

The Junior Reporter

by **Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932**

Published: 1909
in »Weekly Tale-Teller«



IF the junior reporter approached the platform with awe and reverence, it was because he was the junior reporter.

You must understand that Sir Thomas was in the chair, and Mr. Hildry (Lord of the Manor) was prominently displayed in the front row of the platform.

Miss Cicily was there, too—they say down at Taunborough that she has half-a-million in her own right—and the canon and goodness knows what other celebrities.

The junior reporter, who was born and bred in Taunborough, looked round the crowded audience, and his heart swelled with pride that Taunborough had risen to the occasion; that Taunborough had been worthy of itself; and it may be that in this his melting mood a youthful tear glistened in his eye. He rather hoped that Sir Thomas would recognise him, but somehow Sir Thomas had no eyes for the line of young men that sat at the reporters' table sharpening their pencils.

Naturally enough, with Mr. Hildry contesting the seat, rendered vacant by the retirement of his brother, local feeling ran high. Indeed, the junior reporter,

telegraphing to his newspaper at Bristol, had said so in exactly those words. Naturally, too, the junior reporter reflected that shade of political opinion so ably represented by Mr. Hildry.

Because it was an important by-election, there were reporters from London and from Plymouth, and between a Londoner and weary Devonian the junior reporter found himself.

They were both very pleasant young men, especially he who came from London. He had a shock of hair and wore pince-nez, and before Sir Thomas rose to open the meeting he leant across to his colleague from Devonshire and asked:

„What's it worth?“

„This?“ said the Devonshire man, sharpening his pencil. „Oh, about a short half for us.“

„Two sticks for us,“ grumbled the gentleman from town, „unless,“ he added, hopefully, „there's a riot.“

„There'll be no riot,“ said the other contemptuously, „Taunborough's the slowest place on earth!“

The junior reporter listened resentfully; for his part, so far from a „short half,“ this meeting would be recorded in five closely-set columns.

„Who's Sir Thomas?“ asked the London man.

The junior reporter would have been delighted to volunteer the necessary information, but the Devon man anticipated him.

„Oh, Sir Thomas,“ he said offhandedly, just as though he'd been discussing some ordinary man, „is a local person, a little tin god in his way—he'll bore your head off.“

The junior gasped.

„If he speaks for an hour,“ the Devon man went on gloomily, „there won't be two lines you can report; but perhaps,“ he reflected, „he won't speak.“

„What is the candidate like?“

„Shocking,“ said the Devon man frankly.

The junior reporter found his voice.

„Perhaps, gentlemen,“ he said with elaborate sarcasm, „the candidate's views do not coincide with yours.“

The London man regarded him curiously.

„Speaking for myself, they don't,“ he confessed. „That is partly because I have no views; so far as the political colour of my paper is concerned, we are red-hot supporters of the candidate.“

„Politics,“ said the Devonshire oracle, „means one set of rotters trying to chuck another set of rotters out——“

„Ladies and gentlemen...“ (Roars of cheering).

Sir Thomas was on his feet, and the junior reporter poised his pencil over virgin pad.

„Ladies and gentlemen. I am sure—I am quite sure that you do not expect me, that you are not expecting a speech, a long speech from me tonight, this evening. We all know, most of us know, in fact we all know, we are all well acquainted with our friend and neighbour Mr. Hildry Simes-Patrick. (Cheers.) I've known him, that is, I remember him when he was a little boy, quite a small boy in frocks. (Laughter.) I remember his father...“

„He's started,“ groaned the gentleman from Devonshire.

A sibilant whisper ran along the reporters' table.

„Somebody wants you,“ said the Devon man, and the Londoner leant forward and looked down the table.

„You taking this?“ asked the whisperer hoarsely.

„No,“ said the London man.

„Good,“ said the whisperer, „I was afraid you were—how long will he talk...“

Sir Thomas had stopped speaking and was glaring at the audience.

A thin old man with big gig-lamp spectacles on his nose, and clutching a bundle of notes, was standing up, to the indignation of his scandalised neighbours.

„...I would like to ask Sir Thomas,“ he piped.

„I cannot answer you—wait until I have finished my speech,“ said Sir Thomas, very red in the face.

„...Will you explain the attitood of Mr. Chamberlain in the year 1875, when he said...“

„Sit down! Sit down, sir!“

„...Speakin' at the town 'all Birmingham on March 10th he referred to the dooty of the proletariat...“

No man cried „Sit down!“ more fiercely than did the junior reporter; no partisan applauded Sir Thomas more vigorously, and certainly no journalist took so complete and copious a note of the great man's speech as did that representative of the press.

„A quarter of an hour,“ said the Devon man gratefully, when the chairman resumed his seat amidst loud and continued cheering. (I quote again from the script of the junior reporter.)

A burst of wild cheering: „For he's a jolly good feller“ in several keys, and a smiling figure at the chairman's table.

„This,“ said the London man, apprehensively, „is, I presume, His Nibs!“

„That's him,“ said young Devonshire, ungrammatically.

Those excerpts I have been able to take from the junior reporter's book enable me to fit in the speech—as I heard it.

„...the pendulum has swung back, and the pendulum has swung true.“

„A little bit mixed up in his metaphor,“ said the Devonshire reporter.

The junior, who thought the figure of speech beautifully apt, scowled.

„...We are going forward to a winning cause, the goal is in sight and we will not turn back—(cheers)—the prosperity of the country is in the hands of the people, let there be no...“

„What did he say after 'people,?'“ asked the London man.

„I don't know,“ said the Devon man in despair. „Whatever he said doesn't matter much.“

The junior reporter could have told them, but he spitefully covered the passage „let there be no wavering in the ranks of progress“ with the palm of his hand.

The gentleman from London ran his fingers through his hair wearily.

„There were three jobs I might have taken,“ he said deliberately. „I might have done a memorial service, or the opening of the Oyster Fishery Exhibition, or the Brixton murder; and to think,“ he soliloquised bitterly, „to think that I chose this!“

„...whatever might be the opinion of a few self-seeking politicians with axes to grind—(cheers)—the vast majority of the electorate is in favour of...“

„I rather like funerals,“ mused the Devon man, „you get such a splendid opportunity of ringing the changes on ‘sombre magnificence’ and ‘gloomy grandeur’—why didn’t you take the memorial service?“

The London man yawned and shook his head wearily.

„...we cannot put back the clock—(cheers)—we cannot—er—identify ourselves with an anachronism...“

The junior reporter, with a rapt frown, scribbled down the burning words, faithfully, religiously, literally.

„...if you send me to the House of Commons——“

Above the speaker’s monotonous voice rose a shrill cry. A cry that sent an indignant flush to the junior reporter’s cheek, that brought a bright light to the eye of the London man, that jerked a dozen bored metropolitan journalists to their feet seeking the face of the interrupting member of the audience.

Again the thin voice.

„Votes for wimmin!“

„Madam,“ muttered the London man under his breath, as the uproar began, „from the bottom of my heart I thank you!“

„So“ (I quote the junior reporter again) „the meeting concluded in great disorder, owing to the unseemly conduct of two ladies.“ And after „ladies“ the junior reporter put marks like this: (?), but his all-wise editor cut them out.

