

THE MAKING OF A NEWSPAPER MAN

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By

SAMUEL G. BLYTHE

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CHAPTER I

THERE was to be a murder trial at the little county-seat where I was born and where I lived as a boy. I was just eighteen at the time. Murder trials were infrequent in that county and this one attracted wide local attention. The city papers were preparing to give some space to it and the county papers had printed columns about it.

It was the first murder trial I remember much about, though when I was a small boy they hanged a man in the jailyard, which enlivening and novel occurrence had set all the small boys in the village to making gallows and hanging cats and dogs, and even fieldmice and rabbits.

Once we built a big gallows and tried to hang a calf, but that didn't work very well—and the man who owned the calf caused some acute discomfort to the amateur executioners. Until he caught me, I never realized how much power there is concealed in the human leg and foot when the foot is shod with a cowhide boot. Still, murder trials and murders were always a fruitful topic of boyish conversation. Instead of using a trap for the condemned man to fall through to eternity, the local plan was to jerk him into the hereafter by means of a big weight fastened to a rope running over the top of the gallows and released by a spring. The weight was an iron affair and the tradition was that it weighed three hundred and sixty-five pounds. At any rate, it was kept in the cellar of the courthouse; and as the frequent sheriffs always had boys in their families the cellar of the courthouse was a favorite place of resort. Consequently, when conversation languished, the weight was always there to furnish inspiration for speculation as to whom it would be used on

next and the coördinated and congenial theme of murders and murderers.

Of course, having arrived at the mature age of eighteen, I had long since ceased foregathering in the court-house cellar and trying to lift the weight and discussing murders and the last hanging; but when this case was moved for trial, and the farmers began to come in, I was as much interested as I had been in the hanging of the unfortunate years before, and so were all my companions and friends. Our nearest city was thirty miles away and the daily papers came in on the morning and evening trains. They devoted one page to the news of the country through which they circulated and had correspondents in each village of importance. The correspondent for the biggest of the morning papers from our town was a young lawyer, a warm friend of mine. It so happened he had other business to attend to at the time of the trial and he asked me to report it for the city paper.

My father was editor of one of the two weekly

papers in our town, and naturally I had fussed about the printing office a good bit. Moreover, I always received better marks for compositions than the other boys, and my rhetoric teacher had prophesied a great future for me. Also, I had secretly determined to be a newspaper man, although my father objected strenuously, saying the business was no good. So, when the regular correspondent asked me to do his work, I jumped eagerly at the chance. The arrangement was that I was to have the pay for the work that he would have received had he done it. The emolument for the literature of country correspondence in that particular city newspaper office was four dollars a column, which seemed a princely compensation, for I was to have a front seat at the reporters' table, was to hear the whole trial; and likely as not there would be some city reporters there with whom I might get acquainted and thus find an opportunity to discuss my ambition to be a regular reporter myself. I would have worked for nothing.

The trial began on Monday, and I made a longhand running report of the proceedings, got it in the afternoon mail and telegraphed a short, skeletonized summary of what happened after the mail closed. I have filed several million words of telegraphic dispatches to newspapers since that day, twenty-five years ago, from all parts of the world and on all sorts of big stories; but I have never filed a dispatch that seemed quite as important and sensational as that. I was all puffed up when I handed it to the telegraph operator, who had known me since I was a baby, and she was greatly interested and promised to send it right away. Likewise, I have dealt with and known hundreds of telegraph and cable operators in my time, have fought with them, coaxed them, cursed them, bought them, cultivated them, loafed with them; but that dear lady who sent my first newspaper dispatch, while I hung around nervously waiting to see her finish it, remains in my mind as the highest type of the exponents of the business which I was to be so interested in in later life.