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All News-Room Doors Have Two Sides

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ALL NEWS-ROOM DOORS HAVE TWO SIDES

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EVENTUALLY all editors partition themselves off, physically and intellectually. Most news-rooms are laid out with a door at one end and the editor's office at the other, as far removed from the door as possible. Through that door come and go

1. The staff.
2. The rest of the world.

Item 1 is, of course, on the door's inside. Item 2 is outside, trying to get in. But item 2 does not move freely in and out. If the paper can afford it, there is a doorman. He sits at a desk just inside, occupying his spare moments at clipping for the morgue, or at supervision of the copy-boys, or at cataloguing of the city desk's *futures* file. Typically, he is elderly, greying, stoop-shouldered, economically dressed, and alernately polite and mean. He is a former copy-boy who never made the grade to a reporter's job.

It is his task to keep out The Nuts: that is, the rest of the world. In time, nearly everybody but him and the staff becomes batty. Every freak, every power in town, every intellectual, every bum, every *grande dame,* every politician, every rich man—that is, all the crazy people who go to make up the rest of the world—eventually try to get in.

For everyone has an ax to grind, sometime, somehow. It may be a very fine, useful ax, worthy of being ground. It is inconceivable to its possessor that any newspaper might not want to grind it. The paper is his first and last recourse for this sharpening.

As the doorman gets older, and as everyone comes to him, he, like the staff member himself, comes to understand the rest of the world in a special crazy way. It is a cynical way, for newspaper men see the bad sides of everybody. They see the preacher seeking pub-

licity for his immortal sermon, the corporation sending its leg-man for free advertising. They see the doctor, reserved and contemptous of public notice in professional character, secretly elated, as Mr. Hyde, at appearance of his name in a news story.

They see the lady of teas and drawing rooms ingratiatingly seeking out the little girl who reports part-time for the society page. They see the scholar, convinced of the social consequence of his work, applying for attention to his great idea. They see the motive in the scheme behind the statesman's plan. They see all the self-seeking of all but the most wise and thoughtful and selfless of men and women.

They are, moreover, constantly aware that they will be crucified again today. No matter how much good they see in any visitor's ax, no matter how hard they try within the limitations of the newspaper's freedoms and style, it is not enough. One publicity story encourages efforts for twenty more. One rewriting of an inept essay submitted for publication brings down wrath, threats, and calumny. One courteous reception makes many A Nut a daily visitor.

Whatever a newspaper publishes always finds someone whom it arouses. The sensitivity of the rest of the world to the news item is enormous. Appearance of one contention, or one name, in a paper stimulates some kind of endocrine reaction in ten, a hundred, a hundred thousand people. Feelings are hurt, rage takes over, gorges rise, hates develop, lust rears what the copy-desk calls "its ugly head." The ten, the hundred, the hundred thousand come banging some time or other at the door with raised vanity cases or umbrellas, with a macerated clipping or a full copy of yesterday's paper; with a copy of The Great Book under the arm; with the daughter who is far lovelier than yesterday's bathing-suit contest winner; even with a gun.

I have seen in one news-room Betty Grable and her mother, Ginger Rogers and her mother, Jack Dempsey (without benefit of mother), a chimpanzee in diapers; a circus monstrosity seven feet tall, with hair literally over almost every square inch of his body, dressed in leopard skins and accompanied by a chained mastiff.

There was an enraged gentleman of Athenian blood brandishing a stick and demanding to see Aitchel Menck' (who, upon inquiry, turns out to be H. L. Mencken); the Governor shaking hands all 'round and patently aware that everyone on the staff knows about his ax and that he therefore must show special reserve and dignity; the profane mistress of a house of ill fame, screeching that she will have

the law on every so-and-so in the place for writing a story about her girls; the king of the bootleggers; a sweet little old lady with a cake for the boy who wrote the piece about the crippled children; a famous biologist looking for his friend The Old Reporter for a glass of beer and astonishingly wanting nothing else; a threadbare girl, disinherited by her grandmother, who owns a steamship line, and looking, O sir for a job—any kind of a job.

There was the Japanese diplomatic attaché, complaining that use of the word *Jap* in headlines was insulting to his Emperor and his people; the University sub-administrator, requesting to the perplexity then refreshment of the staff that less publicity be given to certain professors always using the institution's name to get their own in the paper; and the department store owner, threatening Hell, high water, and withdrawal of advertising if the story about the falling elevator in his store is printed.

The doorman, then, has a job on his hands. The editor, far off behind his partition at the opposite end of the room, fights psychically and through personal isolation to keep isolated, physically and mentally. He knows that, ideally, he is a kind of objective machine without prejudice or feeling, there to print the news as it occurs without regard to much else unless it be social consequence or publisher's pressure.

There have been few hired editors to whom all pressures were not, in the soul, obnoxious. I knew of one who, though salaried at $20,173.66 cents a year, would own no stock in anything, even in his own paper. He never voted because he could never allow himself to be either Republican or Democrat. He divided his personal insurance among five companies so as to have no prejudice for any one. He refused to see, or talk by phone to, anyone but his own professional staff, unless trapped. He bought a different make of automobile each time so as to favor none in his reactions as to what was news. He leaned over backwards, maybe even too far, to keep himself free, sharing in the staff's contempt for the machinations of publisher and advertising department, and loving only the news as it came, the grease feel of lead slugs occasionally, his wife, his house, his town, and a bottle of Teachers Highland Cream, kept discreetly at home and tippled only after dinner every night.

Like college presidents, he used to say, editors have no friends.

So it goes. In and out of the door moves the world, just as ove

the wires and out from the presses move the events of the world. Sometimes, sitting at his typewriter or his desk after the paper has been put to bed, the reporter or copy-reader wonders whether, with so much of violence and emotion happening all the time everywhere, and with so many petitioners knocking at the door every day, there is anything good, clean, and decent left in the world and in people.

It is then that he goes home and meets his wife at the stoop, affectionate and normal, and pink from the heat of the oven and its biscuits; swings the children high and maybe feels like crying with relief at the realization, renewed, that they want nothing of him but his love and care. He can put his feet on his own andirons, water his own violets, patch his own roof. This is peace and happiness, until—

The woman next door, from whom his wife once was forced to borrow an egg, drops in to say she has just been elected president of the Western Star, and while she doesn't care about it for herself, she feels that for the sake of the organization there should be publicity, and will Mr. Fitzhugh please put it in the paper next day, exactly as she has written it, because it is a delicate subject and hard to get just right and full of dynamite on account of that Mrs. Whitesides, who was elected vice-president, which, after all, is an important office, too, you know?