

'The ways and problems of an editor.

## EDITORS ARE HUMAN, TOO

I HAVE no illusions about myself or my work. I know the failings of my magazines judged by academic standards. However, in editing a magazine, we must first ask ourselves: What is the function of such a thing as this?

The primary function of a magazine is to entertain the public. Call it escape or what you will, but the army of readers wants to be beguiled.

Now, entertainment somehow is not quite respectable. It may be the inheritance of religious or educational misconceptions, but the troubadour, the singer is not quite socially acceptable in the literary world. And yet, as Stevenson said, in talking to writers: "Your business is to please."

The path of the entertainer is hard, especially of the magazine editor. I don't know any wretch in Christendom who is more abused than an editor. There seems to be in the public mind a feeling that one has a perfect right to insult an editor without any qualms of conscience at all.

Every week over two million,

three hundred thousand people ask for *Liberty* magazine at the newsstands all over the country.

The contents of the magazine are of vital importance. *The material must call two and a half million buyers back to the newsstands after a week.*

To entertain, we depend on our writers. There are two hundred thousand people in the United States who think they are writers and all send manuscripts to *Liberty*. All human beings, editors included, have a vast capacity for making mistakes. Walter Hines Page turned down *David Harum*, *Trader Horn*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front* were rejected by several publishers. All of these later became best sellers.

We read all manuscripts at considerable expense. We read them all in the hope of discovering a new writer. Editors are accused of not wanting new writers. Our accusers do not take into consideration the facts. Magazines *must* have new writers. The public gets tired of seeing the same names on magazine covers for twenty-five

years. The public is waiting for the man that will come and talk in a new way.

We had a contest about a year ago for short stories. In addition to our regular "cargoes," thirty thousand manuscripts poured in. We got fifteen stories out of the thirty thousand. Not one of the fifteen has been able to repeat.

People like to be moved. We looked for simple tales that will give them pleasure. That is all our readers ask from us. And the well-turned story, the beautifully done, the adroit, the subtle thing is very often what they do not want from us.

Dickens wrote the kind of thing we would like to print. When Dickens' stories were appearing in parts, in days before magazines, the installments were brought to New York by steamer. One day at the Battery there stood a crowd of thousands of people watching the ship come up the harbor. As it came within distance of what is now the Aquarium, a shout went up from the crowd: "Is little Nell dead?" That was what they were down there to know. Dickens' stories reached the heart of the masses.

We cannot reconstruct the social structure of the United States. Yet day after day, our readers lay

responsibilities upon us. People ask serious questions by mail. They want answers to grave problems. We can't ignore it. We have an editorial page. But our job does not end there. We are willing to present the views of any man or any group that feels it can say something constructive but say it entertainingly.

A magazine can do more than make people think. It can fulfill other social functions. One thing we did in another magazine shows that a magazine can be really of some practical assistance to the Government. I had an idea one day of putting a "Line-up" in our detective story magazine. We went to the authorities and asked for the pictures of six fugitives from justice, with descriptions and a history of the crimes for which they were wanted. Within two weeks after our magazine appeared on the stands, two of them were caught, and in a year we caught thirty-six. We had murderers, forgers, confidence women—a great galaxy of criminals—restored to their proper place—behind the prison bars once more.

In formulating an editorial policy we try to anticipate the things that will serve some practical purpose to the reader. When the in-

come tax comes around we tell him how to make out his report, what exemptions he is entitled to and try to give him the advice he could get if he were to employ counsel. We do not discard out entertainment formula. We dramatize it and make it interesting.

Mr. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* said that there were five themes with which you deal and interest any human being—*birth, hunger, sleep, love and death*. As life is constituted today, I should add one to his list—*money*.

When Mr. Roosevelt first began to be thought of in the public mind as a possible candidate against Mr. Hoover the whisper went around: "He is a cripple. No man like that could ever be trusted with the responsibility of office. He isn't physically fit to be President of the United States." We sent a letter to Mr. Roosevelt.

"This is what the people are saying and we do not know whether it is true or not. Now, any statement from you would not serve our purpose. You are an interested party. Would you permit us to investigate you? We would like to send a man into your home to live for two months and sit by your side day after day, getting up in the morning and put-

ting you to bed at night until we can have a history of just how much is done by other people. Furthermore, we would like to have our physicians examine you and state their conclusions."

It was an impertinent letter.

The then Governor wrote back and said: "Name your man and name your time." So we sent a representative up to Albany. He stayed there, and wrote a story which we published. In a survey conducted by a large advertising agency in America, this article was shown to be the most widely read of the year.

I was astounded when I heard the Governor's story. Disease had paralyzed him from the shoulders down. He couldn't move a finger. Only his head and heart were left working.

Little by little he moved a finger—a hand—an arm—a leg. In a few short years he became President of the United States! And one of the best we have ever had. Such was his invincible spirit.

We are looking for the writer who can put a crowd around our office, asking us what's going to happen to Little Nell next week.—*Fulton Oursler, Editor of Liberty, condensed from Writer's Digest.*