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Newspaper Morals

ASPIRING, toward the end of my nonage, to the black robes of a dramatic critic, I took counsel with an ancient whose service went back to the days of Our American Cousin, asking him what qualities were chiefly demanded by the craft.

'The main idea,' he told me frankly, 'is to be interesting, to write a good story. All else is dross. Of course, I am not against accuracy, fairness, information, learning. If you want to read Lessing and Freytag, Hazlitt and Brunetiere, go read them: they will do you no harm. It is also useful to know something about Shakespeare. But unless you can make people read your criticisms, you may as well shut up your shop. And the only way to make them read you is to give them something exciting.'

'You suggest, then,' I ventured, 'a certain — ferocity?'

'I do,' replied my venerable friend. 'Read George Henry Lewes, and see how he did it — sometimes with a bladder on a string, usually with a meat-axe. Knock somebody in the head every day — if not an actor, then the author, and if not the author, then the manager. And if the play and the performance are perfect, then excoriate someone who doesn't think so — a fellow critic, a rival manager, the unappreciative public. But make it hearty; make it hot! The public would rather be the butt itself than have no butt in the ring. That is Rule No. 1 of American psychology — and of English, too, but more especially of American. You must give a good show to get a crowd, and a good show means one with slaughter in it.'

Destiny soon robbed me of my critical shroud, and I fell into a long succession of less aesthetic newspaper berths, from that of police reporter to that of managing editor, but always the advice of my ancient counselor kept turning over and over in my memory, and as chance offered I began to act upon it, and whenever I acted upon it I found that it worked. What is more, I found that other newspaper men acted upon it too, some of them quite consciously and frankly, and others through a veil of self-deception, more or less diaphanous. The primary aim of all of them, no less when they played the secular lokanaan than when they played the mere newsmonger, was to please the crowd, to give a good show; and the way they set about giving that good show was by first selecting a deserving victim, and then putting him magnificently to the torture. This was their method when they were performing for their own profit only, when their one motive was to make the public read their paper; but it was still their method when they were battling bravely and unselfishly for the public good, and so discharging the highest duty of their profession. They lightened the dull days of midsummer by pursuing recreant aldermen with bloodhounds and artillery, by muckraking unsanitary milk-dealers, or by denouncing Sunday liquor-selling in suburban parks — and they fought constructive campaigns for good government in exactly the same gothic, melodramatic way. Always their first aim was to find a concrete target, to visualize their cause in some definite and defiant opponent. And always their second aim was to shell that opponent until he dropped his arms and took to ignominious flight. It was not enough to maintain and to prove; it was necessary also to pursue and overcome, to lay a specific somebody low, to give the good show aforesaid.

Does this confession of newspaper practice involve a libel upon the American people? Perhaps it does — on the theory, let us say, that the greater the truth, the greater the libel. But I doubt if any reflective newspaper man, however lofty his professional ideals, will ever deny any essential part of that truth. He knows very well that a definite limit is set, not only upon the people's capacity for grasping intellectual concepts, but also upon their capacity for grasping moral concepts. He knows that it is necessary, if he would catch and inflame them, to state his ethical syllogism in the homely terms of their habitual ethical thinking. And he knows that this is best done by dramatizing and vulgarizing it, by filling it with dynamic and emotional significance, by translating all argument for a principle into rage against a man.

In brief, he knows that it is hard for the plain people to think about a thing, but easy for them to feel. Error, to hold their attention, must be visualized as a villain, and the villain must proceed swiftly to his inevitable retribution. They can understand that process; it is simple, usual, satisfying; it squares with their primitive conception of justice as a form of revenge. The hero fires them too, but less certainly, less violently than the villain. His defect is that he offers thrills at second-hand. It is the merit of the villain, pursued publicly by a posse comitatus, that he makes the public breast the primary seat of heroism, that he makes every citizen a personal participant in a glorious act of justice. Wherefore it is ever the aim of the sagacious journalist to foster that sense of personal participation. The wars that he wages are always described as the people's wars, and he himself affects to be no more than their strategist and claque. When the victory has once been gained, true enough, he may take all the credit without a blush; but while the fight is going on he always pretends that every honest yeoman is enlisted, and he is even eager to make it appear that the yeomanry began it on their own motion, and out of the excess of their natural virtue.

I assume here, as an axiom too obvious to be argued, that the chief appeal of a newspaper, in all such holy causes, is not at all to the educated and reflective minority of citizens, but frankly to the ignorant and unreflective majority. The truth is that it would usually get a newspaper nowhere to address its exhortations to the former, for in the first place they are too few in number to make their support of much value in general engagements, and in the second place it is almost always impossible to convert them into disciplined and useful soldiers. They are too cantankerous for that, too ready with embarrassing strategy of their own. One of the principal marks of an educated man, indeed, is the fact that he does not take his opinions from newspapers — not, at any rate, from the militant, crusading newspapers. On the contrary, his attitude toward them is almost always one of frank cynicism, with indifference as its mildest form and contempt as its commonest. He knows that they are constantly falling into false reasoning about the things within his personal knowledge,—that is, within the narrow circle of his special education, — and so he assumes that they make the same, or even worse errors about other things, whether intellectual or moral. This assumption, it may be said at once, is quite justified by the facts.

I know of no subject, in truth, save perhaps baseball, on which the average American newspaper, even in the larger cities, discourses with unfailing sense and understanding. Whenever the public journals presume to illuminate such a matter as municipal taxation, for example, or the extension of local transportation facilities, or the punishment of public or private criminals, or the control of public-service corporations, or the revision of city charters, the chief effect of their effort is to introduce into it a host of extraneous issues, most of them wholly emotional, and so they contrive to make it unintelligible to all earnest seekers after the truth.

But it does not follow thereby that they also make it unintelligible to their special client, the man in the street. Far from it. What they actually accomplish is the exact opposite. That is to say, it is precisely by this process of transmutation and emotionalization that they bring a given problem down to the level of that man's comprehension, and what is more

important, within the range of his active sympathies. He is not interested in anything that does not stir him, and he is not stirred by anything that fails to impinge upon his small stock of customary appetites and attitudes. His daily acts are ordered, not by any complex process of reasoning, but by a continuous process of very elemental feeling. He is not at all responsive to purely intellectual argument, even when its theme is his own ultimate benefit, for such argument quickly gets beyond his immediate interest and experience. But he is very responsive to emotional suggestion, particularly when it is crudely and violently made, and it is to this weakness that the newspapers must ever address their endeavors. In brief, they must try to arouse his horror, or indignation, or pity, or simply his lust for slaughter. Once they have done that, they have him safely by the nose. He will follow blindly until his emotion wears out. He will be ready to believe anything, however absurd, so long as he is in his state of psychic tumescence.

In the reform campaigns which periodically rock our large cities, — and our small ones, too, — the newspapers habitually make use of this fact. Such campaigns are not intellectual wars upon erroneous principles, but emotional wars upon errant men: they always revolve around the pursuit of some definite, concrete, fugitive malefactor, or group of malefactors. That is to say, they belong to popular sport rather than to the science of government; the impulse behind them is always far more orgiastic than reflective. For good government in the abstract, the people of the United States seem to have no liking, or, at all events, no passion. It is impossible to get them stirred up over it, or even to make them give serious thought to it. They seem to assume that it is a mere phantasm of theorists, a political will-o'- the-wisp, a Utopian dream — wholly uninteresting, and probably full of dangers and tricks. The very discussion of it bores them unspeakably, and those papers which habitually discuss it logically and unemotionally — for example, the *New York Evening Post* — are diligently avoided by the mob. What the mob thirsts for is not good government in itself, but the merry chase of a definite exponent of bad government. The newspaper that discovers such an exponent — or, more accurately, the newspaper that discovers dramatic and overwhelming evidence against him — has all the material necessary for a reform wave of the highest emotional intensity. All that it need do is to goad the victim into a fight. Once he has formally joined the issue, the people will do the rest. They are always ready for a man-hunt, and their favorite quarry is the man of politics. If no such prey is at hand, they will turn to wealthy debauchees, to fallen Sunday-school superintendents, to money barons, to white-slave traders, to unsedulous chiefs of police. But their first choice is the boss.

In assaulting bosses, however, a newspaper must look carefully to its ammunition, and to the order and interrelation of its salvos. There is such a thing, at the start, as overshooting the mark, and the danger thereof is very serious. The people must be aroused by degrees, gently at first, and then with more and more ferocity. They are not capable of reaching the maximum of indignation at one leap: even on the side of pure emotion they have their rigid limitations. And this, of course, is because even emotion must have a quasi-intellectual basis, because even indignation must arise out of facts. One fact at a time! If a newspaper printed the whole story of a political boss's misdeeds in a single article, that article would have scarcely any effect whatever, for it would be far too long for the average reader to read and absorb. He would never get to the end of it, and the part he actually traversed would remain muddled and distasteful in his memory. Far from arousing an emotion in him, it would arouse only ennui, which is the very antithesis of emotion. He cannot read more than three columns of any one subject without tiring: 6,000 words, I should say, is the extreme limit of his appetite. And the nearer he is pushed to that limit, the greater the strain upon his psychic digestion. He can absorb a single capital fact, leaping from a headline, at one colossal gulp; but he could not down a dissertation in twenty. And the first

desideratum in a headline is that it deal with a single and capital fact. It must be 'McGinnis Steals $1,257,867.25,' not 'McGinnis Lacks Ethical Sense.'

Moreover, a newspaper article which presumed to tell the whole of a thrilling story in one gargantuan installment would lack the dynamic element, the quality of mystery and suspense. Even if it should achieve the miracle of arousing the reader to a high pitch of excitement, it would let him drop again next day. If he is to be kept in his frenzy long enough for it to be dangerous to the common foe, he must be led into it gradually. The newspaper in charge of the business must harrow him, tease him, promise him, hold him. It is thus that his indignation is transformed from a state of being into a state of gradual and cumulative becoming; it is thus that reform takes on the character of a hotly contested game, with the issue agreeably in doubt. And it is always as a game, of course, that the man in the street views moral endeavor. Whether its proposed victim be a political boss, a police captain, a gambler, a fugitive murderer, or a disgraced clergyman, his interest in it is almost purely a sporting interest. And the intensity of that interest, of course, depends upon the fierceness of the clash. The game is fascinating in proportion as the morally pursued puts up a stubborn defense, and in proportion as the newspaper directing the pursuit is resourceful and merciless, and in proportion as the eminence of the quarry is great and his resultant downfall spectacular. A war against a ward boss seldom attracts much attention, even in the smaller cities, for he is insignificant to begin with and an inept and cowardly fellow to end with; but the famous war upon William M. Tweed shook the whole nation, for he was a man of tremendous power, he was a brave and enterprising antagonist, and his fall carried a multitude of other men with him. Here, indeed, was sport royal, and the plain people took to it with avidity.

But once such a buccaneer is overhauled and manacled, the show is over, and the people take no further interest in reform. In place of the fallen boss, a so-called reformer has been set up. He goes into office with public opinion apparently solidly behind him: there is every promise that the improvement achieved will be lasting. But experience shows that it seldom is. Reform does not last. The reformer quickly loses his public. His usual fate, indeed, is to become the pet butt and aversion of his public. The very mob that put him into office chases him out of office. And after all, there is nothing very astonishing about this change of front, which is really far less a change of front than it seems. The mob has been fed, for weeks preceding the reformer's elevation, upon the blood of big and little bosses; it has acquired a taste for their chase, and for the chase in general. Now, of a sudden, it is deprived of that stimulating sport. The old bosses are in retreat; there are yet no new bosses to belabor and pursue; the newspapers which elected the reformer are busily apologizing for his amateurish errors — a dull and dispiriting business. No wonder it now becomes possible for the old bosses, acting through their inevitable friends on the respectable side—the 'solid' business men, the takers of favors, the underwriters of political enterprise, and the newspapers influenced by these pious fellows — to start the rabble against the reformer. The trick is quite as easy as that but lately done. The rabble wants a good show, a game, a victim: it doesn't care who that victim may be. How easy to convince it that the reformer is a scoundrel himself, that he is as bad as any of the old bosses, that he ought to go to the block for high crimes and misdemeanors! It never had any actual love for him, or even any faith in him; his election was a mere incident of the chase of his predecessor. No wonder that it falls upon him eagerly, butchering him to make a new holiday!

This is what has happened over and over again in every large American city — Chicago, New York, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, New Orleans, Baltimore, San Francisco, St. Paul, Kansas City. Every one of these places has had its melodramatic reform campaigns and its inevitable reactions. The people have leaped to the overthrow of bosses, and then wearied of the ensuing tedium. A perfectly typical slipping back, to be matched in a

dozen other cities, is going on in Philadelphia today. Mayor Rudolph Blankenberg, a veteran warhorse of reform, came into office through the downfall of the old bosses, a catastrophe for which he had labored and agitated for more than thirty years. But now the old bosses are getting their revenge by telling the people that he is a violent and villainous boss himself. Certain newspapers are helping them; they have concealed but powerful support among financiers and business men; volunteers have even come forward from other cities — for example, the Mayor of Baltimore, himself a triumphant ringster. Slowly but surely this insidious campaign is making itself felt; the common people show signs of yearning for another auto-da-fe. Mayor Blankenberg, unless I am the worst prophet unhung, will meet with an overwhelming defeat in 1915. And it will be a very difficult thing to put even a half-decent man in his place: the victory of the bosses will be so nearly complete that they will be under no necessity of offering compromises. Employing a favorite device of political humor, they may select a harmless blank cartridge, a respectable numskull, what is commonly called a perfumer. But the chances are that they will select a frank ringster, and that the people will elect him with cheers.

Such is the ebb and flow of emotion in the popular heart — or perhaps, if we would be more accurate, the popular liver. It does not constitute an intelligible system of morality, for morality, at bottom, is not at all ah instinctive matter, but a purely intellectual matter: its essence is the control of impulse by an ideational process, the subordination of the immediate desire to the distant aim. But such as it is, it is the only system of morality that the emotional majority is capable of comprehending and practicing; and so the newspapers, which deal with majorities quite as frankly as politicians deal with them, have to admit it into their own system. That is to say, they cannot accomplish anything by talking down to the public from a moral plane higher than its own: they must take careful account of its habitual ways of thinking, its moral thirsts and prejudices, its well-defined limitations. They must remember clearly, as judges and lawyers have to remember it, that the morality subscribed to by that public is far from the stern and arctic morality of professors of the science. On the contrary, it is a mellower and more human thing; it has room for the antithetical emotions of sympathy and scorn; it makes no effort to separate the criminal from his crime. The higher moralities, running up to that of Puritans and archbishops, allow no weight to custom, to general reputation, to temptation; they hold it to be no defence of a ballot-box stuffer, for example, that he had scores of accomplices and that he is kind to his little children. But the popular morality regards such a defence as sound and apposite; it is perfectly willing to convert a trial on a specific charge into a trial on a general charge. And in giving judgment it is always ready to let feeling triumph over every idea of abstract justice; and very often that feeling has its origin and support, not in matters actually in evidence, but in impressions wholly extraneous and irrelevant.

Hence the need of a careful and wary approach in all newspaper crusades, particularly on the political side. On the one hand, as I have said, the astute journalist must remember the public's incapacity for taking in more than one thing at a time, and on the other hand, he must remember its disposition to he swayed by mere feeling, and its habit of founding that feeling upon genera, and indefinite impressions. Reduced to a rule of everyday practice, this means that the campaign against a given malefactor must begin a good while before the capital accusation — that is, the accusation upon which a verdict of guilty is sought — is formally brought forward. There must be a shelling of the fortress before the assault; suspicion must precede indignation. If this preliminary work is neglected or ineptly performed, the result is apt to be a collapse of the campaign. The public is not ready to switch from confidence to doubt on the instant; if its general attitude toward a man is sympathetic, that sympathy is likely to survive even a very vigorous attack. The accomplished mob-master lays his course accordingly. His first aim is to arouse suspicion, to break down the presumption of innocence

— supposing, of course, that he finds it to exist. He knows that he must plant a seed, and tend it long and lovingly, before he may pluck his dragon-flower. He knows that all storms of emotion, however suddenly they may seem to come up, have their origin over the rim of consciousness, and that their gathering is really a slow, slow business. I mix the figures shamelessly, as mob-masters mix their brews!

It is this persistence of an attitude which gives a certain degree of immunity to all newcomers in office, even in the face of sharp and resourceful assault. For example, a new president. The majority in favor of him on Inauguration Day is usually overwhelming, no matter how small his plurality in the November preceding, for common self-respect demands that the people magnify his virtues: to deny them would be a confession of national failure, a destructive criticism of the Republic. And that benignant disposition commonly survives until his first year in office is more than half gone. The public prejudice is wholly on his side: his critics find it difficult to arouse any indignation against him, even when the offenses they lay to him are in violation of the fundamental axioms of popular morality. This explains why it was that Mr. Wilson was so little damaged by the charge of federal interference in the Diggs-Caminetti case — a charge well supported by the evidence brought forward, and involving a serious violation of popular notions of virtue. And this explains, too, why he survived the oratorical pilgrimages of his Secretary of State at a time of serious international difficulty—pilgrimages apparently undertaken with his approval, and hence at his political risk and cost. The people were still in favor of him, and so he was not brought to irate and drum-head judgment. No roar of indignation arose to the heavens. The opposition newspapers, with sure instinct, felt the irresistible force of public opinion on his side, and so they ceased their clamor very quickly.

But it is just such a slow accumulation of pin-pricks, each apparently harmless in itself, that finally draws blood; it is by just such a leisurely and insidious process that the presumption of innocence is destroyed, and a hospitality to suspicion created. The campaign against Governor Sulzer in New York offers a classic example of this process in operation, with very skillful gentlemen, journalistic and political, in control of it. The charges on which Governor Sulzer was finally brought to impeachment were not launched at him out of a clear sky, nor while the primary presumption in his favor remained unshaken. Not at all. They were launched at a carefully selected and critical moment — at the end, to wit, of a long and well-managed series of minor attacks. The fortress of his popularity was bombarded a long while before it was assaulted. He was pursued with insinuations and innuendoes; various persons, more or less dubious, were led to make various charges, more or less vague, against him; the managers of the campaign sought to poison the plain people with doubts, misunderstandings, suspicions. This effort, so diligently made, was highly successful; and so the capital charges, when they were brought forward at last, had the effect of confirmations, of corroborations, of proofs. But, if Tammany had made them during the first few months of Governor Sulzer's term, while all doubts were yet in his favor, it would have got only scornful laughter for its pains. The ground had to be prepared; the public mind had to be put into training.

The end of my space is near, and I find that I have written of popular morality very copiously, and of newspaper morality very little. But, as I have said before, the one is the other. The newspaper must adapt its pleading to its clients' moral limitations, just as the trial lawyer must adapt his pleading to the jury's limitations. Neither may like the job, but both must face it to gain a larger end. And that end, I believe, is a worthy one in the newspaper's case quite as often as in the lawyer's, and perhaps far oftener. The art of leading the vulgar, in itself, does no discredit to its practitioner. Lincoln practiced it unashamed, and so did Webster, Clay, and Henry. What is more, these men practiced it with frank allowance for the naivete of the people they presumed to lead. It was Lincoln's chief source of strength, indeed, that he had a homely way with him, that he could reduce complex problems to the simple

terms of popular theory and emotion, that he did not ask little fishes to think and act like whales. This is the manner in which the newspapers do their work, and in the long run, I am convinced, they accomplish far more good than harm thereby. Dishonesty, of course, is not unknown among them: we have newspapers in this land which apply a truly devilish technical skill to the achievement of unsound and unworthy ends. But not as many of them as perfectionists usually allege. Taking one with another, they strive in the right direction. They realize the massive fact that the plain people, for all their poverty of wit, cannot be fooled forever. They have a healthy fear of that heathen rage which so often serves their uses.

Look back a generation or two. Consider the history of our democracy since the Civil War. Our most serious problems, it must be plain, have been solved orgiastically, and to the tune of deafening newspaper urging and clamor. Men have been washed into office on waves of emotion, and washed out again in the same manner. Measures and policies have been determined by indignation far more often than by cold reason. But is the net result evil? Is there even any permanent damage from those debauches of sentiment in which the newspapers have acted insincerely, unintelligently, with no thought save for the show itself? I doubt it. The effect of their long and melodramatic chase of bosses is an undoubted improvement in our whole governmental method. The boss of to-day is not an envied first citizen, but a criminal constantly on trial. He is debarred himself from all public offices of honor, and his control over other public officers grows less and less. Elections are no longer boldly stolen; the humblest citizen may go to the polls in safety and cast his vote honestly; the machine grows less dangerous year by year; perhaps it is already less dangerous than a camorra of Utopian and dehumanized reformers would be. We begin to develop an official morality which actually rises above our private morality. Bribe-takers are sent to jail by the votes of jurymen who give presents in their daily business, and are not above beating the street-car company.

And so, too, in narrower fields. The white-slave agitation of a year or so ago was ludicrously extravagant and emotional, but its net effect is a better conscience, a new alertness. The news papers discharged broadsides of 12- inch guns to bring down a flock of buzzards — but they brought down the buzzards. They have libeled and lynched the police — but the police are the better for it. They have represented salicylic acid as an elder brother to bichloride of mercury — but we are poisoned less than we used to be. They have lifted the plain people to frenzies of senseless terror over drinking-cups and neighbors with coughs — but the death-rate from tuberculosis declines. They have railroaded men to prison, denying them all their common rights — but fewer malefactors escape today than yesterday.

The way of ethical progress is not straight. It describes, to risk a mathematical pun, a sort of drunken hyperbola. But if we thus move onward and upward by leaps and bounces, it is certainly better than not moving at all. Each time, perhaps, we slip back, but each time we stop at a higher level.