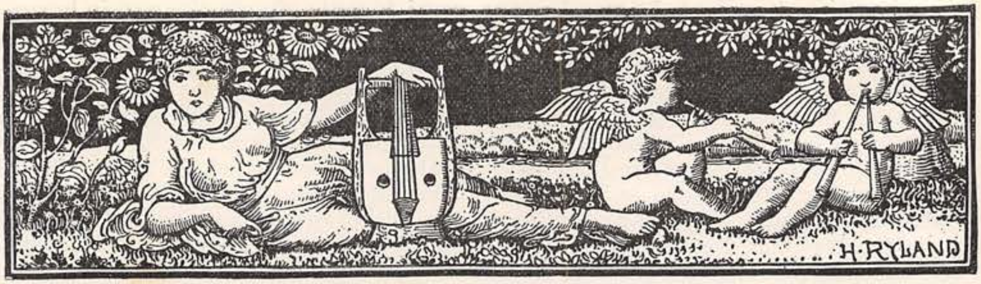


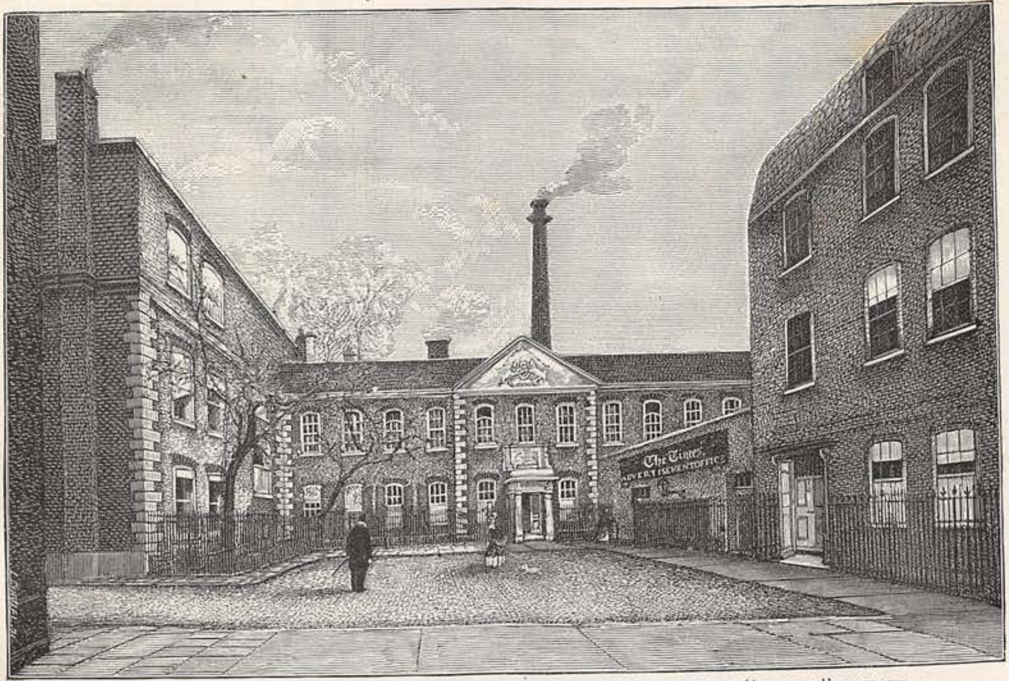
THE "TIMES."

By EDMUND VINCENT.

With Illustrations by EDMUND J. SULLIVAN.

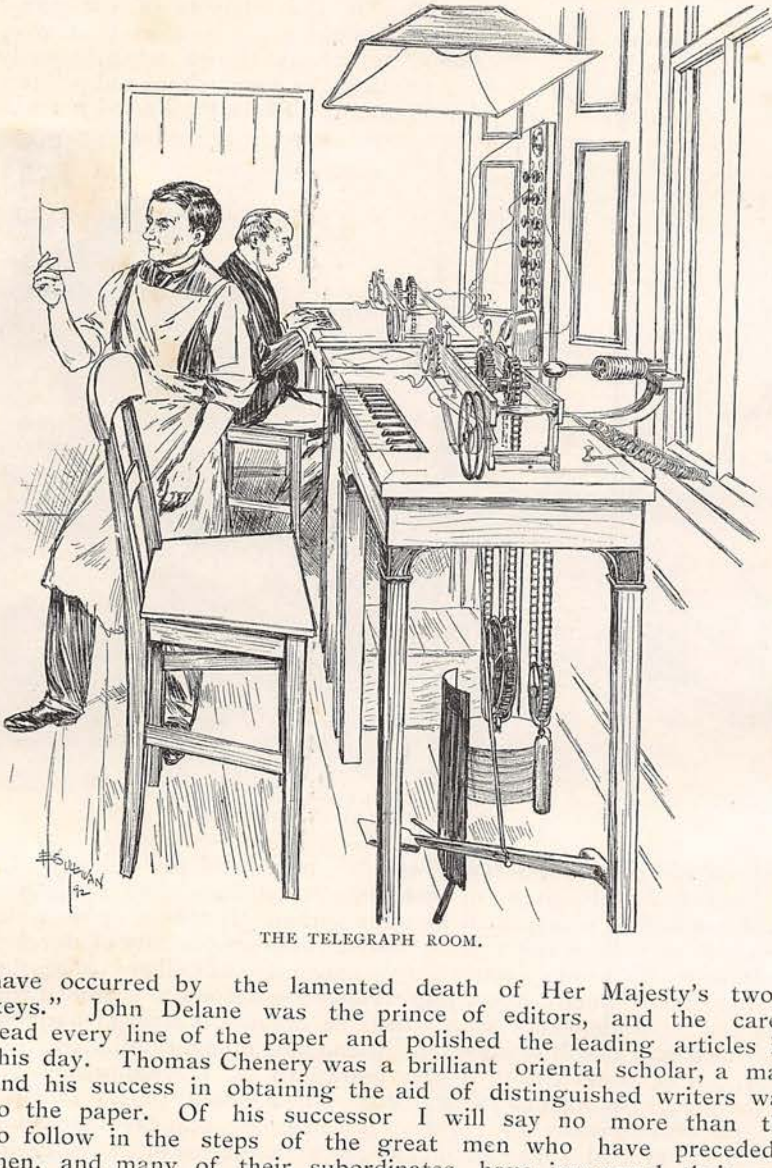
IN the thirtieth chapter of the Book of Pendennis by William Makepeace Thackeray the human, it is written —"There she is—the great engine—she never sleeps. She has her ambassadors in every quarter of the world—her couriers are upon every road. Her officers march along with armies and her envoys enter statesmen's Cabinets. They are ubiquitous." In resolute invasion of the monopoly of the preacher let this text be chosen for exposition with particular reference to the *Times* newspaper, that great engine of to-day, of which Thackeray's words, albeit published but five years after the success of the experiments with the electric telegraph on the South-Western Railway had been recorded as a marvel, are a complete description. When we rise in the morning we hope to see the sun, we expect to see the *Times*. We know that from 1785 until now the office in Printing House Square, as it used to be and as it is, has never failed to pour forth its stream of information into the world at the appointed time on the morning of every week-day in the year. The course of Nature can hardly match its unbroken cycle of regularity. The sun may retire for a week or more, as it did at Christmas time; the tide ought to be full at London Bridge at fifty-seven minutes past seven on the morning of the first of September, and the first copies of the *Times* ought to be ready at the publishing office in Playhouse Yard at an appointed time on that morning. Westerly winds may delay the flood tide, easterly winds may drive it up the estuary so fiercely that it may continue to flow beyond the time fixed, but the *Times* will certainly appear, punctual to the minute, and would appear no less certainly—says M. de Blowitz who knows everything—even though a cataclysm should have swept Printing House Square and Playhouse Yard into the adjoining Thames.

The *Times* is, in effect, an institution which has grown into English life, and it were a labour of love to trace with particularity its development from small beginnings to the present day, to stand in the spirit side by side with John Walter the First at Charing Cross Pillory, to marvel at the generation which stood by while an honest man, for telling the plain and wholesome truth, suffered long imprisonment at Newgate when Newgate was a hell upon earth. From that point onwards it would be easy to trace the various manifestations of fearless independence and unswerving integrity which have enabled the paper to acquire and maintain an amount of influence which no other paper can claim. We hear much of "the policy of the paper" in these days, and of the manner in which that policy is directed; as a matter of fact that policy, which is a thing altogether apart from politics, has followed principles which have never varied, and they are the principles of fearless independence and honest candour. John Walter the First was content to suffer in the pillory for courageous criticism of the Dukes of York, Gloucester and Cumberland. John Walter the Second lost the official advertisements of the Government and the contract for the Customs printing rather than refrain from strong censure of Lord Melville; and this same John Walter the Second was the man who, when the Government of 1810 intercepted his letters by way of punishment for his refusal to prophesy smooth things and to give praise or to keep silence when blame was due, met them by providing his own channels of intelligence and by sending out Henry Crabb Robinson to be the first of special correspondents. Robinson was the fore-runner of the adventurous band, of which William Howard Russell and Charles Austin have been best known to the public, who have faced danger and hardship in the interests of the great paper and of the public, whose anxiety the paper might serve to allay if it were served faithfully and without stint. The same spirit was shown when, shortly before the introduction of the Koenig process of printing, the compositors and printers were all but in a state of mutiny. Then John Walter the Second collected a small but loyal band, took off his coat and assisted with his own hand in setting up the paper, secured its punctual publication in spite of the strikers, and steadfastly resisted a strike of five months accompanied by intimidation. It was a spirit which refused to be beaten. It was also a spirit which seized every opportunity of developing the embryo *Times*—for you may be enterprising in machinery as well as in procuring news—and the keen judgment which enabled John Walter the Second to see the merits of Koenig's process and the promptitude with which he secured it were in harmony with the enterprise which sent Crabb Robinson to Altona and announced the capitulation of Flushing forty-eight hours before it was known to the Government of the country. In 1814 the proprietor worked in his shirt-sleeves a second time. Koenig's machinery had been put up and was ready for use; it was known that the men would resist it; John Walter the Second appeared in the office in the small hours of the morning, confronted his astonished printers with the *Times* already produced by steam, warned them that he had men and arms in readiness if violence were attempted and—promised to pay their wages until those of them who were not wanted could find employment elsewhere. Indomitable, full of resource, generous to a fault, John Walter the Second left a deep impression upon the paper. Nor did he lack that resolute determination to tell the truth at all costs which had been characteristic of his father. His most appropriate memorial is the tablet of 1840, which stands over the



PRINTING HOUSE SQUARE UNTIL 1874. FROM A PICTURE IN THE "TIMES" OFFICE.

doorway in Printing House Square to record the gratitude of the mercantile community for the exposure of colossal fraud. The exposure had cost some thousands of pounds, it had saved the foreign bankers from a loss of at least a million of money, and the merchants wished to reimburse the proprietors. But the *Times* does not accept gratuities, and the moneys subscribed were devoted to the foundation of scholarships connected with Christ's Hospital and the City of London School at Oxford and Cambridge. The tablet over the *Times* doorway may serve to remind every contributor as he enters that fearless honesty must be his watchword : the like tablet, set up in the Royal Exchange, keeps the services of the *Times* constantly in the minds of the mercantile community. The same spirit of enterprise and courage passed to John Walter the Third by heredity, and has passed from him to the present manager Mr. Arthur Walter, and that spirit is the "policy of his paper."



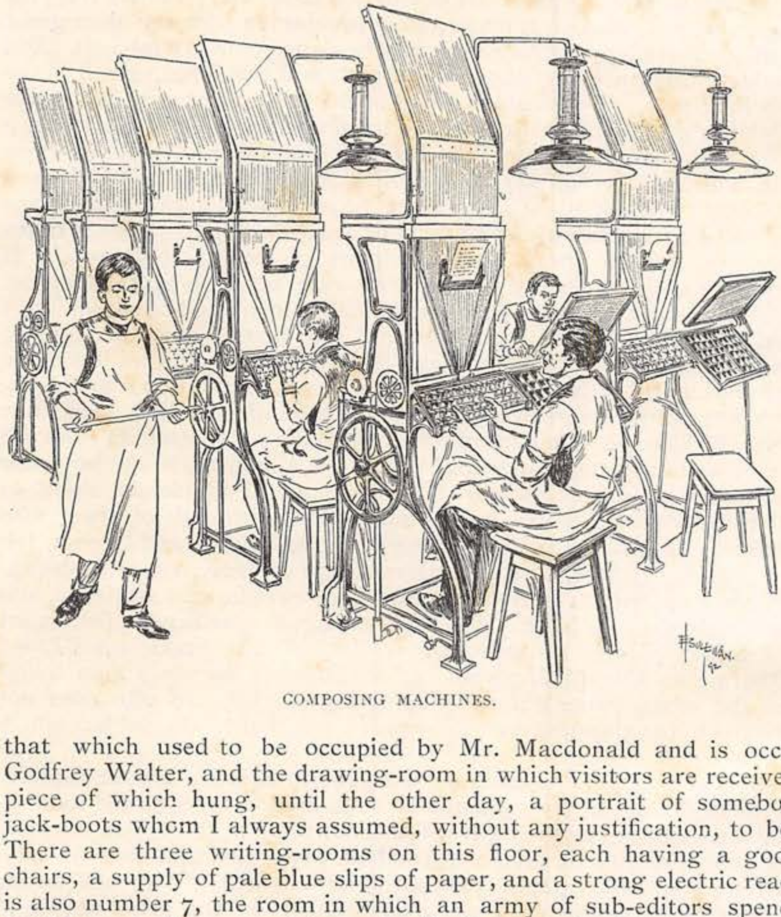
THE TELEGRAPH ROOM.

Of the succession of editors, not much need be said here. Thomas Barnes was a brilliant leader-writer in his generation, but it was a generation which could dub Macaulay as "Mr. Babbletongue Macaulay," and could write of him and of Sheil : "These men Privy Councillors ! These men petted at Windsor Castle ! Faugh ! Why they are hardly fit to fill up the vacancies that have occurred by the lamented death of Her Majesty's two favourite monkeys." John Delane was the prince of editors, and the care with which he read every line of the paper and polished the leading articles is remembered to this day. Thomas Chenery was a brilliant oriental scholar, a master of literature, and his success in obtaining the aid of distinguished writers was of much value to the paper. Of his successor I will say no more than that he is worthy to follow in the steps of the great men who have preceded him. All these men, and many of their subordinates, have impressed their qualities upon the paper, but its policy has never wavered for a moment from those lines of sincerity which were laid down by the founder. They are the lines in effect of the oath administered to grand jurymen, "You shall present no man through envy, hatred, or malice ; neither shall you leave any man unpresented through affection, fear, or the hope of reward." The public knows these things ; it knows that its *Times*, even when it is mistaken, is sincere and honest, nor could there be any more striking testimony to the esteem in which the *Times* is held by the public than the fact that, when the case for the accuser before the Parnell Commission collapsed, so far as the letters were concerned, no rational person among those who came to the conclusion that the letters were forged dreamed of insinuating that the *Times* was a party to the forgery.

From this passing glance into history, the scantiness of which may be excused upon the ground that there is no use in repeating the story which was told with characteristic power by M. de Blowitz in his famous article on the centenary of the *Times* (" Art and Letters," May and June 1888), it is desired to pass to an aspect of the *Times* far more intricate and difficult of treatment. The folded paper as it lies on the breakfast table represents, take it for all in all, one of the most marvellously complex products of civilization. It has, of course, many points in common with the other great morning papers ; and any morning paper is a marvel, when you come to analyse it. And what a strange product is the morning paper in general, and the *Times*, which is the biggest of them by a long way, in particular ! Here in the leading columns, you have the well-weighed opinion of thoughtful men in concert upon home politics, upon a scientific question, upon a crisis in the far East for which a telegram of three lines has formed the text, and upon, let us say, equine diseases with a possibly poisoned favourite for its subject. All these articles must be strong enough to bear the criticism of experts, and a new series of experts will be ready to criticize a fresh series of articles the next day. Then comes the vast mass of foreign telegrams. If Parliament is sitting, you may read word for word the utterances of Mr. Gladstone, Mr. Balfour, or Lord Salisbury, and the speeches of smaller men condensed, shorn of halting ejaculations, hammered by the reporter's skill into something near akin to sequence of sense and grammar. You know that if a wandering politician has made a speech in the Shetlands it will be recorded, that if a colliery explosion or a conflagration of a theatre has occurred there will be a full description. City news, law reports, police reports, fashionable announcements, and a hundred matters besides are set forth with accuracy and in systematic order. Think for a moment of the immense organization of men and machines which must lie at the back of the folded sheet, of the mass of miscellaneous knowledge which there must be in the minds of those who put the paper together. You, sir, who know Newmarket and Ascot and Epsom, tell me, pray, what is the meaning of "spot, pipes, waterside 17/9," or construe "crabs 15/ to 25/ per pad." Answer me, right reverend compiler of nonconformist statistics, and construe "last five furlongs of D. M. h. ft." Tell me again whether the lieutenant who is "seconded" suffers pain in the process. Politician ! explain Grimm's Law ; lawyer ! translate "grain to Liverpool, steam, 3." There is hardly a man living who could construe the whole paper ; there is no living Englishman who does not think himself aggrieved if the slightest error is made in relation to the subject which he has made entirely his own.

Accompany me then at six in the evening to the door in Printing House Square. Remain without in the flesh, but let your disembodied spirit pass through the folding-doors ; the men behind the railings on the right will not notice your ghost, but you may notice that they sit at the receipt of telegrams and of envelopes, and that no man bearing the printed envelope of the paper goes away unrewarded. You will notice too that the night printers are dropping in one after another, for the great engine is awaking out of her half-sleep of the day. She never quite sleeps, even as a producing machine ; for a second edition of the paper comes out every day for the benefit of the Continent, and of the clubs. Moreover, there are the *Times* reports of the debates in Parliament and of leading cases in the Courts, the *Mail* and the weekly edition of the *Times* to be produced, so that there is always something going on. Glide unsubstantially to the right and you shall pass through a lofty room, a wilderness of iron tables and type, to the foot of a spiral staircase of iron, ascending which, if spirits have noses and ears, you shall become aware of a warm smell of oil and of a rattling crashing sound from a composing room. Look down its length, and the impression produced on the eye is that of an endless series of frames, hybrids between a Venetian blind and an Æolian harp, each attended by its satellites who work under a strong light concentrated upon the work. Before each man lies his slip of "copy ;" legible or illegible, he must make the best of it ; some set by hand, others by machine, played upon with keys like a piano, capable of setting nearly 300 lines an hour, whereas fifty lines is the limit of the best hand labour.

Be content with a glance here. Know that each man has his work allotted to him by the head-printer, that many of them grow to an honourable old age, that all receive pay at rates higher than those earned by any men of their class in London, and that there is not a Trade Unionist among them.



COMPOSING MACHINES.

Pass through a green baize door into a long corridor, remembering that even to spirits the room of the editor of the *Times* remains closed, and that you are in another man's house investigating the penetralia of his business. Here your body and spirit may unite for the sake of greeting honest John Marriot, cheery and rosy, although he is awake all night and asleep all day. He is a character. He has seen three editors "out," as he puts it; he can tell many an anecdote of the days of Delane. "Ah, Sir, our obits ain't what they used to be; why I have known 'subjects' to correct the proofs before they died, and then people complained of inaccuracies." "It's all hurry now; everything must be ready to the minute, but I have known Mr. Delane to stop press for an hour or two, to pull a leader into shape." Other rooms in this corridor are that which used to be occupied by Mr. Macdonald and is occupied now by Mr. Godfrey Walter, and the drawing-room in which visitors are received, over the mantelpiece of which hung, until the other day, a portrait of somebody in antediluvian jack-boots whom I always assumed, without any justification, to be Crabb Robinson. There are three writing-rooms on this floor, each having a good desk and good chairs, a supply of pale blue slips of paper, and a strong electric reading-lamp. There is also number 7, the room in which an army of sub-editors spend laborious nights over oceans of manuscript, much of which, to the infinite annoyance of everybody concerned, is faintly pencilled on to greased paper and called "flimsy." I doubt whether the full atrocity of "flimsy" can be represented on good paper; if it could, the picture would excite sympathy for those who have to decipher it, but the picture could not render in any case the faint smell of rancid oil which distinguishes the "flimsy." It comes from stray reporters, from press agencies and from the Post Office. My impression is that if the two former would use duplicates of a more legible kind, much more of their "copy" would be used and paid for. The Post Office, of course, is incorrigible. But in spite of the monotony of their work the sub-editors of the *Times* as a body are the cheeriest and the most helpful men in the world, nor do they think it absolutely a matter of conscience to deprive an article of all point and all epigram. Occasionally they will spare a jest even, but sub-editing does not tend to an appreciation of humour. Let me contrast them with the sub-editors of another office which shall be nameless. The editor had despatched a promising man upon an errand which gave opportunities for picturesque writing; the man returned to be reproved by the editor for Euclidean baldness of style; he asked that the copy might be sent for and showed his chief sentence after sentence of glowing phrase marked with blue pencil for omission. All "outside men" know what blue pencil means.

Up stairs, on another corridor are the reporters' room, the leader-writers' rooms, the foreign room. The leader-writers are wreathed in mystery. I cannot say who they are, how much they earn, how they do their work, how many of them there are, for the maxim of the *Times* office is that of the sage, with variations, "Call no man a leader-writer until he is dead." The name of the reporters is legion. The foreign room is one of the busiest in the house. The wires from the Continent click without ceasing; the messages which come require the full attention of four trained men under a chief. It is a mistake, by the way, to call this gentleman, accomplished and distinguished as he is, an editor. The *Times* has but one editor, and in his department he is absolute and supreme.

We are now in a position to give a rough sketch of the men concerned in producing, choosing and arranging the matter, apart from advertisements, which appears in the *Times*. They are the editor, an assistant editor, foreign director, and the so-called City editor, though here again the word "editor" is to my mind misapplied. There are *x* leader-writers, there are six or seven sub-editors, and midway between them and the printers are the readers. There are also *x* special correspondents, *y* reporters, assigned to districts and peripatetic, and *z* semi-attached reporters. In the United Kingdom there is a local correspondent of every town of importance; in every country in the world, almost, is an accomplished gentleman entitled to call himself "our own correspondent." Of these M. de Blowitz is the type and the ideal. No mystery puzzles him, no effort is too great for his unrivalled memory, no subject is so serious but that he can write upon it, or dictate upon it, in a style which always charms. The world may laugh at him now and again, but it is with the indulgent laughter accorded to a European favourite. Even now I have omitted the full staff of reporters in the House of Commons, who enable the *Times* to give practically the only complete report of debates published daily in England, and the law reporters, barristers all, including men appointed to each circuit, at the head of whom is the most indefatigable and the most humorous of men, the favourite of bench and bar, who has always a kindly word for a struggling junior and a merry anecdote for the jaded leader.

Still there remain the multitudinous reviewers, the dramatic critic, the musical critic, the art critic, the gentleman who makes the turf his study, the yachtsman, the rowing critic, the observer of cricket. The names of gentlemen of this class are indeed legion, they are as numerous as the pursuits of men.

The management of this great organization is conducted by Mr. Arthur F. Walter, with the invaluable assistance of Mr. Moberly Bell. It may readily be imagined these gentlemen have abundant occupation. Advertisements, sales, correspondence with men at home and abroad in the service of the paper, and a thousand matters besides come within their purview; but they do not allow the world to pry into their business or into their manner of conducting it. They have been heard to observe, however, that the world thinks it knows more of the details of the business of the *Times* than the whole of the *Times* staff put together, and that none of the statements made concerning its circulation are even near the truth. Thus much, however, may be known. The circulation of the *Times* is among prosperous people who can afford to buy what they want. It is a better medium, for example, for the advertisement of a grouse-moor, or an estate for sale, or a yacht, or a carriage, than for an advertisement of a costermonger's cart or a second-rate public-house. Advertisements come to it not because its circulation is known to be large, which it is, but because its constituency is eminently prosperous. It must, moreover, be borne in mind that the circulation of the *Times* is very much larger than the numbers published. It has been computed that on an average every copy is read by about five persons.

The printing department is in the hands of Mr. Godfrey Walter. It is a heavy charge, for ever since the days of the Koenig machinery the *Times* has led the way in improvements in the art of printing. It would be superfluous here to describe the Walter press in detail. Suffice it to say that it is a machine which fascinates the observer. At one end of the machine is a reel of paper, tough paper of good esparto grass, boiled and bleached, four miles in length. This paper is converted into copies of the *Times*, folded, and registered as they leave the machine at an incredible rate.

The Walter press is in use at numerous newspaper offices at home and abroad, including places so distant from one another as Missouri, Vienna, Birmingham, and Edinburgh. The press in its present form is the triumph of the administration of John Walter the Third, and was largely due to the careful study of machinery by him and the late Mr. Macdonald. All the Walter presses have been made in the engineering room at the basement of Printing House Square. Here, too, is the type foundry, for at the *Times* office a large proportion of type is melted up and re-cast. Finally the composing machines, Kastenbein's with so many improvements that the original idea is almost beyond recognition, have received much attention with excellent results. At one time it was customary to connect the operators at some of these machines by telephone with persons dictating from the House of Commons, but the practice has been practically discontinued, partly because the House of Commons has become an "early to bed" institution, partly because the strain on the operator was found to be almost intolerable.

Let me conclude by explaining, not in language appealing to the mechanician, but roughly, the history of an article. Somebody writes it, somebody approves it, it goes out to the printer, it is printed in proof, it is read and re-read, its place in the paper is settled, the type representing the page on which the article is to appear is impressed upon *papier mâché*, from the *papier mâché* two half-cylinders are cast, the *papier mâché* being the mould, the half-cylinders make one whole cylinder, other cylinders are made in like fashion. The cylinders are placed in position on one of the Walter presses and all is ready. It needs but to move the starting lever and the machine will do all the rest, will turn out copies of the *Times* at a marvellous pace, folded and ready to be taken to the publishing office, to be despatched by the newspaper train, to be taken to the newsagents, but not to be obtained by any purchaser other than a newsagent before the newspaper train starts. I remember trying after an all-night sitting —not in the House of Commons—to buy the *Times* at half-past four in the morning at the publishing office. The scene was worth the journey, but the answer was, "Not before five o'clock if you were the Prince of Wales himself."