

Hunting a “Story”

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Sally asked me the other day what the reporter’s life is like. “It must be simply thrilling,” she gurgled. “And so romantic.”

“Sure,” I told her, “Romantic is not the word. All the men in the office wear soft ties, flowing from under an unshaven chin, just like you see in the movies. We get down to the office about 5 or 6 in the evening and sit around and josh a while. Then at 6:30 we go out to supper in some thrilling place over on Mott or Elizabeth Street and sit around a table with a dirty cloth or better yet no cloth at all and smoke cigarettes and drink wine. And every once in a while one of the men says “Hist!” and every body stops eating soup and peers around out of the corners of his eyes. And if the party that called forth the “hist” has a bulging hip pocket and slouches or has a Russian mustache and carries papers with seals, we know that there is a story.

All Write Under Inspiration

“The city editor than tells one of us to leave the festive board and pursue and the self-sacrificing reporter does as he is bid. We get back to the office about 9 o’clock and play the Victrola and dance around a while before beginning work. After a while some one gets an inspiration, just like they get religion at one of these Billy Sunday meetings, and they rush to a typewriter and tear off a news story. Finally, all are at it. Then some one comes in with a scoop, writes it, and reads it aloud to the cheers and applause of the whole staff.

Around 12 o’clock we send the office boy out after some ice cream and chocolate éclairs and sit around the editorial table and munch and talk about Nietzsche and the war.

Then... But you know all about that thrilling time around 2 o’clock when the presses are rumbling and everybody works like mad, and big stories come in at the last minute. Your know all about that, of course, plays and story books will have INFORMED YOU. And, finally, exhausted, with brow dripping, we leave the office and wend our weary way homeward. Yes, it’s a gay life.”

And the soul of Sallie was thrilled.

Sad Reality of Hunting a “Story.”

But ... the sad reality. Having painted the foregoing thrilling picture for her edification and aroused her envy, I started out after a story. What I was after was an interview with a girl who had been arrested, convicted and sentenced to an indeterminate sentence on a charge of

throwing stones at a street car. I tried first at the Tombs. Having shown my pass at the door, the massive gate was unlocked and I entered. I asked one man, behind a desk that almost hid him, if I could speak to the girls. He handed me a slip of paper and told me to write her; the slip would be brought in, and, if she did not want to see me, she did not have to.

I wrote the note, I sent it in by a shirt-sleeved man with a kind smile. He came out a few minutes later with the remark that she had been taken over the Queens County Jail.

I walked over to the Third Avenue and took a street car. After we had reached 34th Street a blockade ensued. I waited, reading a paper that I had already read and chewing my finger nails.

Finally, Queensboro Bridge was reached. I took another street car across the bridge and read my paper again. Because I had already asked direction of several obliging policemen who had directed me kindly but obscurely, I was not at all bashful about asking the conductor. He told me where to get off and how far to walk, with a commiserating look. He imagined, I suppose, that I had a brother or sweetheart in the penitentiary. This surmised imagining was the only touch of romance so far in the bleak afternoon.

Walks Half Mile to Jail

I walked half a mile and reached the jail, entered the court house by mistake and wandered around for a while till someone appeared who told me where to go. Walking around the block, I reached the warden's door and told him who I wanted to see.

"Got a pass? Well, uh can't come in without a pass from Mr. Eliot over at Lafayette Street. Where's that? Down at Worth Street."

The half mile was retraced, with an additional four blocks to get to the time-saving subway. In the subway, I read the paper some more, the same paper, and in my delight at finding something that I hadn't read, I neglected to get off at Grand Central Station and rode back under the river again. Next time, enraged, I watched carefully, changed, and got down to Worth Street.

Mr. Eliot told me to go to the 24th floor of the Municipal Building for the special pass and, having at last reached the office after circling around the top floor of the building for a while. I was told that reporters could not see the prisoners after they had been convicted. After trotting around all afternoon, I didn't get the story.

This bare and barren description does not tell how the soles of my shoes wore thinner and thinner; how the sight of iron bars and the antiseptic smell at the jail took away my appetite, how red and cold my nose got; how the damp took all the curl out of my hair and spirit. It does not tell of the desperate people that I came in contact with, who were trying to see their friends. It is an unadorned statement of facts and if it were adorned, it would be shorn still more of any romance or thrill.