

# Task of the Censor

HERE is an old story told of a piano player with more nerve than skill who toured the western mining camps in the early days, protected by this sign, displayed on the platform, "Don't shoot the pianist. He's doing his best." The story is recalled by an official pamphlet presented to both Houses of Parliament at the King's command which has just reached this country and which gives some account of the British press censorship. It is only reasonable to assume that the censorship is doing its best, though it has been almost universally criticized, The Mail and Empire having pointed out, for instance, that a different system of censorship was used in the navy to that in the army. However, it is to be admitted that there never has been a censor yet, who has given satisfaction. For instance, the famous censor of New York morals, Anthony Comstock, has been deposed recently as an inspector in the New York postoffice, and everybody knows that theatrical censors have never attained much greater popularity than that of Mr. Bryan at the present time.

## Work Done by Censors.

In the matter of a war censorship the public does not act upon the principle that no news is good news, and from the day it was established the Press Bureau has received little praised and much abuse. It has been condemned for chilling the enthusiasm of the British people for the war; it has been condemned for concealing facts of vital importance from the public, and for permitting the publication of news that must comfort the enemy. Some critics have gone so far as to assert that the censorship is almost as deadly a foe to success of the allies as Kaiser Wilhelm or King Alcohol. Nevertheless, now and then there appears a line of testimony to the contrary. Some weeks ago a British army officer returned from Flanders on furlough said that the censorship had saved thousands of lives; and those who will take the trouble to read the memorandum concerning the British censorship are likely to come to the opinion that the British censors are grappling with a tremendous task, in which mistakes are inevitable and errors of judgment to be expected. Yet it is only charitable to assume that the censors, too, are doing their best, and that they equally with their critics have at heart the success of British arms.

## A New Situation.

The censorship is divided into two main departments, namely, the censorship of private and commercial communications under the Army Council and the Press Bureau. The latter came suddenly into existence at the beginning of the war, and for a while worked without definite rules, simply acting on general instructions issued by the War Office and the Admiralty. In effect these instructions were that nothing should be published that might give aid or comfort to the enemy, that might injuriously affect any of the allied powers, or that might distress or discourage the British people. In those early days, probably, were committed most of the mistakes that have since been remembered against the bureau. Since then, however, the office has been working upon more specific rules. One man or one newspaper is treated like another, and the work of the bureau has improved like the work of other departments that were brought face to face with unprecedented circumstances.

## Quick Work by Censors.

In the Press Bureau there are a director, two assistant directors, an assistant and about fifty censors. The censors are for the most part naval and military officers, barristers and newspapermen. They work in day and night shifts, and inspect everything appertaining to the war that passes through London. Their offices are connected with the post-office by tubes. As soon as a despatch is received at the postoffice it is sent to the bureau, and it is said that a message is returned in six minutes, which indicates that the censors are busy. By no means all the matter that a newspaper publishes with regard to the war goes to the censors. Letters and other matter may be published at the risk of the newspapers concerned, but the power of the authorities under the Defence Act is great, and the penalty for a mistake is severe.

## Tons of Mail Examined.

In the cable branch of the censorship, which is under the Army Council, 400 censors are employed. They control 120 cable and wireless stations in various parts of the Empire. Between 30,000 and 50,000 cables pass through the censors' hands each day. The censorship of private letters comes under three heads, those to or from prisoners of war; letters from the British army at the front, and those within the war zone; and commercial correspondence with foreign countries. It has been calculated that letters in the third class amount to nearly four tons a week. It is interesting to note that there is no restriction in the transmission of newspapers, and that German newspapers arrive in London almost as regularly as before the war, if more circuitously. Bearing in mind the task of the censors, their critics might be more lenient, especially as they have reason to believe that the work is being done more intelligently as the war proceeds.