



JOURNALISM

By Lincoln Steffens



ONE day in the first week of my service in an executive position on a New York newspaper, the office boy came up grinning to my desk, and mumbling, "Wants a job," laid down a card. I thought he was amused at the great number of applicants that had called that day, so took no notice of his humor or of the name on the card, but hurried down to the rail to look the "cub" over. He was a shabby, gray-haired old man of perhaps fifty years. I was the "cub."

"What is it you want?"
 "Anything, everything—office boy, reporter, desk man—any old thing—something a week—a job."

"But what can you do best? What have you done?"

He smiled. "Well, let's see. I was a reporter on 'The Blank.' I have been a desk man on 'The Quill,' night editor of 'The Courier,' city editor of 'The Mirror,' Sunday editor of 'The Appeal.' I was—" He paused a moment. He nodded across the roomful of young men, and the smile dried up—"I was managing editor here once," he said.

He spoke softly, and we looked at each other eye to eye for a second, then he turned away and disappeared.

A Newspaper Story

A NEWSPAPER wreck—one of the ghosts of Park Row. A glance at the name recalled the story, a newspaper story: the bright young man, the rising young journalist, the star reporter, the editor bid for at rising salaries, then the weary old duffer in somebody's way, the borrower out of a job, the used-up hack. It was like having your future walk in on you, and to have asked him to stay would have been like hiring my fate to stalk about before me every day.

Not many newspaper men will advise anyone to get into journalism. Failure in it is so utter and miserable. It follows such brilliant hopes and such society of vanity and self-love, that when the fall comes the whole man goes, mentally, morally, physically. The heart breaks, somehow, and since there is rarely any money accumulated or divertible skill or solid connections, the wreck is complete and lonely. If one spark of fire remained, some of these men who were writers once would write their own story and score a beat on the world that would be worth while. But a man can't be expected, I suppose, to feed on his own vitals, and it is hard after telling the facts to tell the truth also.

These abject failures, however, are not often in a position to give advice against the repetition of their careers. It is the successful men who sound the warnings that are to be listened to. They were fit, and they have survived; but many of them, some of the leaders of the profession, are sour with disappointment. When they rail, as they do often, at their lot, they cover the whole ground: the little money they can make; the obscurity of anonymity; the limitations upon their individuality; the ephemer-

al nature of all a man's work; the exhaustion that comes of the daily grind.

All of these are fair counts in the indictment. Fortunes are made in journalism, but very few; the proportion is much less than in any profession I can think of except teaching and correct politics. And the men who grow rich on daily newspapers are usually business men who would do as well managing almost any other big business. High salaries are paid—as much as twenty thousand dollars—but these again go to the managers of the papers, who, though they buy and sell news and opinions—yes, and literature—are executive minds who could deal as profitably in any other class of goods. Such possibilities must be considered on the fair side of the case; but this cannot be set off against the fact that, for from four to ten thousand a year, newspapers have the services of men with talent and character which in law, medicine, or railroading would bring in twenty thousand to a hundred thousand dollars or more a year.

What Reporters Are Paid

THERE is no rule of remuneration on newspapers. Beginners in New York are put sometimes on space, and make from nothing up to ten dollars the first week; and more and more, as they learn, till they may earn one hundred dollars. Sometimes they are started on a salary of five, eight, ten, and twelve dollars. The other large cities pay less, and the country very little at any time. A country reporter may get three dollars a week at first, twenty dollars in his prime; his chief may not make more than twenty-five or forty dollars.

Whether to begin in a city, town, or village is a question of circumstances. It doesn't matter much to a strong character. The country newspaper man learns the whole business at once, which is a great advantage, and if he has power he succeeds there, and perhaps outgrows the place. The big city is best for light-weight, clever fellows, who may be made by their surroundings. Certainly great papers, which, however, are scattered all about the land, pick out ability more quickly and foster it. The thing to do is to start anywhere, and then "watch out"; run away from men and places which stop growth, and start wherever progress is possible.

This money question is all the more important because it is not pressing at first. Young men often think they don't want money—other things are so much better. But as they go along in life they find, or their wives find, that money either gets the other things or adds to the enjoyment of them. At any rate, the old newspaper men who were young once often rue bitterly the reckless enthusiasm with which they chose their profession. And as for the young men who go into journalism because they want money, they, too, repent too late when they learn that the first salaries are the best. Young doctors nearly starve for a year or two, young lawyers sometimes pay for the privilege of working in an office, young architects and artists work for wages or nothing; while the youngest reporter on a New York

paper gets a few dollars a week, and the rise to twenty-five, thirty, forty, dollars may be rapid. Five thousand a year may be attained before the men in the other professions are making a fair living.

Those others, however, have been building all for themselves, developing their practice, their art. The journalist has been building somebody's else property. He is helping to make fame and fortune for his paper. His own abilities develop truly, and his market value increases; but the market is narrow, and his efforts have not been cumulative. By the time a bank president is tired out, he owns the bank; when the artist's mind softens, the artist has a name. The newspaper man tires first, and when he drops, nothing drips; he is a sucked orange.

Anonymity, too, palls not at first, but later, when the enthusiasm which might carry a man's head up through it has died away. It is enough at first to see your own language in print. Your most intimate friends know which is your work, and the men about you in the office and those who have been doing the same things for other papers; all these are for awhile a sufficient audience. But by and by a man becomes a man of the world in a sense. He sees his stories or his editorials having an effect in public interest or opinion. It is convincing to him that more or less fame or advertisement might be his, and that it would be not alone a satisfaction to his self-love but a means to social, political, and financial advancement.

His Individuality Stifled

I KNOW a man who once was sufficiently gratified to have his editorials mistaken for his chief's, one of the three or four editors whose personalities have so shone through their newspapers that their names are known as well as the names of their papers. Now this associate editor is unhappy because no one can tell by his page that the chief is in Europe. He is aggrieved for two reasons: first, because his genius and labor go to another man's credit; second, because that is right, since his personality has been molded, as his style was modeled, on another man's.

There, I think, is an essential tragedy of journalism. Money difficulties are comedy in comparison, and the vanity crushed by anonymity is farce; but the annihilation of an individuality which comes of feeling, thinking, writing, and being like and for another man is as serious as life and death. And the case I have in mind is typical; in the editorial rooms of American newspapers it is commonplace. Of course, not all the cases of this sort are tragic. I know of a man who during a presidential campaign was engaged by two papers of opposite political faiths to write their leaders. He was a good editorial writer. Indeed, he was chosen by the second paper because of the effectiveness of his work on the first, and though he was cynical and witty about his double part, he seemed to be a bit proud of it and well pleased with the admiration he had from many of his fellow-craftsmen. I believe, however, that if this man could be caught off his guard in a sincere moment his wit would be found secreting gall; what