

EDITORIAL

WE are told that the first qualification of anyone who aspires to success in modern journalism is the instinct to know what the public wants; and what the reading public is said to want nowadays is sensational news with a strong human appeal. The news may be trivial, like the publicity accorded to the Prime Minister's ubiquitous pipe, or tremendous, like the declaration of a world-war. But in every case it must be news that touches in some way the fringe of human life, and it must be presented in a way that people can grasp at once, without any strain being put upon their thinking intelligence and without anything being left to their imagination. And it must be presented in this tabloid form because the demands of modern life leave little or no time for quiet thought, so that people want their thinking done for them and their opinions ready-made for them by the press. That is why we have the short leader, the snappy article, and the scare headline. Metaphorically, this is an age of the automatic machine and the penny in the slot. In America it is possible to get a meal by inserting a coin and pulling a handle. The same principle is said to operate to-day with regard to the reading public, which insists on being able to assimilate the maximum amount of news with the minimum of effort; which, by inserting its penny in the slot-machine of journalism, can extract its thoughts and opinions without personal trouble or inconvenience.

The news itself must be on an equally low level. The things that are supposed to appeal irresistibly to human nature are sex, sensation, and cheap sentiment; that is, things that appeal, because human nature is originally prone to evil, to the lower instincts of

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humanity. News of this kind is at once marked saleable: there is money in it. Men and women, we are told, and it sounds like a paradox to say it, find more pleasure and entertainment in reading about the misfortunes and tragedies that overtake their fellow-mortals than in reading of the triumph of good over evil or of success emerging out of apparent failure. The public takes a morbid delight in murders, divorces, and the latest society scandal, and reads with scant interest the report of the discovery of the cancer-germ, a discovery that may one day become of personal importance to itself. In defence of this strange attitude towards the news of the day the contention is put forward that, by satiating themselves with sensational news of subjects and happenings that do not enter into their own lives, people find some sort of escape from their drab existence, and in this way compensate themselves for the monotonous routine of their daily tasks. They live in an age of rush and bustle, when life is almost too short to be lived, and everything about them is stereotyped and tabulated; therefore they try to break the dull monotony of life by reading of the vicious or sensational exploits of others who have thrown off the traces and plunged into the false liberty of crime or eccentricity.

But if this popular demand for cheap sensationalism is responsible for the kind of news our papers readily supply, the explanation is that modern conditions of life have made it practically impossible for people to think for, and about, themselves. If it was possible, at a time when the individual is being almost standardised out of existence, and when the human element has been almost eliminated from the field of labour, for men and women suddenly to wake up and realise their higher needs and desires, and the real purpose of their existence in the world, they would just as suddenly cease to want sensation, tragedy, and triviality in their news-

papers. The probability is that they would want no newspapers at all. They would discover the divine selfishness of thinking about themselves and for themselves. Instead of taking a morbid interest in the lives and doings of others, they would begin to find the supreme interest in their own lives and activities. If they wanted to read at all, they would want books that showed them how noble a thing human life is intended to be, not how base it so easily becomes; they would want truth and beauty, and the things of wisdom that belong to peace.

But so long as the present servile state prevails this universal awakening of the public to its birthright of quiet thought and meditation is, of course, impossible. Certain individuals, however, will be found who react from the world as they know it and try to discover the truth of things in any book or magazine that has the courage to turn away from the merely topical and sensational and to deal with issues more vital to man himself. If a book or magazine attempts to supply this slender demand, the cry at once goes forth that its policy is suicidal, that it will not pay. We can imagine a rich man getting easily into the kingdom of heaven by spending his fortune in financing a magazine that always told the truth and never earned a penny. Such an enterprise would be to all editors foolishness, and to publishers folly. But it would certainly help those who cried for help; it would be a true apostolate. For are not the few, the little flock, worth catering for? It is hard to sell the truth; it is difficult enough even to give it away: but the few who want to know the truth about themselves and the world may perhaps be ready to pay a small sum for it. A magazine, or weekly, that stands apart from its commercial contemporaries in principle and practice, and tries to supply the corrective of truth to those who crave for it, need not necessarily perish. Our brilliant contempor-

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ary, *G. K.'s Weekly*, is such a paper. It stands for truth instead of compromise, sanity instead of sensation. Its appeal is to what the higher part of man not only wants, even if the consciousness of this want may have been submerged by present conditions, but emphatically needs. It stands outside newspaper trusts and political groups, and is therefore able to say what it thinks and knows to be true, and what is the best way for the individual to emancipate himself from his degrading servility. In its own way BLACKFRIARS is trying to do the same.

But as a practical illustration of the fact that there are many people who are ready to welcome books that eschew modern methods of appealing to public taste and rely for their human appeal on the presentation of things beautiful and true, it is only necessary to draw attention to the published will of the late Mr. A. C. Benson, whose fortune of well over six figures was to a large extent due to the books he published. It is not surprising, of course, for a writer of popular fiction to receive handsome emolument from his work; but those who know the kind of book Mr. Benson wrote may well be surprised to know the financial success that came to him from his writings. For not in the commonly accepted sense of the word could this writer be called popular; the books he wrote were quiet books of pleasant observation—genial, kind, breathing peace in every line. *The House of Quiet*, *The Thread of Gold*, and others like them, written in a style that has been described as 'going charmingly on,' made no clamorous entry into print, and created nothing like the furor of the average 'best-seller.' Their matter and manner preserved them from the highly-coloured wrapper, and they came into the world without the fanfare of the publisher's 'previous announcements.' And when they came they looked what they were, books of quiet. They were without any mention of sex or sensation, and were

content to point out the 'beauty of this visible world,' and the truth and good that lie very close to the heart of man. Yet the figures of an ample fortune show that these delightful books, that invite solitude and compel meditation, were in the best sense 'best-sellers.' They sold in a generation of unrest and upheaval, and especially did they sell in that country which is supposed to be primarily addicted to the god of hustle. Why? Evidently the public wanted that kind of book. If people could not lead quiet and beautiful lives themselves, they could at any rate find a respite from their hustled existence in reading books of beauty and peace. And by reading books of this kind they found more solace, courage, and self-respect in the turmoil of modern life than they could ever get from the sensational press.

The only answer to the gibe that people do not want books of truth, goodness, and beauty is that in reality, it may be subconsciously, they do.

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