Impressions and experiences

Howells William Dean
Title: Impressions and experiences

Author: Howells William Dean

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IMPRESSIONS AND EXPERIENCES
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THE COUNTRY PRINTER

My earliest memories, or those which I can make sure are not the sort of early hearsay that we mistake for remembrance later in life, concern a country newspaper, or, rather, a country printing-office. The office was in my childish consciousness some years before the paper was; the compositors rhythmically swaying before their cases of type; the pressman flinging himself back on the bar that made the impression, with a swirl of his long hair; the apprentice rolling the forms, and the foreman bending over the imposing-stone were familiar to me when I could not grasp the notion of any effect from their labors. In due time I came to know all about it, and to understand that these activities went to the making of the Whig newspaper which my father edited to the confusion of the Locofoocos, and in the especial interest of Henry Clay; I myself supported this leader so vigorously for the presidency in my seventh year that it was long before I could realize that the election of 1844 had resulted in his defeat. My father had already been a printer for a good many years, and sometime in the early thirties he had led a literary forlorn-hope, in a West-Virginian town, with a monthly magazine, which he printed himself and edited with the help of his sister.
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As long as he remained in business he remained a country editor and a country printer; he began to study medicine when he was a young man, but he abandoned it for the calling of his life without regret, and, though with his speculative and inventive temperament he was tempted to experiment in other things, I do not think he would ever have lastingly forsaken his newspaper for them. In fact, the art of printing was in our blood; it never brought us great honor or profit; and we were always planning and dreaming to get out of it, or get it out of us; but we are all in some sort bound up with it still. To me it is now so endeared by the associations of childhood that I cannot breathe the familiar odor of types and presses without emotion; and I should not be surprised if I found myself trying to cast a halo of romance about the old-fashioned country office in what I shall have to say of it here.

I

Our first newspaper was published in southwestern Ohio, but after a series of varying fortunes, which I need not dwell upon, we found ourselves in possession of an office in the northeastern corner of the state, where the prevalent political feeling promised a prosperity to one of my father’s antislavery opinions which he had never yet enjoyed. He had no money, but in those days it was an easy matter to get an interest in a country paper on credit, and we all went gladly to work to help him pay for the share that he acquired in one by this means. An office which gave a fair enough living, as living was then, could be bought for twelve or fifteen hundred dollars; but this was an uncommonly good office, and I suppose the half of it which
my father took was worth one sum or the other. Afterward, within a few months, when it was arranged to remove the paper from the village where it had always been published to the county-seat, a sort of joint-stock company was formed, and the value of his moiety increased so much, nominally at least, that he was nearly ten years paying for it. By this time I was long out of the story, but at the beginning I was very vividly in it, and before the world began to call me with that voice which the heart of youth cannot resist, it was very interesting; I felt its charm then, and now, as I turn back to it, I feel its charm again, though it was always a story of steady work, if not hard work.

The county-seat, where it had been judged best to transfer the paper lest some other paper of like politics should be established there, was a village of only six or seven hundred inhabitants. But, as the United States senator who was one of its citizens used to say, it was "a place of great political privileges." The dauntless man who represented the district in the House for twenty years, and who had fought the antislavery battle from the first, was his fellow-villager and more than compeer in distinction; and, besides these, there was nearly always a state senator or representative among us. The county officers, of course, lived at the county-seat, and the leading lawyers, who were the leading politicians, made their homes in the shadow of the court-house, where one of them was presently elected to preside as judge of the common pleas. In politics, the county was always overwhelmingly Freesoil, as the forerunner of the Republican party was then called; the Whigs had hardly gathered themselves together since the defeat of General Scott for the presidency; the Democrats, though dominant in state and nation, and faithful to slavery
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at every election, did not greatly outnumber among us the zealots called Comeouters, who would not vote at all under a Constitution recognizing the right of men to own men. Our paper was Freesoil, and its field was large among that vast majority of the people who believed that slavery would finally perish if kept out of the territories and confined to the old Slave States. With the removal of the press to the county-seat there was a hope that this field could be widened till every Free-soil voter became a subscriber. It did not fall out so; even of those who subscribed in the ardor of their political sympathies, many never paid; but our list was nevertheless handsomely increased, and numbered fifteen or sixteen hundred. I do not know how it may be now, but then most country papers had a list of four or five hundred subscribers; a few had a thousand, a very few twelve hundred, and these were fairly decimated by delinquents. We were so flown with hope that I remember there was serious talk of risking the loss of the delinquents on our list by exacting payment in advance; but the measure was thought too bold, and we compromised by demanding two dollars a year for the paper, and taking a dollar and a half if paid in advance. Twenty-five years later my brother, who had followed my father in the business, discovered that a man who never meant to pay for his paper would as lief owe two dollars as any less sum, and he at last risked the loss of the delinquents by requiring advance payment; it was an heroic venture, but it was perhaps time to make it.

The people of the county were mostly farmers, and of these nearly all were dairymen. The few manufactures were on a small scale, except perhaps the making of oars, which were shipped all over the world from the heart of the primeval forests densely wooding the