

PICTURE MAGAZINES AND MORONS

By J. L. BROWN

IF A MAN labored to fashion machines calculated to deprive him of his livelihood, privacy, intelligence, and even his very life, he would be labeled mad. Yet this is precisely what mankind has been engaged in doing of late. With the instruments which fall into the first and last categories above — the machines of industry and the engines of war — we do not propose to deal here; of them we have heard and will hear plenty. But of the infernal contraption which, alone, threatens to transform man into a species of goldfish, by exposing his private life, loves, and scandals to public view, and render him brainless by removing the necessity for thought, there has been too little appraisal.

Perhaps this is because the machine is inoffensive-looking; because it does not make frightening noises, nor belch forth flame. It is operated by pressing a bulb or a button, or by turning a simple crank. Even children can manage it — and do. For this machine is, in plain words, the camera. "One

picture is worth ten thousand words", a much-abused Chinese proverb tells us. Now, with the popularity of the movies, tabloid newspapers, and picture magazines the true significance of Oriental wisdom threatens really to dawn on us. The evidence indicates that mankind is well on the way backward to a language of pictures. Probably nothing much can be done about it, but it may prove revealing to trace the steps in this phase of man's "Progress".

Paleolithic Man started it. Cudgeling his savage brain for some way of communicating with his fellows other than by guttural sounds, he first carved pictures in the sand or on stone. Later he devised ingenious characters and thus, slowly, the written, civilized languages of man evolved — slowly, indeed, for the ability to read and understand words instead of pictures required some concentration, and this fact was almost sufficient to condemn it. In every step of the process the preference for the happy, ignorant state resisted change; education al-

ways had to be made compulsory in order to ensure the mob of some schooling. Yet, despite the billions expended for this purpose, most human beings remain as they desire to be—ignorant. The last war, for example, proved that the mental age of American adults was in the neighborhood of twelve. Thus it is hardly surprising that mankind's literary heritage, distilled from the sweat and genius of the race, continues to be ignored by the multitudes.

Acting upon this antipathy of most humans to thought, inventive minds, eyes glued to the main chance, have in recent years experimented with more sensational methods of displaying pictures than the ancient man ever conceived. The early lantern slides evoked the first wide interest, for here at last was an attempt by brains to cater to people's real tastes. By the inevitable process of improvement motion pictures were achieved, and the mob willingly stood ten deep in lines several blocks long to express its emphatic approval of them, and at the same time bestow its spare change on an assorted group of ex-buttonhole makers, ex-hoboes, and toothsome adventuresses. But in time even the movie marijuana threatened to pall on all save the most confirmed ad-

dicts—not the least of the reasons for this being that the flickering films were not pure, unalloyed pictures. They required sub-titles and other reading matter which required concentration of a sort. So, in answer to the dictates of the majority and the prayers of the magnates, came the talkies, whereby man is now able to partake, through half-open eyelids and while in a delicious state of half-slumber, of heavenly delights without reading or thinking at all. Here indeed was an opiate to rival the legendary hasheesh.

But even so the human mind had not yet reached the nadir. This place of distinction was reserved for mankind's crowning achievements, the picture publications. Eliminating such isolated phenomena as the old-time *Police Gazette*, the tabloid newspapers came first. Their genius consisted in discerning what the mob wanted, then feeding it in great gulps. On the theory that, since the majority won't or can't read, the tabloids offered pictures, and their circulations climbed to unbelievable heights. Hordes of people who never ruffle the pages of a book devour with fierce interest the pictures of sex and death which the tabloids print as news. The average man is the average tabloid

reader, which is, of course, the chief reason why both remain average.

It is well to note, in the tabloids, what goes on in the spaces intended for thought-provoking material. The best evidence, naturally, is found in the reader forums consecrated to the letters of tabloid devotees, and we offer, to sum up, three typical letters which need no comment:

So Madge thinks her red-headed boy friend is the tops? Well, she better keep her eyes glued on him because I had one once, and did he two-time me? Dunt esk. HEARTBROKEN LULU

Loretta Cirella, besides committing various crimes and knifing a lot of people, where do you Italians get off stating that an Irishman is not qualified to be Pope? If it were possible for the Almighty Himself to make a selection, we feel confident he would choose an Irishman for Pope.

THREE IRISH GIRLS

My prediction is that Brooklyn will win the pennant with Mungo taking twenty-eight games and Phelps batting over .370. And we are going to beat the Yankees in the World Series, too.

MARIO JOHN COMELLA

II

Even more obvious than the tabloids as a step backward, are the magazines devoted to photographs, most of which enjoy fabulous circulations and all of which strive for increasingly sensational exposés of *homo sapiens*. Exhibit

A, of course, is *Life*, first of the host of picture magazines and one of the minor miracles of the day. In the beginning one could hardly buy or steal a copy of *Life*, so great was the demand, and it became generally accepted that picture magazines were a great advance. Newsstand operators assumed hard-boiled attitudes, hardly deigning to honor requests for copies with a reply — one ought to know better than to ask for cherries in March. The first issues of *Life* called forth such overwhelming expressions of approval, duly publicized by the delighted editors, that it is amusing to quote samples. After that we can look into the magical pages to see what evoked such extraordinary enthusiasm. At any rate, messages like these poured into *Life* from every part of the country:

Life is stupendous! Your magazine ought to sweep the country. Your subscribers ought to number millions.

Life is great. My arm is sore writing to relatives and friends to get it.

My two daughters of school age call it marvelous. My husband looks it over and over.

I don't give a darn when Television arrives.

This is the first letter I've ever written. My summation: THRILLING!

My four children practically fought over it.

I think *Life* is a Wow! America should be proud of such a contribution to arts and letters.

But the most super-colossal praise, naturally, came from Hollywood. Telegraphed that erudite movie-queen, Ginger Rogers:

Life almost makes pictures move and talk.

So much for indications of the immediate hit *Life* made with the public. Now, by dissecting a few typical issues of the same period, we find the following subjects immortalized: a cock fight; the man who balanced 3584 matches on beer bottles; a fur-lined teacup; scenes from the movie-of-the-week; the Lindy Hop; where the Nine Old Men eat lunch; the Wahoo Boy; the private life of Darryl Zanuck; how a wife should *not* undress; how a wife *should* undress; Jimmy Durante's nose; the man who lives off fleas; Lindy Hoppers again; aft view of a hippo; the newest movie queen; models displaying corsets; ping-pong; the life story of Joan Crawford; Steve Hannagan's girls; women taking baths; the Raynham Hall ghost; more ping-pong; Britain's noble beauties; attorney firing questions at a witness while lying on the floor; Hollywood's attempts to make a he-man of Robert Taylor. . . .

Life's rivals were not far behind

it in circulation and sensational enterprise. Its closest competitor was, and is, *Look* — a fitting title for a magazine aimed at a public afflicted with adult infantilism — which was unveiled at about the same time as *Life*, and whose publishers blandly confessed:

We concluded . . . to try to develop a "picture language" that would interest millions. . . . The language of ideas has always belonged to a small stratum of individuals. . . . Our experiments convince us that nearly every kind of story can be told in pictures with very little type.

It might be observed that cave men had the same idea, but that was a long, long time ago.

Look's first issue of 400,000 copies was a sell-out; its second sold over a million, and the circulation is now alleged to be somewhere around a million and a half. Since then, in less than two years, thirteen picture magazines have entered the field. Their combined circulation is put at the enormous total of 16,000,000. *Life* at one time enthusiastically reported that its own "natural" sale would approximate 7,000,000 copies a week, but while it has not yet managed to reach such ethereal heights there appears to be no reason why it shouldn't, since the population is not likely to decrease. Civilization marches on!

III

Here a new and frightening possibility, hinted at in our opening paragraphs, suggests itself. What will happen to our vaunted right of privacy? Some years ago, a writer in these very pages closed an article with these ominous words:

If a man builds a better mousetrap than his neighbor, the world will not only beat a path to his door, it will make newsreels of him and his wife in beach pajamas, it will discuss his diet and his health, it will publish heart-throb stories of his love life, it will publicize him, analyze him, photograph him, and make his life thoroughly miserable by feeding to the palpitant public intimate details of things that are none of its damned business.¹

But this was before the advent of the present-day crop of picture-magazines, and before the perfection of the candid camera! The law, with that strange backwardness which often characterizes it where essentials are concerned, imposes no restriction upon the use of pictures, except for obscene or advertising purposes. Thus, *Life*, in an early prospectus, was able to declare this bold editorial policy:

Life will show us the Man-of-the-Week . . . his body clothed and, if possible, nude. It will expose the

loves, scandals, and personal affairs of the plain and fancy citizen . . . and write around them a light, good-tempered "colymnist" review of these *once private lives*.

Fortunately *Life* has thus far managed to restrain itself from putting this threat into execution, although the same cannot be said of some of the other picture magazines or of the tabloids. It is clear, however, that the so-called right of privacy has become a privilege enjoyed by *homo Sapiens* at mere sufferance.

The worst, however, is yet to come. Lurid journals have in the past rattled the skeletons in countless closets, and even succeeded in provoking a war or two. But future strife among picture magazines, like future warfare, promises that not even babes will be safe. So far as Americans are concerned, we have more cause to build subterranean cellars against this possibility than we have against air raids. Unless, of course, we can rush through a Constitutional amendment in time.

But that is probably wishful thinking. Having joyfully advanced backwards to the language of pictures, and having as willingly forfeited a last remaining "fundamental" right, we may not be as far as we think from the Stone Age of human intelligence.

¹ The Right to be Let Alone, by Newman Levy. AMERICAN MERCURY, June, 1935.

THE MUSES JOIN THE PICKET LINE

BY ERNEST BOYD

IT is many years since I first smiled at the conclusion of the entry after George Bernard Shaw's name in the English *Who's Who*: "Recreations: Anything but sport" — or words to that effect. The same entry also contained a reference which did not attract the comment the other invariably drew forth. This second reference, which once seemed a mere Shavian affectation, today assumes a ghastly significance. It was to the effect that Shaw's "trade union" was the Society of Authors. In England, the Incorporated Society of Authors, Playwrights, and Composers fulfils the function of the Authors' League and its affiliates over here. Shaw was the only person — and I hope he still is — who ever referred to it as a trade union, thereby anticipating the current efforts to weld such organizations into something they were never intended to be — something that they never can and never should be.

My first experience of how such a "trade union" helps an author has left me skeptical ever since, and

convinced me many years ago that all talk of unionizing creative work is either downright brutality, downright hypocrisy, or downright racketeering. A young writer friend of mine joined the Society of Authors while his first manuscript was in the hands of a publisher. I suggested that this move was premature, since he would not be an author until he had at least one book published. The answer was that the Society undertook to give members expert legal advice about their contracts, and that no writer should sign a contract without asking for this invaluable assistance. I replied that I had managed to publish a few books without belonging to the Society and that I should be curious to learn what superior advantages accrued to the author who consulted the Society before signing a contract. I was soon to learn.

One day my friend proudly showed me the contract for his first book. When the Society of Authors had examined it, revised it, and passed it as being up to "trade-