

**FLEET STREET FROM
WITHIN: THE
ROMANCE AND MYSTERY
OF THE DAILY PAPER**

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Fleet Street from Within: The Romance and Mystery of the Daily Paper by Henry Leach

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HENRY LEACH

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FLEET STREET FROM WITHIN



BY
**HENRY
LEACH**

ONE SHILLING

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Leach
N.A.

NOTE.

THE morning and evening newspapers are such literally every-day affairs, that familiarity of a sort may have bred in the minds of some of their readers a kind of ignorant disregard. This would not exist if there were occasionally a pause for reflection upon the fascinating romance of their production. When the conjurer pulls out scores of yards of coloured ribbons from an apparently empty hat his audience, in astonishment, can only murmur, "Isn't it wonderful!" But there are vastly more amazing feats than this performed in Newspaper Land every day and every night, when something akin to the wiles of the conjurer—even the powers of the magician—need constantly to be employed. It is my object to present to readers a light but systematic description of newspaper production, with constant illustration by example of the various processes. I wish to give some idea of what the "copy" fever is like as it rages constantly in our Street. I have lived there for many years and know it well. Every anecdote related in the following pages I believe to be true, and if here and there a name is suppressed it may be taken that the object of such suppression is to spare the feelings of somebody concerned or, what is equally important, to spare myself the trouble and expense of defending an action for libel. From the abundance of their experience many good literary and journalistic friends have tossed me a few crumbs of anecdote, and I thank them.

H. L.

FLEET STREET,

September, 1905.

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CHAPTER I.

THE WORKING DAY.

"There she is—the great engine—she never sleeps. She has her ambassadors in every quarter of the world—her couriers upon every road. Her officers march along with armies, and her envoys walk into statesmen's cabinets. They are ubiquitous. Yonder journal has an agent at this minute giving bribes at Madrid, and another inspecting the price of potatoes at Covent Garden. Look! here comes the Foreign Express galloping in. They will be able to give news at Downing Street to-morrow: funds will rise or fall, fortunes be made or lost. Lord B. will get up, and holding the paper in his hands, and seeing the noble marquis in his place, will make a speech; and Mr. Doolan will be called away from his supper at the back kitchen, for he is foreign sub-editor, and sees the mail in the newspaper sheet before he goes to his own."—THACKERAY.

THOUSANDS of millions of newspapers have been printed in Fleet Street since the lines above were written, bands of paper have been sucked into the machines, which if wrapped round the globe would have covered it entirely from the North Pole to the South more than once, generations of editors and sub-editors have succeeded each other; but nobody in a few lines has conveyed such an impression of the ubiquitous and versatile character of the Press so well as Thackeray did in his *Pendennis*. And, many as have been the changes in Fleet Street since the middle of the last century, the description will stand for to-day as well as it did for the newspaper world of that time. But if the "great engine" was such a live and wonderful thing in those early times, she is vastly more so now in these far more strenuous days of twentieth-century journalism, when she fairly palpitates as the last ounce of her mighty power is extracted from her every day and every night.

Newspaper Land has ever been regarded as an

abode of mystery by the outside world, and the mystery only seems to deepen as time goes on and more wonders are unfolded. It is a common truism that one of the most marvellous things of our modern civilisation is the Press, and perhaps more particularly the London Press. Each day's work is a collection of seeming miracles. Expressions of surprise and admiration upon the capacity of Fleet Street are made at hundreds of breakfast tables every morning when the result of the night's work of the Street is presented there, and the readers wonder however the papers do manage to get hold of all that startling news, picked up from every nook and cranny in the two hemispheres. And all for a halfpenny or a penny, or at the very most for threepence! But somehow, despite this daily surprise and the curiosity immediately following upon it, that pillar of the Press, the general public, has never to any extent succeeded in satisfying itself as to how the thing is done, or even in making itself intelligently acquainted with the simplest features of newspaper production. The man in the street would be hard put to it to distinguish between the functions of a news editor and those of a reporter, and every one of him is under the impression that a sub-editor is an assistant to the editor, and an assistant editor—well, the same. But the assistant editor of today would not be pleased to be mistaken for the modern Mr. Doolan, great as is the importance of the latter, and most necessary as he is to the "great engine"—none more so.

The plain fact is that newspaperdom is a world of itself much more completely and exclusively than any other sphere of labour or activity. It works in its own way, it lives in its own way, and, though there is in these days some tendency

for it occasionally to seek help from outside, it is very largely self-supporting and complete in itself. The world is the garden of rich and perennial flowers where the busy bees of the Press buzz forth to get their honey; but their community and their working in the Fleet Street hive have always seemed to be held in a large measure as sacred from the public curiosity. There is a shrinking from the vulgar gaze, which, by a law of human nature, then becomes more eager, but is never satisfied. The men with "copy" and proofs may enter at the doors of the Street, but others are discouraged.

There is, at all events, one thing to be said for this secrecy so well maintained, that something good is really hidden. It happens with so many other public institutions, like the stage, that when the glitter is rubbed away from them by the inquisitives who get behind the scenes all that is left seems very mean and tawdry. There are mountains of machinery to work the opera at Covent Garden, and great manufactories behind and below the stage at Drury Lane when a pantomime is in progress; but for the most part the stage in private is rather disappointing. But the more an outsider in his good fortune might be privileged to know about the inner workings of Newspaper Land the more assuredly would he marvel at its daily miracles. The veil shall be raised for a little while, and we will see something of the process; and first it may be of advantage to gain some general impression of the working day.

A beginning may best be made at the time of least activity, which is usually between five and seven o'clock in the morning. This is the only period during the double circuit of the fingers of the clock when Fleet Street is inclined to drowse

—"she never sleeps." During this brief interval there is comparative peace and quiet about. The heavy work of the night is over, and the engine pauses as if to gather strength for a vigorous grappling with the events of the new day that has come. There is less life in the Street at this time than at any other; there are no paper carts, the staffs of the various departments, down even to the machine-minders and the publishers—the last to leave—have sought their beds, and the boiler fires are burning low.

If the times are exciting, as in the heat of a big war, there may be an emergency editor reclining upon a couch, only half asleep and full awake when the boy brings in some new piece of Reuter flimsy hot from the cables. This man at this time of quiet brings out a special edition of the morning paper in supplement to the big one that has gone before and is being hurried all over the country in special trains, when the news that comes to him demands it. But this is seldom.

At this time on a summer morning, when the rising sun in the east throws up a golden fringe round the dome of St. Paul's, which stands a constant sentinel above the Street, the day-workers of this land of mystery are turning wakefully in their suburban beds, and those whose call to duty is the earliest rub their sleepy eyes and rise. The first call is upon the sub-editors and the compositors, who make the beginning upon the evening paper of the day, due for publication in the majority of cases before noon. By seven o'clock many of them have already made the journey to Fleet Street by train or tram; and as indicative of the continuity of newspaper work from day to day, despite the lull that has been mentioned, the very first thing done by the earliest sub-editor,