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The country printer

THE COUNTRY PRINTER

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AN ESSAY BY
WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

PRIVATELY PRINTED

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MY earliest memories, or those which I can make sure are not the sort of early hearsay that we mistake for remembrance later in life, concern a country newspaper, or, rather, a country printing-office. The office was in my childish consciousness some years before the paper was; the compositors rhythmically swaying before their cases of type; the pressman flinging himself back on the bar that made the impression, with a swirl of his long hair; the apprentice rolling the forms, and the foreman bending over the imposing-stone were familiar to me when I could not grasp the notion of any effect from their labors. In due time I came to know all about it, and to understand that these activities went to the making of the Whig newspaper which my father edited to the confusion of the Locofocos, and in the especial interest of Henry Clay; I myself supported this leader so vigorously for the presidency in my seventh year that it was long before I could realize that the election of 1844 had resulted in his defeat. My father had

already been a printer for a good many years, and sometime in the early thirties he had led a literary forlorn-hope, in a West-Virginian town, with a monthly magazine, which he printed himself and edited with the help of his sister.

As long as he remained in business he remained a country editor and a country printer; he began to study medicine when he was a young man, but he abandoned it for the calling of his life without regret, and, though with his speculative and inventive temperament he was tempted to experiment in other things, I do not think he would ever have lastingly forsaken his newspaper for them. In fact, the art of printing was in our blood; it never brought us great honor or profit; and we were always planning and dreaming to get out of it, or get it out of us; but we are all in some sort bound up with it still. To me it is now so endeared by the associations of childhood that I cannot breathe the familiar odor of types and presses without emotion; and I should not be surprised if I found myself trying to cast a halo of romance about the old-fashioned country office in what I shall have to say of it here.

I

OUR first newspaper was published in southwestern Ohio, but after a series of varying fortunes,

which I need not dwell upon, we found ourselves in possession of an office in the northeastern corner of the state, where the prevalent political feeling promised a prosperity to one of my father's antislavery opinions which he had never yet enjoyed. He had no money, but in those days it was an easy matter to get an interest in a country paper on credit, and we all went gladly to work to help him pay for the share that he acquired in one by this means. An office which gave a fair enough living, as living was then, could be bought for twelve or fifteen hundred dollars; but this was an uncommonly good office, and I suppose the half of it which my father took was worth one sum or the other. Afterward, within a few months, when it was arranged to remove the paper from the village where it had always been published to the county-seat, a sort of joint-stock company was formed, and the value of his moiety increased so much, nominally at least, that he was nearly ten years paying for it. By this time I was long out of the story, but at the beginning I was very vividly in it, and before the world began to call me with that voice which the heart of youth cannot resist, it was very interesting; I felt its charm then, and now, as I turn back to it, I feel its charm again,

though it was always a story of steady work, if not hard work.

The county-seat, where it had been judged best to transfer the paper lest some other paper of like politics should be established there, was a village of only six or seven hundred inhabitants. But, as the United States senator who was one of its citizens used to say, it was "a place of great political privileges." The dauntless man who represented the district in the House for twenty years, and who had fought the antislavery battle from the first, was his fellow-villager and more than compeer in distinction; and, besides these, there was nearly always a state senator or representative among us. The county officers, of course, lived at the county-seat, and the leading lawyers, who were the leading politicians, made their homes in the shadow of the court-house, where one of them was presently elected to preside as judge of the common pleas. In politics, the county was always overwhelmingly Free-soil, as the forerunner of the Republican party was then called; the Whigs had hardly gathered themselves together since the defeat of General Scott for the presidency; the Democrats, though dominant in state and nation, and faithful to slavery at every election, did not greatly out-

number among us the zealots called Comeouters, who would not vote at all under a Constitution recognizing the right of men to own men. Our paper was Freesoil, and its field was large among that vast majority of the people who believed that slavery would finally perish if kept out of the territories and confined to the old Slave States. With the removal of the press to the county-seat there was a hope that this field could be widened till every Freesoil voter became a subscriber. It did not fall out so; even of those who subscribed in the ardor of their political sympathies, many never paid; but our list was nevertheless handsomely increased, and numbered fifteen or sixteen hundred. I do not know how it may be now, but then most country papers had a list of four or five hundred subscribers; a few had a thousand, a very few twelve hundred, and these were fairly decimated by delinquents. We were so flown with hope that I remember there was serious talk of risking the loss of the delinquents on our list by exacting payment in advance; but the measure was thought too bold, and we compromised by demanding two dollars a year for the paper, and taking a dollar and a half if paid in advance. Twenty-five years later my brother, who had followed my father in the busi-

ness, discovered that a man who never meant to pay for his paper would as lief owe two dollars as any less sum, and he at last risked the loss of the delinquents by requiring advance payment; it was an heroic venture, but it was perhaps time to make it.

The people of the county were mostly farmers, and of these nearly all were dairymen. The few manufactures were on a small scale, except perhaps the making of oars, which were shipped all over the world from the heart of the primeval forests densely wooding the vast levels of the region. The portable steam-sawmills dropped down on the borders of the woods have long since eaten their way through and through them, and devoured every stick of timber in most places, and drunk up the water-courses that the woods once kept full; but at that time half the land was in the shadow of those mighty poplars and hickories, elms and chestnuts, ashes and hemlocks; and the meadows that pastured the herds of red cattle were dotted with stumps as thick as harvest stubble. Now there are not even stumps; the woods are gone, and the water-courses are torrents in spring and beds of dry clay in summer. The meadows themselves have vanished, for it has been found that the strong

yellow soil will produce more in grain than in milk. There is more money in the hands of the farmers there, though there is still so little that by any city scale it would seem comically little, pathetically little; but forty years ago there was so much less that fifty dollars seldom passed through a farmer's hands in a year. Payment was made in kind rather than in coin, and every sort of farm produce was legal tender at the printing-office. Wood was welcome in any quantity, for the huge box-stove consumed it with inappeasable voracity, and then did not heat the wide, low room which was at once editorial-room, composing-room, and press-room. Perhaps this was not so much the fault of the stove as of the building. In that cold, lake-shore country the people dwelt in wooden structures almost as thin and flimsy as tents; and often in the first winter of our sojourn the type froze solid with the water which the compositor put on it when he wished to distribute his case; the inking-rollers had to be thawed before they could be used on the press; and, if the current of the editor's soul had not been the most genial that ever flowed in this rough world, it must have been congealed at its source. The cases of type had to be placed very near the windows so as to get all the light

there was, and they got all the cold there was, too. From time to time the compositor's fingers became so stiff that blowing on them would not avail; he passed the time in excursions between his stand and the stove; in very cold weather he practised the device of warming his whole case of types by the fire, and, when it lost heat, warming it again. The man at the press-wheel was then the enviable man; those who handled the chill, damp sheets of paper were no more fortunate than the compositors.

II

THE first floor of our office-building was used by a sash-and-blind factory; there was a machine-shop somewhere in it, and a mill for sawing out shingles; and it was better fitted to the exercise of these robust industries than to the requirements of our more delicate craft. Later, we had a more comfortable place, in a new wooden "business block," and for several years before I left it the office was domiciled in an old dwelling-house, which we bought, and which we used without much change. It could never have been a very luxurious dwelling, and my associations with it are of a wintry cold, scarcely less polar than that we were inured to elsewhere. In fact, the climate

of that region is rough and fierce; and the lake winds have a malice sharper than the saltest gales of the North Shore of Massachusetts. I know that there were lovely summers and lovelier autumns in my time there, full of sunsets of a strange, wild, melancholy splendor, I suppose from some atmospheric influence of the lake; but I think chiefly of the winters, so awful to us after the mild seasons of southern Ohio; the frosts of ten and twenty below; the village streets and the country roads drowned in snow, the consumptives in the thin houses, and the "slippin'," as the sleighing was called, that lasted from December to April with hardly a break. At first our family was housed on a farm a little way out, because there was no tenement to be had in the village, and my father and I used to walk to and from the office together in the morning and evening. I had taught myself to read Spanish, in my passion for *Don Quixote*, and I was then, at the age of fifteen, preparing to write a life of Cervantes. This scheme occupied me a good deal in those bleak walks, and perhaps it was because my head was so hot with it that my feet were always very cold; but my father assured me that they would get warm as soon as my boots froze. If I have never yet written that life

of Cervantes, on the other hand I have never been quite able to make it clear to myself why my feet should have got warm when my boots froze.

III

IT may have been only a theory of his; it may have been a joke. He had a great many theories and a great many jokes, and together these always kept life interesting and sunshiny to him. With his serene temperament and his happy doubt of disaster in any form, he was singularly well fitted to encounter the hardships of a country editor's lot. But for the moment, and for what now seems a long time after the removal of our paper to the county-seat, these seem to have vanished. The printing-office was the centre of civic and social interest; it was frequented by visitors at all times, and on publication day it was a scene of gayety that looks a little incredible in the retrospect. The place was as bare and rude as a printing-office seems always to be: the walls were splotched with ink and the floor littered with refuse newspapers; but lured by the novelty of the affair, and perhaps attracted by a natural curiosity to see what manner of strange men the printers were, the school-girls and young ladies of the village flocked in and made it like a scene

of comic opera, with their pretty dresses and faces, their eager chatter and lively energy in folding the papers and addressing them to the subscribers, while our fellow-citizens of the place, like the bassos and barytones and tenors of the chorus, stood about and looked on with faintly sarcastic faces. It would not do to think now of what sorrow life and death have since wrought for all those happy young creatures, but I may recall without too much pathos the sensation when some citizen volunteer relaxed from his gravity far enough to relieve the regular mercenary at the crank of our huge power-press wheel, amid the applause of the whole company.

We were very vain of that press, which replaced the hand-press hitherto employed in printing the paper. This was of the style and make of the hand-press which superseded the Ramage press of Franklin's time; but it had been decided to signalize our new departure by the purchase of a power-press of modern contrivance and of a speed fitted to meet the demands of a subscription-list which might be indefinitely extended. A deputation of the leading politicians accompanied the editor to New York, where he went to choose the machine, and where he bought a

second-hand Adams press of the earliest pattern and patent. I do not know, or at this date I would not undertake to say, just what principle governed his selection of this superannuated veteran; it seems not to have been very cheap; but possibly he had a prescience of the disabilities which were to task his ingenuity to the very last days of that press. Certainly no man of less gift and skill could have coped with its infirmities, and I am sure that he thoroughly enjoyed nursing it into such activity as carried it hysterically through those far-off publication days. It had obscure functional disorders of various kinds, so that it would from time to time cease to act, and would have to be doctored by the hour before it would go on. There was probably some organic trouble, too, for, though it did not really fall to pieces on our hands, it showed itself incapable of profiting by several improvements which he invented, and could, no doubt, have successfully applied to the press if its constitution had not been undermined. It went with a crank set in a prodigious fly-wheel which revolved at a great rate, till it came to the moment of making the impression, when the whole mechanism was seized with such a reluctance as nothing but an heroic effort at the crank

could overcome. It finally made so great a draught upon our forces that it was decided to substitute steam for muscle in its operation, and we got a small engine which could fully sympathize with the press in having seen better days. I do not know that there was anything the matter with the engine itself, but the boiler had some peculiarities which might well mystify the casual spectator. He could easily have satisfied himself that there was no danger of its blowing up when he saw my brother feeding bran or corn-meal into its safety-valve in order to fill up certain seams or fissures in it which caused it to give out at the moments of the greatest reluctance in the press. But still he must have had his misgivings of latent danger of some other kind, though nothing ever actually happened of a hurtful character. To this day I do not know just where those seams or fissures were, but I think they were in the boiler-head, and that it was therefore suffering from a kind of chronic fracture of the skull. What is certain is that, somehow, the engine and the press did always get us through publication day, and not only with safety, but often with credit; so that not long ago, when I was at home, and my brother and I were looking over an old file of

his paper, we found it much better printed than either of us expected; as well printed, in fact, as if it had been done on an old hand-press, instead of the steam power-press which it vaunted the use of. The wonder was that, under all the disadvantages, the paper was ever printed on our steam power-press at all; it was little short of miraculous that it was legibly printed, and altogether unaccountable that such impressions as we found in that file could come from it. Of course, they were not average impressions; they were the very best out of the whole edition, and were as creditable as the editorial make-up of the sheet.

IV

ON the first page was a poem, which I suppose I must have selected, and then a story, filling all the rest of the page, which my brother more probably chose; for he had a decided fancy in fiction, and had a scrap-book of inexhaustible riches, which he could draw upon indefinitely for old personal or family favorites. The next page was filled with selections of various kinds, and with original matter interesting to farmers. Then came a page of advertisements, and then the editorial page, where my father had given his opinions of the political questions which interested him,

and which he thought it the duty of the country press to discuss, with sometimes essays in the field of religion and morals. There was a letter of two columns from Washington, contributed every week by the congressman who represented our district; and there was a letter from New York, written by a young lady of the county who was studying art under a master of portraiture then flourishing in the metropolis — if that is not stating it too largely for the renown of Thomas Hicks, as we see it in a vanishing perspective. The rest of this page, as well as the greater part of the next, was filled with general news clipped from the daily papers and partly condensed from them. There was also such local intelligence as offered itself, and communications on the affairs of village and county; but the editor did not welcome tidings of new barns and abnormal vegetation, or flatter hens to lay eggs of unusual size or with unusual frequency by undue public notice. All that order of minute neighborhood gossip which now makes the country paper a sort of open letter was then unknown. He published marriages and deaths, and such obituary notices as the sorrowing fondness of friends prompted them to send him; and he introduced the custom of publishing

births, after the English fashion, which the people took to kindly.

We had an ambition, even so remotely as that day, in the direction of the illustration which has since so flourished in the newspapers. Till then we had never gone further in the art than to print a jubilant raccoon over the news of some Whig victory, or, what was to the same purpose, an inverted cockerel in mockery of the beaten Democrats; but now we rose to the notion of illustrated journalism. We published a story with a woodcut in it, and we watched to see how that cut came out all through the edition with a pride that was perhaps too exhausive; at any rate, we never tried another.

Of course, much of the political writing in the paper was controversial, and was carried on with editors of other opinions elsewhere in the county, for we had no rival in our own village. In this, which has always been the vice of American journalism, the country press was then fully as provincial as the great metropolitan journals are now. These may be more pitilessly personal in the conduct of their political discussions, and a little more skilled in obloquy and insult; but the bickering went on in the country papers quite as idly and foolishly. I fancy nobody really

cared for our quarrels, and that those who followed them were disgusted when they were more than merely wearied.

The space given to them might better have been given even to original poetry. This was sometimes accepted, but was not invited; though our sixth page commonly began with verse of some kind. Then came more prose selections, but never at any time accounts of murder or violent crimes, which the editor abominated in themselves and believed thoroughly corrupting. Advertisements of various kinds filled out the sheet, which was simple and quiet in typography, wholly without the hand-bill display which now renders nearly all newspapers repulsive to the eye. I am rather proud, in my quality of printer, that this was the style which I established; and we maintained it against all advertisers, who then as now wished to outshriek one another in large type and ugly woodcuts.

It was by no means easy to hold a firm hand with the "live business men" of our village and county, who came out twice a year with the spring and fall announcements of their fresh stocks of goods, which they had personally visited New York to lay in; but one of the moral advantages of an enterprise so modest as ours was that the

counting-room and the editorial-room were united under the same head, and this head was the editor's. After all, I think we lost nothing by the bold stand we made in behalf of good taste, and, at any rate, we risked it when we had not the courage to cut off our delinquent subscribers.

We had business advertising from all the villages in the county, for the paper had a large circle of readers in each, and a certain authority, in virtue of representing the county-seat. But a great deal of our advertising was of patent medicines, as the advertising still is in the country papers. It was very profitable, and so was the legal advertising, when we could get the money for it. The money had to come by order of court, and about half the time the order of court failed to include the costs of advertising. Then we did not get it, and we never got it, though we were always glad to get the legal advertising on the chance of getting the pay. It was not official, but was made up of the lawyers' notices to defendants of the suits brought against them. If it had all been paid for, I am not sure that we should now be in a position to complain of the ingratitude of the working-classes, or prepared to discuss, from a vantage of personal experience,

the duty of vast wealth to the community; but still we should have been better off for that money, as well as the money we lost by a large and loyal list of delinquent subscribers. From time to time there were stirring appeals to these adherents in the editorial columns, which did not stir them, and again the most flattering offers to take any kind of produce in payment of subscription. Sometimes my brother boldly tracked the delinquents to their lairs. In most cases I fancy they escaped whatever arts he used to take them; many died peacefully in their beds afterward, and their debts follow them to this day. Still, he must now and then have got money from them, and I am sure he did get different kinds of "trade." Once, I remember, he brought back in the tail of his wagon a young pig, a pig so very young that my father pronounced it "merely an organization." Whether it had been wrought to frenzy or not by the strange experiences of its journey I cannot say, but as soon as it was set down on the ground it began to run madly, and it kept on running till it fell down and perished miserably. It had been taken for a year's subscription, and it was quite as if we had lost a delinquent subscriber.

V

UPON the whole, our paper was an attempt at conscientious and self-respecting journalism; it addressed itself seriously to the minds of its readers; it sought to form their tastes and opinions. I do not know how much it influenced them, if it influenced them at all, and as to any effect beyond the circle of its subscribers, that cannot be imagined, even in a fond retrospect. But since no good effort is altogether lost, I am sure that this endeavor must have had some tacit effect; and I am sure that no one got harm from a sincerity of conviction that devoted itself to the highest interest of the reader, that appealed to nothing base, and flattered nothing foolish in him. It went from our home to the homes of the people in a very literal sense, for my father usually brought his exchanges from the office at the end of his day there, and made his selections or wrote his editorials while the household work went on around him, and his children gathered about the same lamp, with their books or their jokes; there were apt to be a good many of both.

Our county was the most characteristic of that remarkable group of counties in northern

Ohio called the Western Reserve, and forty years ago the population was almost purely New England in origin, either by direct settlement from Connecticut, or indirectly after the sojourn of a generation in New York State. We were ourselves from southern Ohio, where the life was then strongly tinged by the adjoining life of Kentucky and Virginia, and we found these transplanted Yankees cold and blunt in their manners; but we did not undervalue their virtues. They formed in that day a leaven of right thinking and feeling which was to leaven the whole lump of the otherwise proslavery or indifferent state; and I suppose that outside of the anti-slavery circles of Boston there was nowhere in the country a population so resolute and so intelligent in its political opinions. They were very radical in every way, and hospitable to novelty of all kinds. I imagine that they tested more new religions and new patents than have been even heard of in less inquiring communities. When we came among them they had lately been swept by the fires of spiritualism, which left behind a great deal of smoke and ashes where the inherited New England orthodoxy had been. A belief in the saving efficacy of spirit phenomena still exists among them, but not, I fancy, at all in

the former measure, when nearly every household had its medium, and the tables that tipped outnumbered the tables that did not tip. The old New York *Tribune*, which was circulated in the country almost as widely as our own paper, had deeply schooled the people in the economics of Horace Greeley, and they were ready for any sort of millennium, religious or industrial, that should arrive, while they looked very wisely after the main chance in the mean time. They were temperate, hard-working, hard-thinking folks, who dwelt on their scattered farms, and came up to the county fair once a year, when they were apt to visit the printing-office and pay for their papers. In spite of the English superstition to the contrary, the average American is not very curious, if one may judge from his reticence in the presence of things strange enough to excite question; and if our craft surprised these witnesses they rarely confessed it.

They thought it droll, as people of the simpler occupations are apt to think all the more complex arts; and one of them once went so far in expression of his humorous conception as to say, after a long stare at one of the compositors dodging and pecking at the type in his case, "Like an old hen pickin' up millet." This sort of silence,

and this sort of comment, both exasperated the printers, who took their revenge as they could. They fed it full, once, when a country subscriber's horse, tied before the office, crossed his hind-legs and sat down in his harness like a tired man, and they proposed to go out and offer him a chair, to take him a glass of water, and ask him to come inside. But fate did not often give them such innings; they mostly had to create their chances of reprisal, but they did not mind that.

There was always a good deal of talk going on, but, although we were very ardent politicians, the talk was not political. When it was not mere banter, it was mostly literary; we disputed about authors among ourselves and with the village wits who dropped in. There were several of these who were readers, and they liked to stand with their backs to our stove and challenge opinion concerning Holmes and Poe, Irving and Macaulay, Pope and Byron, Dickens and Shakespeare.

It was Shakespeare who was oftenest on our tongues; indeed, the printing-office of former days had so much affinity with the theatre that compositors and comedians were easily convertible; and I have seen our printers engaged in hand-to-hand combats with column-rules, two

up and two down, quite like the real bouts on the stage. Religion entered a good deal into our discussions, which my father, the most tolerant of men, would not suffer to become irreverent, even on the lips of law students bathing themselves in the fiery spirit of Tom Paine. He was willing to meet any one in debate of moral, religious, or political questions, and the wildest-haired Comeouters, the most ruthless sceptic, the most credulous spiritualist, found him ready to take them seriously, even when it was hard not to take them in joke.

It was part of his duty, as publisher of the paper, to bear patiently with another kind of frequenter — the type of farmer who thought he wished to discontinue his paper, and really wished to be talked into continuing it. I think he rather enjoyed letting the subscriber talk himself out, and carrying him from point to point in his argument, always consenting that he knew best what he wanted to do, but skilfully persuading him at last that a home-paper was more suited to his needs than any city substitute. Once I could have given the heads of his reasoning, but they are gone from me now. The editor was especially interested in the farming of the region, and I think it was partly owing to the

attention he called to the question that its character was so largely changed. It is still a dairy country, but now it exports grain, and formerly the farmers had to buy their flour.

He did not neglect any real local interest in his purpose of keeping his readers alive to matters of more general importance, but he was fortunate in addressing himself to people who cared for the larger, if remoter, themes he loved. In fact, as long as slavery remained a question in our politics, they had a seriousness and dignity which the present generation can hardly imagine; and men of all callings felt themselves uplifted by the appeal this question made to their reason and conscience. My father constantly taught in his paper that if slavery could be kept out of the territories it would perish, and, as I have said, this was the belief of the vast majority of his readers. They were more or less fervid in it, according to their personal temperaments; some of them were fierce in their convictions and some humorous, but they were all in earnest. The editor sympathized more with those who took the true faith gayly. All were agreed that the Fugitive-slave Law was to be violated at any risk; it would not have been possible to take an escaping slave out of that county without bloodshed, but

the people would have enjoyed outwitting his captors more than destroying them. Even in the great John Brown times, when it was known that there was a deposit of his impracticable pikes somewhere in our woods, and he and his followers came and went among us on some mysterious business of insurrectionary aim, the affair had its droll aspects which none appreciated more keenly than the Quaker-born editor. With his cheerful scepticism, he could never have believed that any harm or danger would come of it all; and I think he would have been hardly surprised to wake up any morning and find that slavery had died suddenly during the night of its own iniquity.

He was like all country editors then, and I dare say now, in being a printer as well as an editor, and he took a full share in the mechanical labors. These were formerly much more burdensome, for twice or thrice the present type-setting was then done in the country offices. At the present day the country printer buys of a city agency his paper already printed on one side, and he gets it for the cost of the blank paper, the agency finding its account in the advertisements it puts in. Besides this patent inside, as it is called, the printer buys stereotyped selections

of other agencies, which offer him almost as wide a range of matter as the exchange newspapers he used to choose from. The few columns left for local gossip and general news, and for whatever editorial comment he cares to make on passing events, can be easily filled up by two compositors. But in my time we had three journeymen at work and two or three girl-compositors, and commonly a boy-apprentice besides. The paper was richer in a personal quality, and the printing-office was unquestionably more of a school. After we began to take girl-apprentices it became coeducative, as far as they cared to profit by it; but I think it did not serve to widen their thoughts or quicken their wits as it did those of the men. They looked to their craft as a living, not as a life, and they had no pride in it. They did not learn the whole trade, as the journeymen had done, and served only such apprenticeship as fitted them to set type. They were then paid by the thousand ems, and their earnings were usually as great at the end of a month as at the end of a year. But the boy who came up from his father's farm, with the wish to be a printer because Franklin had been one, and with the intent of making the office his university, began by sweeping it out,

by hewing wood and carrying water for it. He became a roller-boy, and served long behind the press before he was promoted to the case, where he learned slowly and painfully to set type. His wage was forty dollars a year and two suits of clothes, for three years, when his apprenticeship ended, and his wander-years (too often literally) began. He was glad of being inky and stained with the marks of his trade; he wore a four-cornered paper cap, in the earlier stages of his service, and even an apron. When he became a journeyman, he clothed himself in black doeskin and broadcloth, and put on a silk hat and the thinnest-soled fine boots that could be found, and comported himself as much like a man of the world as he knew how to do. His work brought him acquainted with a vast variety of interests, and kept his mind as well as hands employed; he could not help thinking about them, and he did not fail to talk about them. His comments had generally a slightly acid flavor, and his constant survey of the world, in the "map of busy life" always under his eye, bred in him the contempt of familiarity. He was none the less agreeable for that, and the jokes that flew about from case to case in our office were something the editor would have been the last man to interfere

with. He read or wrote on through them all, and now and then turned from his papers to join in them.

VI

THE journeyman of that time and place was much better than the printer whom we had known earlier and in a more lax civilization, who was too apt to be sober only when he had not the means to be otherwise, and who arrived out of the unknown with nothing in his pocket, and departed into it with only money enough to carry him to the next printing-office. If we had no work for him it was the custom to take up a collection in the office, and he accepted it as a usage of the craft, without loss of self-respect. It could happen that his often infirmity would overtake him before he got out of town, but in this case he did not return for a second collection; I suppose that would not have been good form. Now and then a printer of this earlier sort appeared among us for a little time, but the air of the Western Reserve was somehow unfriendly to him, and he soon left us for the kindlier clime of the Ohio River, or for the more southerly region which we were ourselves sometimes so homesick for, and which his soft, rolling accent

so pleasantly reminded us of. Still, there was something about the business — perhaps the arsenic in the type-metal — which everywhere affected the morals as it was said sometimes to affect the nerves.

There was one of our printers who was a capital compositor, a most engaging companion, and of unimpeachable Western Reserve lineage, who would work along in apparent perpetuity on the line of duty, and then suddenly deflect from it. If he wanted a day off, or several days, he would take the time, without notice, and with a princely indifference to any exigency we might be in. He came back when he chose and offered to go to work again, and I do not remember that he was ever refused. He was never in drink; his behavior was the effect of some obscure principle of conduct, unless it was that moral contagion from the material he wrought in.

I do not know that he was any more characteristic, though, than another printer of ours, who was dear to my soul from the quaintness of his humor and his love of literature. I think he was, upon the whole, the most original spirit I have known, and it was not the least part of his originality that he was then aiming to become a

professor in some college, and was diligently training himself for the calling in all the leisure he could get from his work. The usual thing would have been to read law and crowd forward in political life, but my friend despised this common ideal. We were both studying Latin, he quite by himself, as he studied Greek and German, and I with such help as I could find in reciting to a kindly old minister, who had forgotten most of his own Latin, and whom I do not now wish to blame for falling asleep over the lessons in my presence; I did not know them well enough to keep him up to the work. My friend and I read the language, he more and I less, and we tried to speak it together, to give ourselves consequence, and to have the pleasure of saying before some people's faces what we should otherwise have said behind their backs; I should not now undertake to speak Latin to achieve either of these aims. Besides this, we read a great deal together, mainly Shakespeare and Cervantes. I had a task of a certain number of thousand ems a day, and when I had finished that I was free to do what I liked; he would stop work at the same time, and then we would take our *Don Quixote* into some clean, sweet beechwoods there were near the village, and laugh

our hearts out over it. I can see my friend's strange face now, very regular, very fine, and smooth as a girl's, with quaint blue eyes, shut long, long ago, to this *dolce lome;* and some day I should like to tell all about him; but this is not the place. When the war broke out he left the position he had got by that time in some college or academy farther west and went into the army. One morning, in Louisiana, he was killed by a guerilla who got a shot at him when he was a little way from his company, and who was probably proud of picking off the Yankee captain. But as yet such a fate was unimaginable. He was the first friend of my youth; he was older than I by five or six years; but we met in an equality of ambition and purpose, though he was rather more inclined to the severity of the scholar's ideal, and I hoped to slip through somehow with a mere literary use of my learning.

VII

AS I have tried to say, the printers of that day had nearly all some affinity with literature, if not some love of it; it was in a sort always at their fingers-ends, and they must have got some touch of it whether they would or not. They

thought their trade a poor one moneywise, but they were fond of it and they did not often forsake it. Their hope was somehow to get hold of a country paper and become editors and publishers; and my friend and I, when he was twenty-four and I eighteen, once crossed over into Pennsylvania, where we had heard there was a paper for sale; but we had not the courage to offer even promises to pay for it. The craft had a repute for insolvency which it merited, and it was at odds with the community at large by reason of something not immediately intelligible in it, or at least not classifiable. I remember that when I began to write a certain story of mine, I told Mark Twain, who was once a printer, that I was going to make the hero a printer, and he said: "Better not. People will not understand him. Printing is something ever village has in it, but it is always a sort of mystery, and the reader does not like to be perplexed by something that he thinks he knows about." This seemed very acute and just, though I made my hero a printer all the same, and I offer it to the public as a light on the anomalous relation the country printer bears to his fellow-citizens. They see him following his strange calling among them, but to neither wealth nor worship, and they

cannot understand why he does not take up something else, something respectable and remunerative; they feel that there must be something weak, something wrong in a man who is willing to wear his life out in a vocation which keeps him poor and dependent on the favor they grudge him. It is like the relation which all the arts bear to the world, and which is peculiarly thankless in a purely commercial civilization like ours; though I cannot pretend that printing is an art in the highest sense. I have heard old journeymen claim that it was a profession and ought to rank with the learned professions, but I am afraid that was from too fond a pride in it. It is in one sort a handicraft, like any other, like carpentering or stone-cutting; but it has its artistic delight, as every handicraft has. There is the ideal in all work; and I have had moments of unsurpassed gladness in feeling that I had come very near the ideal in what I had done in my trade. This joy is the right of every worker, and in so far as modern methods have taken it from him they have wronged him. I can understand Ruskin in his wish to restore it to some of the handicrafts which have lost it in the "base mechanical" operations of the great manufactories, where men spend their lives in mak-

ing one thing, or a part of a thing, and cannot follow their work constructively. If that were to be the end, the operative would forever lose the delight in work which is the best thing in the world. But I hope this is not to be the end, and that when people like again to make things for use and not merely for profit the workman will have again the reward that is more than wages.

I know that in the old-fashioned country printing-office we had this, and we enjoyed our trade as the decorative art it also is. Questions of taste constantly arose in the arrangement of a title-page, the display of a placard or a hand-bill, the use of this type or that. They did not go far, these questions, but they employed the critical faculty and the æsthetic instinct, and they allied us, however slightly and unconsciously, with the creators of the beautiful.

But now, it must be confessed, printing has shared the fate of all other handicrafts. Thanks to united labor, it is better paid in each of its subdivisions than it once was as a whole. In my time, the hire of a first-rate country printer, who usually worked by the week, was a dollar a day; but of course this was not so little in 1852 as it would be in 1892. My childish remembrance

is of the journeymen working two hours after supper, every night, so as to make out a day of twelve hours; but at the time I write of the day of ten hours was the law and the rule, and nobody worked longer, except when the President's Message was to be put in type, or on some other august occasion.

The pay is not only increased in proportion to the cost of living, but it is really greater, and the conditions are all very much better. But I believe no apprentice now learns the whole trade, and each of our printers, forty years ago, would have known how to do everything in the kind of office he hoped to own. He would have had to make a good many things which the printer now buys, and first among them the rollers which are used for inking the type on the press. These were of a composition of glue and molasses, and were of an india-rubbery elasticity and consistency, as long as they were in good condition. But with use and time they became hard, the ink smeared on them, and they failed to impart evenly to the type; they had to be thrown away or melted over again. This was done on the office stove, in a large bucket which they were cut up into, with fresh glue and molasses added. It seems in the retrospect to have been rather a

simple affair, and I do not now see why casting a roller should have involved so much absolute failure and rarely have given a satisfactory result. The mould was a large copper cylinder, and the wooden core of the roller was fixed in place by an iron cap and foot-piece. The mixture boiled away, as it now seems to me, for days, and far into the sleepy nights, when as a child I was proud of sitting up with it very late. Then at some weird hour my father or my brother poured it into the mould, and we went home and left the rest with fate. The next morning the whole office crowded round to see the roller drawn from the mould, and it usually came out with such long hollows and gaps in its sides that it had to be cut up at once and melted over again. At present, all rollers are bought somewhere in New York or Chicago, I believe, and a printer would no more think of making a roller than of making any other part of his press. "And you know," said my brother, who told me of this change, "we don't wet the paper now." "Good Heavens," said I, "you don't print it *dry!*" "Yes, and it doesn't blur any more than if it were wet." I suppose wetting the paper was a usage that antedated the invention of movable type. It used to be drawn, quire by quire, through a vat of

clear water, and then the night before publication day it was turned and sprinkled. Now it was printed dry, I felt as if it were time to class Benjamin Franklin with the sun-myths.

VIII

PUBLICATION day was always a time of great excitement. We were busy all the morning getting the last editorials and the latest news in type, and when the paper went to press in the afternoon the entire force was drafted to the work of helping the engine and the press through their various disabilities and reluctances. Several hands were needed to run the press, even when it was in a willing frame; others folded the papers as they came from it; as many more were called from their wonted work to address them to the subscribers, for with the well-known fickleness of their sex, the young ladies of the village ceased to do this as soon as the novelty of the affair wore off. Still, the office was always rather a lively scene, for the paper was not delivered at the village houses, and each subscriber came and got his copy; the villagers began to come about the hour we went to press, the neighboring farmers called next day and throughout the week.

Nearly everybody who witnessed the throes of our machinery had advice or sympathy to offer, and in a place where many people were of a mechanical turn the spectacular failure of the editor's additions and improvements was naturally a source of public entertainment; perhaps others got as much pleasure out of his inventions as he did.

Of course, about election-time the excitement was intensified; we had no railroad or telegraphic communication with the outer world, but it was felt that we somehow had the news, and it was known that we had the latest papers from Cleveland, and that our sheet would report the intelligence from them. After all, however, there was nothing very burning or seething in the eagerness of our subscribers. They could wait; their knowledge of the event would not change it, or add or take away one vote either way. I dare say it is not so very different now, when the railroad and the telegraph have made the little place simultaneous with New York and London. We people who fret our lives out in cities do not know how tranquil life in the country still is. We talk of the whirl and rush, as if it went on everywhere, but if you will leave the express train anywhere and pass five miles into

the country, away from the great through lines, you will not find the whirl and rush. People sometimes go mad there from the dulness and ennui, as in the cities they sometimes go mad from the stress and the struggle; and the problem of equalizing conditions has no phase more interesting than that of getting the good of the city and the country out of the one into the other. The old-fashioned country newspaper formed almost the sole intellectual experience of the remote and quiet folks who dwelt in their lonely farmsteads on the borders of the woods, with few neighbors and infrequent visits to the township centre, where the church, a store or two, and a tavern constituted a village. They got it out of the post-office there once a week, and read it in the scanty leisure left them by their farm-work or their household drudgery, and I dare say they found it interesting. There were some men in every neighborhood, tongueyer than the rest, who, when they called on us, seemed to have got it by heart, and who were ready to defend or combat its positions with all comers; this sort usually took some other paper, too — an agricultural paper, or the New York *Trybune*, as they called it, or a weekly edition of a Cleveland journal. It was generally believed that Horace

Greeley wrote everything in the *Trybune*, and when a country subscriber unfolded his *Trybune* he said, with comfortable expectation, "Well, let's see what old Horace says *this* week." But by far the greater number of our subscribers took no paper but our own. I do not know whether there is much more reading done now on the farms, but I doubt it. In the villages, however, the circulation of the nearest city dailies is pretty general, and there is a large sale of the Sunday editions. I am not sure that this is an advantage, but in the undeniable decay of interest in the local preaching, some sort of mental relish for the only day of leisure is necessary. It is not so much a pity that they read the Sunday papers, as that the Sunday papers are so bad. If they were carefully and conscientiously made up, they would be of great use; they wait their reformer, and they do not seem impatient for him.

In the old time, we printers were rather more in touch with the world outside on the journalistic lines than most of our fellow-villagers, but otherwise we were as remote as any of them, and the weekly issue of the paper had not often anything tumultuously exciting for us. The greatest event of our year was the publication of the

President's Message, which was a thrill in my childish life long before I had any conception of its meaning. I fancy that the patent inside, now so universally used by the country papers, originated in the custom which the printers within easy reach of a large city had of supplying themselves with an edition of the President's Message, to be folded into their own sheet, when they did not print their outside on the back of it. There was always a hot rivalry between the local papers in getting out the message, whether it was bought ready printed, or whether it was set up in the office and printed in the body of the paper. We had no local rival, but all the same we made haste when it was a question of the message. The printers filled their cases with type, ready for the early copy of the message, which the editor used every device to secure; when it was once in hand they worked day and night till it was all up, and then the paper was put to press at once, without regard to the usual publication day; and the community was as nearly electrified as could be with our journalistic enterprise, which was more important in our eyes than the matters the message treated of.

There is no longer the eager popular expecta-

tion of the President's Message that there once seemed to be; and I think it is something of a loss, that ebb of the high tide of political feeling which began with the era of our immense material prosperity. It was a feeling that formed a solidarity of all the citizens, and if it was not always, or often, the highest interest which can unite men, it was at least not that deadly and selfish cult of business which centres each of us in his own affairs and kills even our curiosity about others. Very likely people were less bent on the pursuit of wealth in those days, because there was less chance to grow rich, but the fact remains that they *were* less bent in that direction, and that they gave their minds to other things more than they do now. I think those other things were larger things, and that our civic type was once nobler than it is. It was before the period of corruption, when it was not yet fully known that dollars can do the work of votes, when the votes as yet rather outnumbered the dollars, and more of us had the one than the other. The great statesman, not the great millionaire, was then the American ideal, and all about in the villages and on the farms the people were eager to know what the President had said to Congress. They are not eager to know now, and that seems

rather a pity. Is it because in the war which destroyed slavery, the American Democracy died, and by operation of the same fatal anomaly the American Plutocracy, which Lincoln foreboded, was born; and the people instinctively feel that they have no longer the old interest in President or Congress?

There are those that say so, and, whether they are right or not, it is certain that into the great centres where money is heaped up the life of the country is drained, and the country press has suffered with the other local interests. The railroads penetrate everywhere, and carry the city papers seven times a week, where the home paper pays its tardy visit once, with a patent inside imported from the nearest money centre, and its few columns of neighborhood gossip, too inconsiderable to be gathered up by the correspondents of the invasive dailies. Other causes have worked against the country press. In counties where there were once two or three papers there are now eight or ten, without a material increase of population to draw upon for support. The county printing, which the paper of the dominant party could reckon upon, is now shared with other papers of the same politics, and the amateur printing-offices be-

longing to ingenious boys in every neighborhood get much of the small job-work which once came to the publisher.

It is useless to quarrel with the course of events, for which no one is more to blame than another, though human nature loves a scape-goat, and from time to time we load up some individual with the common sins and drive him into a wilderness where he seems rather to enjoy himself than otherwise. I suppose that even if the conditions had continued favorable, the country press could never have become the influence which our editor fondly hoped and earnestly strove to make it. Like all of us who work at all, the country printer had to work too hard; and he had little time to think or to tell how to make life better and truer in any sort. His paper had once perhaps as much influence as the country pulpit; its support was certainly of the same scanty and reluctant sort, and it was without consecration by an avowed self-devotion. He was concerned with the main chance first, and after that there was often no other chance, or he lost sight of it. I should not instance him as an exemplary man, and I should be very far from idealizing him; I should not like even to undertake the task of idealizing a city journalist; and yet, in the retro-

spect at least, the country printer has his pathos for me — the pathos of a man who began to follow a thankless calling because he loved it, and kept on at it because he loved it, or else because its service had warped and cramped him out of form to follow any other.

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