

A NEWSPAPER SUB-EDITOR'S OFFICE AND WORK.



THE public does not fully understand the office or the work of the sub-editor of a daily newspaper. There is a general appreciation of the fact that there must be a literary director, who is called the editor; that there must be "leader"-writers, reporters, compositors, and others; but generally there

is profound ignorance of the work of the sub-editor. So complete is this, that on one occasion the secretary of a company owning a large newspaper remarked to the editor that he had never been able to discern what was the use of a sub-editor! Possibly it may furnish a little knowledge if we sketch the surroundings and the work of the sub-editor of one of our chief provincial papers.

It is night when he enters on his duties—replacing the "day" sub-editor, who has been engaged in the preparation and supervision of literary matter that has accumulated during the day, and the portion of which he has not been able to deal with is passed by him on to his successor. The scene is a small room, well lit and warmed, and with a tendency to grow heated and close in the small hours of the morning. Its furniture comprises table, desk, a chair or two, a little library, a few files of papers. There are spouts that communicate with the printing office, and along which little boxes, "copy"-laden, may travel. There are speaking-tubes, files, and abundance of the sub-editor's "tools"—writing materials, scissors, gum, and other essentials. The library is a peculiar one—fiction is almost absent, poetry is conspicuous by its absence, and the bulk of the volumes are those that Charles Lamb called "books that are no books:" works of reference; dictionaries, alike of words, events, and dates; cyclopædias; law, medical, clerical, and army and navy lists, and a mass of volumes in which the facts and the personalities of the past and present are recorded and tabulated for easy reference. And could you unveil the secrets of the desks and the

to these occasional visits from reporters or from the composing-room, and you have some idea of the scene and the surroundings.

The work is varied. To the sub-editor is brought the literary matter a selection from which is to appear next day, with certain exceptions, and it is his duty to arrange, condense, and prepare it for publication, to place it in other hands for dealing with certain parts, or to reject it. Telegrams by public or private wire are brought here; reports of markets, exchanges, meetings, and other events, either by members of the staff of the paper or by correspondents; the evening's newspapers, the letters of volunteer correspondents—everything indeed, except the advertisements and the editorial utterances, passes through the hands of the sub-editor. Night after night he will have fifty to eighty of the buff telegraphic envelopes to open—each with from one to eight slips of "flimsy" written with more or less closeness; possibly as many of the news parcels sent by train from correspondents or reporters; and multitudinous letters and newspapers by post and mail train. He is, of course, aided in disposing of these masses of matter by regulations that vary slightly in different offices. In the one taken as typical, all the reports of markets—either by telegraph, from local papers, or sent by correspondents—pass at once to compositors who regularly set them into type, and who by long use are familiar with the technicalities of the trades, and can instantly interpret the condensed telegrams, or the contractions. In another, all sporting matter is sent to a "sporting editor;" and again, at a sea-port, voluminous shipping reports pass at once to a shipping expert. Even when thus relieved, there is work for the sub-editor for all the night, as an example or two will show.

He receives from 100 to 200 sheets of telegrams, and in addition, a possible "special wire" from the metropolis into the editorial offices pours in at times its flood of telegrams—from Stock Exchange, Coal Market, or in its session from the special Parliamentary reporters. Here is a copy of the message as received by the telegraphic clerks in charge of the "puncher" instrument in the office:—

docket-holes, you would find abundant preparation for the production of other matter. Here are manuscript biographies of men of the present, for use when they have just become silent; here tables of local records and events, and here compilations and statistics that refer to local affairs that are ever and anon discussed. Litter up the table with papers and copy; let the basket on the floor be partially filled with envelopes, wrappers, unused manuscripts, and torn newspapers; allow telegraph messengers to come and go, and add

This oddity of dashes is thus translated by the telegraphic operator, and sent to the sub-editor for revision if needed:—

"P. cent. for the year 1881."

A reading easily understood by the compositors, and so sent through untouched, after a glance. Not so, however, with the "flimsy" that is sent in from the Post Office. On the next page we give a reduced *fac-simile* of a sheet as it is sent.

The first part of this, after the introductory line,

needs no alteration, beyond that of a capital for a small letter or so. The introductory line is simply a series of contractions. The letters in the left-hand corner state the time, according to the telegraphic code. The "pa" is simply the initials of the "Press Association," which obtains it from Reuter ("Rtr"), and "Cls. one" defines merely the class of the news-supply. But when we come to the involved second paragraph, it needs experienced eyes to gather its meaning, and hence the following cutting of the message, as printed, will best explain it to the uninitiated reader:—

INDIA. CALCUTTA, Jan. 20.

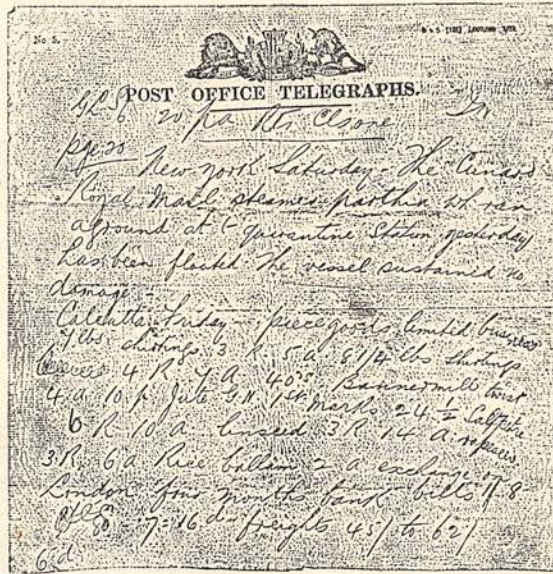
Piece goods, limited business; 7lbs. Shirtings, 3r. 5a.; 8½lbs. Shirtings, 4r. 7a.; 40's Bannermill Twist, 4a. 10p.; Jute, G. N. 1st marks, 24½; Saltpetre, 6r. 10a.; Linseed, 3r. 14a.; Rape-seed, 3r. 6a.; Rice ballam, 2a.; Exchange on London four months' Bank Bills, 1s. 8 7-16d.; Freights, 45s. to 62s. 6d.

Similarly the reports of the correspondents are sent in, in a contracted form, and though the contractions pass to and are well understood by the compositors, and hence entail no trouble on the sub-editor, all the mass of matter that he passes on to the latter must be read by him. Repetitions, whether of messages from different correspondents or press agents, must be removed; reports that are uninteresting may be either condensed

report, which he has condensed carefully into half a column, back from the overseer of the printing office, with the request that it be "cut down to a stick"—that is, to the small extent of the amount of type that may be set in one of the composing "sticks." And, possibly, when the matter has passed into the hands of the compositors and been "set," it may happen that on the sub-editor devolves the duty of selecting such matter as must be kept out, owing to advertisements proving longer than had been anticipated, or late and important intelligence crowding out earlier and less important news. The arrival of the news of any unforeseen event—a colliery explosion, a railway accident, an important trial, or any similar intelligence—upsets

the whole arrangement and disposal of space of the sub-editor. He must see to that being got into type at once, and a proof sent to the "late" leader-writer, must obtain from the books of reference he can as to the places or persons referred to, and then is called upon to give the "happy despatch" to some of the work he had taken time over and pains with earlier in the evening.

At last, when the ink shows signs of exhaustion, and the pencil for the "flimsy" has been blunt some time, when the desk



is littered with scraps and cuttings, and the files are crowded with "items" for use in that future (that so seldom arrives) when space is plentiful; when the gum-bottle is sticky at the mouth, and the scissors snap shortly; when he is almost hoarse with shouting through speaking-tubes, and sick of the sight of the little imp who is the messenger; when the telegraph boys have ceased from troubling, and the printers' boys are at rest, the night's work of the sub-editor is wound up—seldom satisfactorily to him.

This, then, is the work of the sub-editor. To him, in the strong words of Lowell, "by wind or steam, on horseback or dromedary-back, in the pouch of the Indian runner or clicking over the magnetic wires, troop all the famous performers from the four quarters of the globe." He arranges the utterances of "myriad invisible electric conductors along which tremble the joys, sorrows, wrongs, triumphs, hopes, and despairs of as many men and women." And then, when his work is done, and has served its brief hour, like Imperial Caesar's clay, it may pass to the use of "the wrappage of a bar of soap!"