

# The Society Editor

By William Allen White

THEY say that in the newspaper offices of the city men work in suits, and that the editorial writer never reports an item, no matter how much he knows of it, and that a reporter is not allowed to express an editorial view of a subject even though he be well qualified to speak. But on our little country daily newspaper it is entirely different. We work on the interchangeable point system. Every one writes items, all of us get advertising and jobwork when it comes our way, and when one of us writes anything particularly good, it is marked for the editorial page. The religious reporter does the racing matineses in Wildwood Park, and the financial editor, who gets the market reports from the feed-store men, also gets any church news that comes along.

The only time we ever established a department was when we made Miss Larrabee society editor. She came from the high school, where her graduating essay on Kipling attracted our attention, and after an office council had decided that a Saturday Society page would be a paying proposition.

At first, say for six months after she came to the office, Miss Larrabee devoted herself to the accumulation of professional pride. This pride was as much a part of her life as her pompadour, which at that time was so high that she had to tiptoe to reach it. However she managed to keep it up was the wonder of the office. Finally, we all agreed that she must use chicken-fence. She denied this, but she was inclined to be good-natured about it, and as an office joke the boys used to leave a step-ladder by her desk so that she could climb up and see how her top-knot really looked. But nothing ruffled her spirits, and we quit teasing her and began to admire her work. In addition to filling six columns of the Saturday's paper with her society report in a town where a church social is important enough to justify publishing the names of those who wait on the tables, Miss Larrabee was a credit to the office.

For she was always invited to the entertainments at the houses of the rich and the great who had stationary wash-tubs in the basements of their houses, and who ate dinner instead of supper in the evening. And when she put on what the boys called her trotting harness, her silk petticoats rustled louder than any others at the party. One day she suddenly dropped her pompadour and appeared with her hair parted in the middle and doused over her ears in long, undulating billows. No other girl in town came within a quarter of an inch of Miss Larrabee's dare. When straight-fronts became stylish Miss Larrabee was a vertical marvel, and when she rolled up her sleeves and organized a country club, she referred to her shoes as boots and took the longest steps in town. But with it all she was no more clothes-horse. We drilled it into her head during her first two weeks that "society" news in a country town means not merely the doings of the cut-glass set, but that it means the doings of the Happy Hoppers, the Trundle-Bed Trash, the Knights of Columbus, the Rathbone Sisters, the King's Daughters, the Epworth League, the Christian Endeavourers, the Woman's Relief Corps, the Ladies Aid and the Home Missionary Societies, Miss Nelson's Dancing Class, the Switchemen's annual ball—if we get their job-work—and every kindred, every tribe, except such as gather in what is known as "kitchen sweats" and occasionally send in calls for the police. When Miss Larrabee got this into her head she began to groan under her burden, and, at the end of the year, though she had great pride in her profession, she affected to loathe her department.

Weddings were her especial abominations, and when the first social cloud appeared on the horizon indicating the approach of a series of showers for the bride which would culminate in a cloud-

burts at some stone church, Miss Larrabee would begin to rumble like distant thunder, and as the storm grew thicker, she would flash out crooked chain-lightning imprecations on the heads of young people, their fathers and mothers and uncles and aunts. By the day of the wedding she would be rolling a steady diapason of polite, decolorized, expurgated, ladylike profanity.

When she sat at her desk writing the stereotyped account of the event, it was like picking up a live wire to speak to her. As she wrote, we could tell at just what stage she had arrived in her copy. Thus if she said to the adjacent atmosphere, "What a whopper!" we knew she had written, "The crowning glory of a happy fortnight of social gatherings found its place when—" and when she hissed out, "Mortgaged clear to the ears and full of instalment furniture!" we felt that she had reached a point something like this: "After the ceremony the gay party assembled at the palatial home." In a moment she would snarl: "I am dead tired of seeing Mrs. Morrison's sprawly old fern and the Bosworth palm. I wish they would stop lending them!" And then we realized that she had reached the part of her write-up which said: "The chancel rail was banked with a profusion of palms and ferns and rare tropical plants." She always groaned when she came to the "simple and impressive ring ceremony." When she wrote, "After the benediction the distinguished company came forward to offer the congratulations to the newly-wedded pair," she would say as she sharpened her pencil point: "There's nothing like a wedding to reveal what a raft of common kin people have." And we knew it was all over and she was closing the article with: "A jangling array of beautiful and costly presents were exhibited in the library," for then she would pick up her copy, dog-ear the sheets, and jab them on the hook as she sighed: "Another great American pickle-dish exhibit end-d."

In the way she did two things Miss Larrabee excited the wonder and admiration of the office. One was the way she kept tabs on brides. We heard through her of the brides who could cook, and of those who were beginning life by accumulating a bright little pile of tin cans in the alley. Also she knew the brides who could do their own sewing and those who could not. She had the single girl's sniff at the bride who wore her trousseau season after season, made over and fixed up, and she gave the office the benefit of her opinion of the husband in the case who had a new tailor-made suit every fall and spring. She scented young married troubles from afar, and we knew in the office whether his folks were edging up on her, or her people were edging up on him. If a young married man danced more than twice in one evening with any one but his wife, Miss Larrabee made faces at his back when he passed the office window, and if she caught a young married woman flirting Miss Larrabee reeled up by telling us with whom the woman in question had opened "a fresh can of notions."

The other way in which Miss Larrabee displayed genius for her work was in describing women's costumes. Three or four times a year, when there are large social gatherings, we print descriptions of the women's gowns. Only three women in our town have more than one new party dress in a year, and most of the women make a party dress last two or three years. Miss Larrabee was familiar with every dress in town. She knew it made over, and no woman was cunning enough to conceal the truth from Miss Larrabee with a spangled yoke, a chiffon berth or a net overdress. Yet she would describe the gown not merely twice, but half a dozen times so that the woman wearing it might send every description to her rich relatives back East without arousing their suspicion

that she was wearing the same dress year after year. Therefore, whenever she wrote up the dresses worn at a party we were sure to sell from fifty to a hundred extra papers. She could turn a breast-pin and a homemade point lace handkerchief tucked in the front of a good old lady's best black satin into "point-lace and diamonds," that was always good for a dozen copies of the paper, and she never overlooked the dress of the wife of a good advertiser, no matter how plain it might be.

She was worth her wages to the office merely as a compendium of shams. She knew whether the bridal couple, who announced that they would spend their honeymoon in the East, were really going to Niagara Falls, or whether they were going to spend a week with his relatives in Decatur, Illinois. She knew every woman in town who bought two prizes for her whist party—only to give if her friend should win the prize, and another to give if the woman she hated should win. And with the diabolical eye of a fiend she detected the woman who was wearing the dry-cleaned, cast-off clothing of her sister in the city. What she saw the office knew, though with the wisdom of a serpent, she kept her conclusions out of the paper if they would do any harm or hurt any one's feelings. No pretender ever dreamed that she was not fooling Miss Larrabee. She was willing to agree most sympathetically with the woman who insisted that the "common people" wouldn't be interested in the list of names at her party. And the only place where we ever saw Miss Larrabee's claw in print was in the insistent mis-spelling of the name of a woman who made it a point to ridicule the paper.

We have had other girls around the office since Miss Larrabee left, but they don't seem to get the work done with any system. She was not only industrious, but practical. Friday mornings, when her work piled up, instead of fussing round the office and chattering at the telephone, she would dive into her desk and bring up her regular list of adjectives. These she would copy on three slips, carefully dividing the list so that no one had a duplicate, and in the afternoon each of the boys received a slip with a list of parties, and with instructions to scatter the adjectives she had given him through the accounts of the parties assigned to him—and the work was done. There was no scratching of the head for synonyms for "beautiful," "superb" or "elegant." Miss Larrabee had doled out to each of us the adjectives necessary, and given the adjectives, society reporting is easy. Also the editing of the copy is easy, for one does not have to remember whether or not the re-arrangements were "delicious" at the Jones party when he sees the word in connection with the viands at the Smith party. No two parties were ever "elegant" the same week. No two events were "charming." No two women were "exquisitely" gowned. The person who was assigned the adjective "delightful" by Miss Larrabee might stick it in front of a luncheon, pin it on a hostess, or use it for an evening's entertainment. But he could use it only once. And with a list of those present and the adjectives thence appertaining, even a row by could get up a column in half an hour. She had an artist's pride in the finished work, however much she might dislike the thing in making, and she used to sail down to the press-room as soon as the paper was out, and picking up the paper from the folder, she would stand reading her page, line upon line, precept upon precept, though every word and syllable was familiar to her.

During her first year she joined the Woman's State Press Club, but she discovered that she was the only real worker in the club and she never attended a second meeting. She told us that too many of the women wore white stockings and low shoes and read their

own unpublished short stories, and she feared they regarded her as a decorated shirtwaist and melodramatic open-work hosiery with suspicion and alarm.

As the years passed, and wedding after wedding sizzled under her pen, she complained to us that she was beginning to be called "auntie" in too many houses, and that the stock of available young men who didn't wear their handkerchiefs under their collars at the dances had dwindled down to two. This reality faces every girl who lives in a country town. Then she is left with two alternatives: to go visiting or to begin bringing them up by hand.

Miss Larrabee went visiting. At the end of a month she wrote: "It's all over with me. He is a nice fellow, and has a job doing 'Live Topics About Town' here on the Sun. Give my job to the little Wheatly girl, and tell her to quit writing poetry, and tuck up her dress in the back. My adjectives are in the left-hand corner of the desk under When Knighthood was in Flower. And do you suppose you could get me and the grand keeper of the records and seals a pass home for Christmas if I'd do you a New York letter some time?"

"They say these city papers are hog-tight!"

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