

## THE CONTRIBUTORS' CLUB

### A SHORT STUDY OF EDITORS

FROM time to time there appear in various of our periodicals certain bland, paternal columns in which the Editor discusses the Young Writer. The burden of these discourses is, Little Children, we do not bite. I do not know that the Young Writer has to any great extent discussed the Editor. I am moved to do so, and that quickly, while my impressions still have the spice of novelty. When editors become as thick in my acquaintance as huckleberries in the upland pasture, their personalities may become obscured. I write in haste, therefore, in a race against my own fame, for already I have had personal interviews with seven living editors.

My sensations in regard to editors are still whetted with awe, and I want to record them before all that disappears, and it is going fast. In fact, if you wish to preserve intact your fearsomeness of the mere word Editor, as well as your fervor for writing, don't write; that is, don't get accepted. There is a very simple rule for this: continue to write what you want to write, and continue to send it to people who don't want it. The writer's happiest days are those when no one appreciates him. Unaccepted, he may believe himself a Shakespeare; accepted, he knows himself a Grub-Streeter. The low world has laid its thumb; he is sunk to the sordidness of all things labelable. Unaccepted, he may believe himself what he pleases, and write what he pleases; accepted, he is no longer free, but bondservant; he alone is free of whom no one expects anything.

My respect for writing and my respect for editors began to decline from the moment they began to accept me. Up to that time, editors were entirely without personality except such as was expressed in the quantity and quality of the sugar with

which in their printed slips they covered the pill of rejection. These official communications, however, in the elaborateness and ingenuity of their courtesy, are not to be compared with the adroitness and delicacy with which the personal editor, brave in his own chirography, can state the fact that your wares are not to his liking. I should blush to tell him that I am really unworthy of his inventiveness, that rejection is not the stab he evidently thinks it ought to be. How can I tell a man who shows so much sensibility himself as he administers the blow, that my own sensibilities as I receive it are inferior to his?

In my experience editors acquired personality slowly. It began with initials. These initials attached themselves with a slight word of encouragement to the printed rejection. The initials invited me to try again, but for long the invitation was a snare. After a very weary time the initials appeared after the printed acceptance, then after the personal one, and at length the editor stepped boldly out of his official obscurity and signed his full name. It was then that I was first moved to try to meet him, to track him to his lair. I well remember my first editor, — also, immediately prior to the editor, the sensations of throat and knees as the elevator mounted, and the sickening plunge into a great, cavernous room, in which crouched, not one editor, but twenty, it appeared. My first editor proved no more formidable than the friendly letters that had preceded our acquaintance. He was a big, breezy man, with no taint of printer's ink about him, suggesting rather tennis and football and abundant tubbing. I forgot he was an editor. He confided to me his own literary ambitions. All editors have their own literary ambitions, and a way of talking of them that suggests that you are much more a some-

body than they can ever hope to be. It is the ringmaster's complimentary bow to the acrobat, his confidential, "I do a bit of the trapeze myself sometimes in other tents than mine."

This editor, furthermore, was brisk and businesslike. He told me what he wanted, and I told him I'd give it to him. I left him with a sense that I had gained a lesson in the tricks of my trade.

From my practical editor I proceeded to my poetic one. I thought to find out what it was *he* wanted of me. I call him my poetic editor partly on account of the love-songs to which I see his name attached in the magazines, partly on account of his hair. He is young; the dust of college not off him. When boldly and baldly I put the question, what did he want? he blushed for me. politely and patiently blushed for me, through a homeopathic philippic lasting fifteen minutes. A writer should never try to please an editor, he said; a writer should let the winds of fancy blow through him, and write at their æolian dictates; he should never try to trim his personality to the imagined pattern of an editor's taste, — he should be his own pattern; "please yourself, and you will please me," concluded my poetic editor, dismissing me; but, curiously enough, I never have pleased him.

I have met but one editor whose soul was neither that of a gentleman nor a scholar. He conducted a potent newspaper, and he wanted a column a week for it of literary chat, nothing learned, nothing commonplace, something altogether novel, something wholly brilliant, a show of intellectual fireworks that would make his paper famous. Was my name to be appended? I asked. Oh, no, for anonymity would enable him the more easily to turn me off and put another in my stead. His price? I cannily inquired. Shylock wore no gaberdine, but he answered, "Five dollars a week." I was so new a writer as to be almost non-existent, but I rejected this editor.

This is my only mercenary editor. As

a rule, editors embarrass me by being so little mercenary when I myself am greatly so. They seem to expect me to be as little commercial as my pot-boilers aim to appear. It is a serious trouble, the fact that editors seem to expect, when they see you in the flesh, that you will be that person you have appeared to be on paper. This failing is not confined to editors, but that is exactly my grievance; editors ought to be the last of men to expect you to live up to what you write.

As a matter of fact, there is but one editorial room where I can be myself. Here there is a keen-eyed editor who knows me the child of darkness if I do write moral tales, knows me a sad bluffer if I do write criticism, does not expect me to lisp in numbers if a bit of verse does sing itself off my pen in an unguarded moment, does not expect to cull psychological or biological flowers from my workaday conversation just because I sometimes in stories sport with subtleties and curious phenomena. Thank Heaven for one editor who sees through me, and gives me the satisfaction of knowing it.

So do they not all. For instance, there is the editor who loves phrases, and counts on me to appreciate them. His letters require the elucidation of a Reader's Handbook, a Biblical Concordance, and the *Century Cyclopædia of Names*. His briefest communications drip with erudite allusion. This editor really knows things, and I am sure he thinks I appreciate his intricacies of reference because, forsooth, I have sometimes written for him essays in which I trigged myself out in my few shreds of learning, wearing them bravely, as if I had whole drawerfuls of ornamental knowledge to supplement them.

O editors, you are of all men most unsophisticated. I am not learned, although I write so; nor, O gentle arbiters of my fate, am I good because I write so.

My pen paces on here to my pious editor, him for whom I write those moving moral tales for the young, in which I pipe to the reader's emotions, and the reader in response politely pipes his eye.

To this editor I here make confession. I dare to do so only anonymously, but what weary weight of insincerity he has made me carry! Dear Sir, forgive me; I am poor, and you pay so well for piety. I write to your order, as per your printed circular, "short, inspiring tales in which a character crisis is involved," and I always let my sin-tossed hero, *ætat.* fifteen, land cat-like on his feet. I bedew with simple pathos the eye of grandam and grandchild, but O Sir Editor, I who write thus am myself full of the Old Boy. I who write thus innocently for the tender juvenal could with this same red right hand write for the tough senior tales of riot or of ruin, of divorce, destiny, or naughty Paris!

I shudder to recollect that before I met him I fancied my pious editor, — he who supplied the public with the milk of human kindness, germ-proof, hygienic, fresh-bottled weekly, — was just such another even as I — his — his *côw*! (Heaven save us from our own metaphors!) In my first interview I actually caught a wink on the wing, and in the nick of time clapped it into my pocket, marked for future reference, "Not for editors or the clergy."

I met the extreme of my pious editor some weeks ago. His is a Sunday School publication and it was my proud purpose, judiciously concealed, to use him as a scrap-basket in extreme need. But even as a scrap-basket his appreciation of my wares needed stimulating. I speak commercially, otherwise his appreciation overflowed several typewritten pages. He pressed me to call, but first he sent me a small devotional book of his own. Now, I can bear religion in the open, when I'm all alone, in woods or fields, with the wind blowing, and the world all about big and breezy; but compress religion into a book, a little gold and white book, with versicle, canticle, and prayerlet for every day, tack my soul sensations to a calendar thus, — well, my soul is too fond of playing truant for that.

I called, I waited in a room ornamented

with texts and typewriters and lank begonias. Then, my card having preceded me, I was passed on into the sanctum. Just because he was thrice as old, did he need to hold my hand so fervently, and to say, "I want to know you, to look into your eyes, to be your friend"? My embarrassment must have embarrassed him. I shot off into business as dexterously as possible, and, having moderately accomplished my aim in coming, rose to go, but was detained. "We have talked of your writing, now let us talk of you," persisted my host. He discovered my college, my class, my birthplace, my boarding-house, my mother's maiden name, my church connection; but he did not catch *me*. Pray, why should he have tried to? Is it not enough that we who write must cook up out of our inmost sensations and experiences appetizing dishes for an editor's palate, without having either editor or public think they have a right to knock at the kitchen door? I am willing to cook, but when I entertain I do so on the front piazza, or anonymously, as now, at the rooms of the Contributors' Club.

#### CHOKED UTTERANCES

The Contributor takes his well-gnawed pencil and his scribbling pad in hand with some degree of insecurity. For many years he has admired the wit and ease with which various members of the Club seize and hit off as literary material the things that all of us have always known, but that none of us have ever noticed. He has more than once, on turning over the new *Atlantic* to those ever alluring pages at the back, found the familiar subjects which he discussed that morning with his wife while dressing for breakfast, clothed in language, dignified by print, accepted and inserted in the coveted spaces of the magazine. It was like discovering a picture of one's own kitchen-garden or blackberry patch illustrating an article on "Beautiful America:" a homely, accustomed thing brought into the public eye. It had been within a