EDITORIAL

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS.

By DANIEL DE LEON

COLLIER’S Magazine for this month comes out with a broadside on “the patent medicine conspiracy against the freedom of the press.” The broadside contains facsimiles of letters, contracts and telegrams, together with a mighty array of authenticated facts. The exposure is complete; the chain of evidence can not be broken through; the indictment is tantamount to a conviction. Beyond cavil it is proven that the patent medicine interests have extensively muzzled the press of the land. Nevertheless, valuable though such a revelation is, this particular Collier’s broadside may do as much, if not more harm than it does good. It is cast in a mold to act as an eye-opener to one wrong and an eye-shutter to a raft of other wrongs. It is calculated, by singling out one pimple, to conceal the constitutional putrefaction that produces a series of ulcers—the capitalist press.

Was it an accident, or a unanimity in defective memory, that caused the capitalist press of the land to be silent as the tomb upon the $40,000,000 raid perpetrated upon the Federal Treasury by the collection of French convicts who owned the “ditch at Panama”? That the ditch and its appurtenances were not worth $40 was a matter of common knowledge. Yet the appropriation was made at Washington, the sum was paid, and now, after two years, the Commission of Engineers, proposes to abandon the ditch and plant, and start all over anew?—Whence that unanimity of silence in aid of Bonau Varilla’s scheme?

Periodically the stench of political corruption up-State breaks out. It has broken out this year again. The up-State press suppresses the facts, and when these are unsuppressible, seeks to minimize them. Commenting upon this circumstance a correspondent to one of the “highminded” city papers has this to say: “If you have any doubt as to what keeps the up-State counties in the grasp of the Republican
machine, you can now see that it is largely because of a pusillanimous press, fearing
to speak the truth of a man in high station, who is personal counsel to Railroad
Commissioner G.W. Dunn.”—Is this correspondent a dreamer of dreams?

The capitalist world is one city, or, rather, one family. What are the revelations
made by a pamphlet entitled Purchased Peers just issued and widely circulated in
Austria? It contains the stenographic report of an unsuccessful suit recently
brought by Privy Councillor von Markhoff against a Vienna paper, Die Zeit—a sort
of Collier’s Magazine that, instead of uncovering patent medicine swindles and
conspiracies against the press, uncovered the swindles of von Markhoff and one von
Gutmann in carrying an extensive traffic in titles, decorations[,] promotions and
seats in the Upper House and OF SUBSIDIZING THE PRESS IN THE INTEREST
OF THE CABAL.—Is this a sporadic affair?

But why go to Europe, or Panama, or even up-State for illustrations? Here is
Collier’s itself at hand. It is the successor of a magazine that, with articles and
cartoons, thirteen years ago, justly lashed the rhinoceros hide of Depew and the
New York Central Railroad magnates for one of the frequent and frightful accidents
that had just occurred in the tunnel, and over which Depew was indecent enough to
crack ghastly jokes. And what happened? Collier’s predecessor was censored out of
the New York Central Railroad’s parlor cars. That was a severe loss in
advertisement to the magazine. It first threatened gory things, and
then?—collapsed into silence and subservience, just as the papers muzzled by the
patent medicine interests, and to-day the railroad interests of the land have no
dooughtier gouger than this same Collier’s.

Collier’s correctly says that our people “rely upon the newspapers as at once the
most forbidding preventive and the swiftest and surest corrective of evil” and that
“more men are abstaining from crime and carouse to-night than for fear of arrest”
due to the fear that “it might get into the papers.” Aye, but these facts rather point
to a leading source of revenue than to the ethics of the capitalist press.

Heinous though the wrongs may be that one set of capitalist papers periodically
uncovers while it denounces another set for being bribed into silence, as the patent
medicine nuisance and bribery in this particular instance, such wrongs almost sink
into insignificance beside the real crime that both sets unconsciously expose. The
colossal fact brought out in such instances is the strumpet nature of a private industry that presumes to wrap itself up in the mantle of a “ministry”—the ministry of enlightening the people—the ministry of trimming and keeping brightly burning the lamp of private and civic virtues—the capitalist press.