

# The Post Impressionist

## Mr. Kirkley Kicks

Sure, I'm squawking, even yipping if you want to call it that. I'm one of those long-horned, hard-headed goats of the editorial copy desk of what I hope is your favorite morning newspaper. We are the forgotten men of journalism—until something goes wrong in the paper; then, we catch . . .

All we have to do is to try and sift out of the yards of copy thrust at us by reporters, city editors, assistant city editors, telegraph editors, news editors, ad nauseum, a few facts if we can discern them as kernels smothered by chaff of experting and interpreting that writers insist on. Then we put on headlines we hope tell the story. We don't know either, half the time!

This collection of words—some quite useless in keeping with the streamlined era of newspapering—(Lord, how I hate that word!)—will ultimately settle down and say that things in the business ain't what they used to be. They've just gone to pieces, according to the hard and fast rules under which I learned this trade.

Or maybe at the ripe old age of 34 and with some 17 years of experience behind me, I've set my feet firmly at long last on the hallowed ground of being a veteran in the Fourth Estate. Naturally, us old-timers always oppose progress and never recognize genius when we see it.

For the uninitiated in the newspaper racket, the editorial copy desk is the funnel through which all stories that go into a newspaper must clear before going to the compositors. All we have to do is to make the stories read, make sense if that is possible, put on a headline and pick up the next piece.

I started in 1923 as an office boy and worked my way up to all the jobs inside the editorial office, did a hitch with the Associated Press on the Senate in Washington and finally got to be a trained seal, and only had to write one story a day. But, at my advanced age, I am trying to learn all over again; just a new cub in today's way of handling things.

The fundamentals hammered into me were: get the facts and check all names; get your story together and get it together fast in simple language for the garbage man in Galveston, not The Nation's readers; be impartial in the treatment of facts; tell the story as it happened, and if it were sensational or bizarre, the facts would show that without the help of any adjectives.

These simple rules have been relegated to the ash can by today's crop of reporters. To any ambitious young man or woman starting into the profession today, the first advice I'd give is: stay out of it. But, if you feel you just have to get your feet wet, be an essayist and write poetry in prose; don't bother about syntax, the copy desk will take care of that.

Don't let the facts annoy you. And, as the cardinal axiom, be sure and use at least 1,000 words when a hundred would do, or your colleagues won't think much of your piece. Be sure all the news appears after paragraph 12; never put it in the first two or three paragraphs.

Always be interpretative in your writing. Of course, what you write may need an interpreter to explain what you mean to the simple brains that have to understand it in their efforts to put a headline on it, but that's all right. It used to be that a newspaper was got out for readers; remember that today it's intended to please the reporters; what the writer and editors want to see in print is more important than a mere reader. Phooey on him! All the reader does is pay the bills; poor capitalist!

There's another angle one mustn't overlook. Always try to get some class angle into the story. Don't hesitate to air your pet peeve or favorite crusade or your philosophical or ideological bias in any story you write. By all means, get plenty of mystery into any piece. The war service of the New York Times has some excellent examples, such as leads beginning: "All is confusion along the . . . or (my favorite): "All is conjecture today . . ." Try and write an 84-point or 96-point headline on that sometime!

Be sure and write a colorful story. Naturally, you may have to strive for it, if the story doesn't happen to be colorful, but don't let that stop you! After all, the art of writing poetry in prose is to have a creative mind. We had a good example the other day:

Six Chinese sat down to breakfast. Either they got some rat poison thinking it was rice dust or the fish they ate were a little tired. Anyway, two died and four got sick. Those are the simple facts and, after all, what's a Chinese more or less, among friends? But, the story comes up to the desk something like this:

"A bizarre Oriental mystery, with some of the overtones of a Fu Manchu thriller, struck yesterday . . ." That is real color; poesy of the highest order.

The Associated Press came through with a nice one, too, the other day: "Godsent was the hour at which the tornado struck . . ." We backsliders on the desk almost wired the reporter "forget storm, interview God, etc." For some reason or another, I've always had an idea that most catastrophes were Godsent or God-directed or something of that nature.

We old-timers from across the Styx occasionally get together in an attempt to analyze the new trend. The majority opinion seems to be that it's the Oxonian or Phi Beta Kappa influence on journalism. One used to get a job and work up in the business. But that era has passed. The trade is filled with professors, essayists and authors now; it would never occur to them to write a simple narrative, the sacred ideal of a real newspaperman. Someone has said with a certain touch of irony, it's nice to be a newspaperman because you meet such interesting people; the copy editor revises that today to read; such interesting reporters.

I realize I may get fired if and when this appears in print. But, being something of a heretic, I don't care. I will at least have the satisfaction of having got out of my system a terrific bellyache brought on by acute indigestion from attempting to make fairly readable and, occasionally intelligent, copy out of the stuff that pours across the desk. But I'm fairly young; maybe I'll learn new tricks  
—don kirkley.