

Customs of Publicity

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NATIONS have so scattered, so various, and so broadcast a quality of inconsistency that it is not worth while to reproach them for that sin. If a man had so little conscience of his own will, he would hardly be human enough to bear a man's name. But in truth none but those accustomed to think in rhetoric would require of a country the unity of feeling that proves a man to be sane. None the less it is unintelligible that—despite all our little English private ways, our blinds, our shrubs, our railings, the enclosures of which we are so fond, our separate houses, our suburbs, our resolute little solitudes at close quarters, our point-blank seclusions, the thin screens we make haste to interpose where we cannot shut off the voices and the pianos; despite our close crowds just at arm's length, and the cramped hiding-places that we crouch in—we should yet take a daily license with names.

The French paper gives no such publicity to the unfortunate. There is not a small malefactor, not a litigant, no citizen subject to an ignominious accident, not a man whose affairs are exposed inevitably to public inquisition, but the Paris paper leaves him the privacy of his name. In the case of conspicuous assassins or criminals of note, of course, it is not so. Some one must ultimately content the general curiosity by publishing the names of these; therefore no attempt need be made to secure to them that possession, escheated once for all. But the others—the unlucky, the pauper, the bankrupt, the plaintiff, the defendant, the accused, the acquitted, the condemned, the ridiculous, the reluctantly exposed, the accidentally revealed—does the custom of the press in France confirm in their hold upon that last right, the right to the privacy of their names.

Strange to say, the very word privacy is English and hardly has a translation, yet the English custom offends and violates the thing for which it has the exact and peculiar word, and of which it has precise consciousness. Thus the English custom outrages Privacy to its face—as it were in person. Nay, does not even the exhibitor of his own portrait retain in France the dignity of a sequestered name? The English catalogue prints names in full. It seems that the French difference is clear enough: For dealers with the public, published names; to those who have nothing whatever to present before the world except the strife, the misfortunes, or the errors of their *intérieur*, or the favour of their faces

as a painter may render it, the appropriate reserve is left. By what strange consent is it resigned in England daily, and by those who have nothing but confusion to undergo—rich and poor alike? The last obscurity of mean life is not obscure enough to suppress a name. Insignificantly disgraced, it is insignificantly given to the world. The slums cannot bury it. Its commonness gives it no shelter, except the slight and uncertain shelter of its multitudinous use—so many share it. Nor is there any possible paltriness of crime that shall be permitted to efface a name. Moreover the prosperous, the powerful, must suffer like things, by the same general consent. Their salient names have to endure the peculiar and unmistakable stain.

It was Charles Kingsley who made much of that human possession—the eternal, inalienable, and inseparable name. And even those who have not conceived his whole idea of this sign and proclamation of individual life and destiny, must assuredly have felt at times the value of their names—not as known, but as unknown. For instance, the crowd is free of your aspect; to your walk and dress and demeanour it has a kind of right of sight; it may overhear your voice and jostle you by the shoulders. But while your name is your own secret, as you walk alone, you reserve the heart of your privacy. Why, then, is it to be compromised by the merest chance? If a thief shall have your purse, all thieves will have your name, forsooth! Or a carriage accident is to be enough occasion for unsealing it. As for your poor brother or sister, the “first offender,” is it not a cruel custom that makes the name as public as the crime? A cruel custom and a useless! The idle readers of police reports surely find their amusement in the anecdote, and not in the name of the unhappy hero, whereas to him and his acquaintance the name is all-important. Something else than humane is this English habit, and it is no small indelicacy to read the paper; you may read of the capture of a young thief, as the Paris paper tells it, with mere initials, and your conscience be easier.

That our national custom in this respect is of long standing, old newspapers bear witness, but with the strangest little sign of *pudeur* showing consciousness of the act of cruelty. It is this: In a magazine of 1750 a monthly list of bankruptcies is given, and the title of the column is printed “B—nkr—pts.” Under this shrink-

ing and shocked head-line in its large type appear in full the baptismal and family names of the whole company of the month's b—nkr—pts, headed by some unhappy Eliza Hopkins or so, grocer, say, and of Bristol. It is the sorriest show of sparing Eliza Hopkins; nay, the thing is made worse by this lamentable stammer, which does but add a humiliation. A frank title of "Bankrupts" would have had all the indifference of mere business, but the hesitation is traitorous. It is a much harder thing to have the ill-luck of the Bristol grocery made public under this show of forbearance and emphasis of indignity. Eliza, being an honourable bankrupt, must needs feel something of the reproach of the fraudulent when she sees her condition made the subject of this mock hide-and-seek.

In England to-day we make no show—even so wanton a show as was made by this mincing magazine of 1750—of sparing anybody. Recall the case—the many cases, rather—of the late Jane Cakebread. A few years ago there was a woman of that name, incorrigibly drunken, in the streets of London. After a great number of appearances in the police-courts, some reporter thought it worth while to print her extraordinary name. Printed, it caught the eye. The dull fact of her being haled before the magistrates acquired by repetition a cumulative interest: her replies began to be reported. Soon the paragraph-writer in the cleverer papers, vain of what he called an "unmoral" view of men and things (he did but make one more mongrel word by his Teutonic particle, and he altered the meaning of the supplanted Latin negative less perhaps than he thought), began to follow her with a bantering applause; she was old, she was courageous; her name considered, she was unique; she might surely be allowed to enjoy herself in her own way, whilst Fleet Street looked on amused. Tolerance—that was the word, tolerance and humour. When the unfortunate was gathered finally into a lunatic asylum, and died there confessedly insane, the humourists had less to say. In Paris Jane Cakebread would have been Mme C. What a loss such a suppression would have been to the inexplicable gaiety of our single nation! Her career, her convictions, her indomitable vice, her cheerfulness—all would have been little without her name. Ah, it is we who are the "lively neighbours"! The Parisians would have taken Jane Cakebread so seriously as to hide her, to

waste her with an initial! That very name which to our papers was precious is that which they would have had the gravity to respect. Tell us no more of the gaiety of France. There is not a journalist in London but was more gay than that.

So useful a purpose, I am told, is served by this universal publicity that my wonder is thrown away. Business, for example, is safeguarded by the proclamation of the failure at Bristol. So be it; but would it be too much to ask for some discrimination? What is safeguarded by the publication of the names of suicides? Now and then an effort, forlorn enough, is made by family and friends to keep some hold upon their own secrets; but they are promptly obliged to yield them, unto the uttermost fact. Granted that the story has to be told, and that the courts have to be open, is it necessary to print and placard the name? It is the name, the mere name, that one might plead for. Other countries find no such necessity. Then comes the almost crushing rejoinder that other countries do keep judicial and official secrets, and with what consequences to-day in France—with what consequences! But none the less should it be possible to have the affairs of private life—made public by the anomaly of violence—opened by the processes of the law in all their history, but closed from the mere reader as regards this one possession of the unfortunate, their names. Is it not the possession even of the dead—their only right? There might be less of this futile, desperate, and always defeated attempt to keep hidden the history of a suicide, but for the knowledge that if the facts are given to the world, so also will be the name, and that from this strong custom of a country there is no escape.

Paris, in a word, prints in full the name of the critic and the reviewer, and hides the name of Jane Cakebread, and hides the name—in which there is no amusement, none—of the man who yesterday breathed the vapour of charcoal in his room. London, on the contrary, generally veils the name of its dramatic critics; but it prints the unnecessary names of those who had no desire but to vanish. It prints the names the printing of which—adding much to the confusion on one side, the helpless side—adds little or nothing to the idle pleasure on the other, the pleasure of an idle reader. For, seeing that the names of criminals, of suicides, of parties in an amusing lawsuit, of the respondent and the co-

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respondent, are, except to one reader out of thousands, the names of strangers, the idlest reader would lose nothing of his pastime if the infamous were allowed to be the anonymous. Nay, theirs are names that, even published, will be soon forgotten. They have seldom the charm of the name of a Jane Cakebread, and they are published to please the briefest curiosity on the part of the world, and to inflict a long dismay upon the already wounded.

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