and, all unknowing, gave me the wrong impetus. It was only the editor and publisher of the county journal, — have I said we lived far out in the coun-

try? He sat behind me during a school exhibition, — a rather meagre place to display my latent literary talent. When it was over he spoke to me.

"I want a good correspondent from this town," he said. "I am convinced you will be a good one. Take it." In vain I said I had no knowledge of what was wanted; he saw in me the making of a good newspaper woman in a day when women journalists could be counted on the fingers of the hands. In the end I began, not only contributing items of interest about town (at five cents apiece), but "writing up" the occasional conventions, cattle shows, camp-meetings, and other festivities of the locality. In this way I gained a facility in the use of the pen, and increased my vocabulary, without too much of a strain on time or brain. Then, with family changes, came a day when I must choose whether I would remain in the country, writing there, or seek a wider field in the town. I had already begun to send out poems and stories with fair success, getting a proportion of my things published, and even an occasional check. The proudest moment of my life was when I received a check from the *Atlantic Monthly* for four dollars to pay for a screed in the "Contributors' Club," — the only one, alas! I wondered whether I would not attain my heart's desire sooner by staying in the country and working steadily, slowly, surely on until I made a name among writers of good poetry and fiction. I had sense enough even then to see that my best chance might possibly lie there; to-day I believe it did. But the resources of the village where I lived were woefully limited. There was no good library; my father's was better. And society was as narrow as it knows how to be in a small New Eng-

land town. I persuaded myself that life in a great city, where I might come into close contact with the great, pulsating mass of humanity, would be of more use to me. It is always easy to decide in favor of what we prefer to do. And so I came to the city. Once here, I must live. The occasional check for two, ten, twenty-five dollars is not half as punctual as the landlady's rent bill or the insistence of a healthy appetite. I was no Keats. I was not minded to emulate Chatterton. I met a comfortable, optimistic, well-fed woman who did regular work on a newspaper. I determined to try for a position, not as a permanency, but as a stepping-stone.

Now a stepping-stone is right enough in its place, if one does not linger on it until the desire to go farther has died. I applied for a position on four metropolitan papers, and by each managing editor was well received (one of them going so far as to put on his coat when he saw me). Each one wrote my name and address in a small book, saying he would send for me when he needed me. Fortunately I sat where I could see into the first of these books. There were three pages of similar names and addresses; or, to be exact, of addresses of women with similar ambitions, all of whom had, doubtless, been told the same thing, — that they would be sent for when they were needed. Doubtless some of them are waiting still, although that was twenty years ago. But the glimpse into that book proved that I had the sort of sense that is necessary to success. I did not wait to be sent for. I went forth and applied to all the managing editors I could reach, and not being set at regular work with the alacrity which I had hoped to see displayed, I set myself at work. I hunted up lectures and concerts that were not scheduled on the city editor's lists. I reported Shakespeare lectures by noted professors before their regular classes. I began to depend on my "nose for news," and brought in short, readable accounts of happenings in places where the regular

reporters were not sent. They were used, and I was paid "space rates," — and little enough they amounted to. After a time I was sent for and a new managing editor engaged me at the munificent salary of fifteen dollars a week to edit the "woman's page," which meant contributing five columns to every Sunday edition of the paper. I took the place in delight, filled it three weeks, and then was told that the new editor had left, and that another woman had my position. I saw the successor of my editor, and he was exceedingly polite; but he regretted that he could not employ two of us, and as the other woman was poor he felt obliged to let her keep the position she needed more than I seemed to. I could not tell him that I had nothing but the clothes I wore, and that beyond the paltry fifteen dollars I knew not how I should live. I have always believed in the gospel of clothes. If a woman goes to seek employment in well-fitting, tasteful, "lady-like" attire, she will usually get what she wants far more quickly and surely than if she is shabby; but in this case my respectable clothes were my undoing. The other woman wore cheap satins, frayed around the bindings; I wore plain, well-made cloth. And she got the work because she was in apparent need. I went home, wept a few tears in private, and went at my writing again. I got a position as eastern correspondent for a western daily. The pay was good (this was years ago when western papers paid for eastern letters), and I was happy again, but the wild and woolly editor wanted to marry me, without the preliminaries of meeting, and that cut short my usefulness on his paper.

But I was a good reporter, and soon found work enough on the daily papers at space rates to take care of myself. Some weeks I earned from fifty to eighty dollars; oftener I did not earn ten. I have attended an all-day convention, and worked far into the night, writing reports for messenger boys to take in sections "red hot" to the presses, so that the first part of the article would be in type before the

last was written. And I have kept this up for many hours at a time. I have gone forth after breakfast to see a whole page of the paper given up to my report of such all-day meetings, at which I had worked for fourteen consecutive hours the day before, lunching on bananas and a sandwich and supping on a similar meal. I have had the printer's "devil" stand at my elbow to seize every fresh sheet that flew out from under my pencil, almost before it was done, the hot presses upstairs crying, with the horse-leech's daughters, "Give, give." I have crawled from my bed in the morning only to fall back across it in a dead faint, and then have gotten up and gone out to another regular day's work. And I have beaten the men on rival papers in "scoops" which occupied columns, and told no lies. But in spite of the fascination in this sort of thing—and it is a wonderful fascination—I could not keep it up. And when, after a few years, there came a chance to edit an obscure monthly at a fair salary, I took it. Then I added a dramatic department for a weekly paper to my regular duties, doing the work evenings. Later I went to the weekly paper as editor of several departments, and still later took on a regular department in the Saturday edition of the most highly respected journal in my city.

Then came a time, covering several years, when I had charge of twenty-eight columns a week, on three papers, all of which I filled on time and without help from "subs." I was not paid well enough to hire subordinates. I worked eight hours a day in my dark, dingy office, and six more in my "den" at home every night, going to theatres from twice to five times a week, and working all day Sunday to bring up the ends. I have edited news-columns, fashion, health, dramatic, hotel, book-review, railroad, bicycle, fancy-work, kitchen, woman's club, society, palmistry, and correspondence departments, and withal kept up an editorial-notes column for eight years. And then I started a journal of my own.

"Why did I attempt so much?" The question has been asked repeatedly. Chiefly because I was not paid enough for any one department so that I could afford to do less. A man in my place on the weekly paper would have been paid twice my salary. On the Saturday paper he would have received three or four times what I got. I am not prepared to say that he would have done these things any better than I, but I can safely admit that if I had not done so much I could have given much better "stuff," to use a technical newspaper term. When I opened my department on the Saturday paper, it covered a new field, one about which the managing editor felt doubtful. He insisted that I sign my name; to this I consented, and my name appeared for three years at the end of my article. Then came a time when my department was fearfully cut, not to say mutilated, every week in the city department. I bore it for a time, and then protested. "I think," said the managing editor, in reply to my complaint, "the whole trouble comes from your signing your name." "But I did it because you said I must," I cried in astonishment. "Yes," was his answer. "But your department has proved one of the most popular features of the paper. You are getting a great deal of glory out of it, and some of the men upstairs, who do good work but are not allowed to sign it, are jealous. You cannot blame them." And so to please these men I stopped signing my name, and matters ran smoothly again for several years, until my own paper took so much of my time that I withdrew from others.

I started my own journal because, reasoning from such incidents as I have just narrated, I saw the time coming when I should be calmly dropped from the regular newspaper. Women had become plentiful in journalistic ranks,—women who could do sensational work, whose health was more reliable, and who had the advantage of being young. I saw that in a few years I should be succeeded by the younger generation of newspaper wo-

men, and that I could not provide against the proverbial rainy day from any salaries I might earn. I started my paper, worked like a slave for seven years on it. I wrote articles, editorials, read manuscripts and books, kept up an enormous correspondence, solicited most of my advertisements, and went to the printing office every issue to attend personally to the details of "make-up" and proofreading. No day laborer ever worked as I did, for there is an end to his hours. I worked from the time I crawled out of bed in the morning until I crept in again in the wee, sma' hours next morning. Then I had an opportunity to sell out, and did so, at half the figures any man in my place would have got. But at least I am better off than if I had stuck to newspaper work for somebody else.

Better off? How? Financially, only. Otherwise, I had been far better off to-day had I stayed in my little country town and worked faithfully and carefully at writing things less ephemeral. I am worn out. My brain is fagged. When I walk along a country road to-day, I see no visions. The babbling brooks, the singing birds, the soft west wind, the blue skies above, have no great messages for me. My head aches. I cannot exert my mental faculties to evolve a second set of rhymes, even when the first comes involuntarily. There is no more poetry left in me. I dropped it somewhere in those dusty, musty newspaper offices when I went home after midnight. I did not miss it then, I was too dead tired; but to-day I know where I left all my capabilities for beautiful, poetic fancies. I try to write stories, remembering the great novel which was the early dream of my life. But the blue pencil habit has killed all ability to do fine writing. Condensation is valuable in a newspaper; in a novel it does not help to adorn the page nor point a moral. Human nature is no longer interesting to me; how can I make it so to others? I have seen too much of it. I used to know a man journalist who said, "The newspaper will use you as long as

there is any freshness in you; then it will throw you aside like a squeezed lemon." I am a squeezed lemon.

"But you have had your day," says the younger woman. "Why grumble now?" Because it was not the day I wanted, and I only meant to make it the stepping-stone to something better. I did not want to be a newspaper woman and nothing more; and now that I have leisure for something more, I find my mental faculties, instead of being sharpened for further use, dulled. I have done desultory work so long I cannot take up anything more thorough. I have been a "hack" too many years. I cannot be a race horse now.

There is a moral to my tale of woe. Let the young woman who has ambitions of a literary nature shun the newspaper office as she would any other hurtful thing. I know women who are content to be reporters to the end of the chapter. But they never cared to write poems. They never glowed with imaginary triumphs. They are content with whatever work falls to their hands, so long as their daily bread and butter is assured. But there is an ever increasing army of young women coming on from colleges and schools, who have in them the ambition to do more than make a living. Let them not waste time and talent on the newspaper. The first thing they will learn is that the newspaper office is not a drawing-room. Men will treat them as they would another man, — or the office boy. They will not take the trouble to remove their pipes because a woman happens to sit in the same room with them; they will not wear coats, nor remove their feet from the table. They may even throw "spitballs" at her. But if she would be popular with the "boys" she must take all this as a matter of course. She will be met everywhere by the argument that if she goes into men's offices to do men's work, she must take men as they are in actual life, not as they appear in drawing-rooms. The sensible woman who can take this philosophically, without becoming herself "one of the boys," will find that

she is cordially liked by the men in her office. But if she persists in feeling that hats should be doffed and pipes laid by when she comes in, she will not make friends. The girl who goes to an opposite extreme and tries to make herself popular by smoking cigarettes, swinging her feet from the table, and betting on the races, will not achieve unbounded popularity, since it is necessary to stand well with the managing editor; but she who can retain her own refinement and good manners without surrounding herself with the air of superiority is liked by all classes. And yet, let her smother her love of refinement and persuade herself to enjoy a seat in the room where cuspidors are as numerous as desks, breathing an atmosphere of mingled tobacco smoke and profanity, for a few years, and her moral tone is sure to be blunted and her manner to take on a certain brusqueness not native to the delicately reared girl with college affinities. If she is honest with herself, she will own this, and question seriously whether the experience is worth while.

"But the work brings you into contact with so many delightful people!" Yes. But there are all kinds of people in the world, and the newspaper woman is pretty sure to meet them. Celebrities of all kinds become so familiar to her that the word "glamour" might well be eliminated from her dictionary. She learns to meet them on such off-hand, free-and-easy terms as to offend both the celebrities and the onlookers. It does not take her long to discover that geniuses are only men and women with some particular faculty a little more developed than the rest of us, and that usually some other faculty — too often that of common sense — is correspondingly stunted. Accordingly, she loses her reverence for geniuses. "We all look alike to our Maker," is her motto, forgetting that our Maker, if he compares us at all, uses a standard quite unknown in the newspaper office. The society woman and the club woman, too, become as transparent as glass to the

keen-witted newspaper woman. There is a time, at the very first, when she is flattered by invitations to select club-gatherings and exclusive weddings; but she soon learns, sometimes by humiliating experience, that she is tolerated for the sake of the paper she represents. She will meet with some true and beautiful women who will never let it be seen that they appreciate any difference in station or education. But she will meet more who are polite only when they have something to gain by good manners. Women will try to bribe her into writing favorable reviews of their books or flowery descriptions of their gowns; and she will come to have no more respect for the one kind than the other. It will not take long for her to discover that not only her particular doll, but all the dolls in the world, are stuffed with sawdust. Distinguished actresses will send for her, give her tickets, ask her to their dressing-rooms or to go autoing. But let her cease to write for the dramatic or social departments, and where is she? Forgotten, like a last season's play.

All this, taken as experience in the art of living, or preparatory to doing better work, may have a shaping purpose in her life. Some women who have tried it claim that it is all educatory in effect; I thought so once, myself. Now I question if I should not have been a sweeter, saner, healthier writer to-day if I had kept out of the roughening process and stuck to the country byways and hedges where songs spring easily alongside the peaceful road and idyls may be lived as well as imagined. It all comes to this: ask any newspaper woman who has worked hard and long at her profession, even her who has achieved an enviable record in it, if she would put her own young daughter into a daily newspaper office to work her way up. Her answer is, invariably, "No: a thousand times, no."

Of course, there are positions, editorial positions on the weekly and monthly publications, where conditions are entirely different. The college-educated girl with

a taste for literary work may find here a pleasant way of beginning her literary career. These places came to me only after many years of the hardest kind of newspaper work. There has been a great influx of women into newspaper offices within the last decade, but I believe they will never be so numerous as reporters again. The life is too hard and too hardening. Women are not fitted for the rush-at-all-hours a reporter's life demands. There will always be a chance for them as editorial, fashion, household, society, and critical writers, but the time is soon coming when the reporters' ranks will be filled from the men's schools instead of from the girls'. Meanwhile the young woman of literary proclivities will work her way, either from the editor's desk, or from the quiet of her own particular

corner at home, — as I should have done. Look around you and see if the women who have really succeeded with the pen have not been those who have kept off the newspaper staff.

I said, better off financially. But, after all, I doubt it. Had I remained in my country town, living sanely, thoughtfully, and helpfully to myself and others, I could have lived on less than half of what it has cost in the city. I should have had leisure for reading, walking, driving, and enjoying things, with ample time to write at regular hours. I should have arrived sooner at the point where I could command good prices for my work, and at the same time have given better, more enduring work. And I should have been younger in spirit, better in health, and more plethoric of pocket than I am to-day.

JANE

BY ARTHUR COLTON

EARLY of a dewy morning the cow, Prudence, driven by Angelica and Willy Flint, came by the house of Mrs. Jerolamon on the Salem road, and, reaching over the fence, ate the tops off the geraniums which stood in brown pots in a row on the edge of the porch. Also she nosed over two of the pots, while Willy Flint looked on and argued as follows: —

"Mrs. Jerolamon's a scratch cat. She'll lay for us pretty good."

Mrs. Jerolamon was in the barnyard out of sight, Orphan Jane was in the kitchen. Prudence lumbered innocently up the Salem road, with ruin behind her and pleasure before, namely, the brownings in high pasture below the Cattle Ridge. A half hour passed, and nothing more yet happened at the Jerolamon house.

So it is in this world. Your lumbering and milky instinct upsets your orderly

potted plants, devours with large warm mouth your careful blossoms, and goes its guileless way to other pleasures; and therefore if your desires are set on things of fragile artifice, let there be some space between your picket fence and your porch, for life goes vagrantly on the highway.

Prudence, the cow, then floated up the Salem road, and turned through the bars into the cattle lane that led past Cumming's alder swamp and the parti-colored meadows to the hill pastures. Angelica and Willy Flint walked behind her, forgetful almost of Mrs. Jerolamon's geraniums. They plotted how society might be tempted to other explosions.

Angelica had yellow hair, and a taste for swift emotions. Willy Flint had an industrious intelligence, which kept him experimenting with the eruptive forces that lay hidden in nature and society.