

# Lingua California Spoken Here

By WILLIAM FADIMAN

**I**T HAS been well established that the technical jargon of an industry or profession frequently attains sufficient currency and respectability to be integrated into our everyday language. Lexicographers accept the inevitable, and the lingo and cant of some enterprises are ultimately, if sometimes reluctantly, admitted to the formal haven of the dictionary. But on occasion an individual business vocabulary forms a pattern that never becomes a part of this language accretion process. It remains essentially isolated and aloof, an outlander's speech. Thus an entire system of communication may come into being which only makes sense to its practitioners, the members of the in-group. It is this private, highly personalized mode of verbal and written intercourse that characterizes the innovative idiom of Hollywood.

The entertainment industry is exceptionally prolific and imaginative in its invention of new words and the transformation of old ones, yet its coinages have never entered fully into contemporary speech. Its flourishing collection of odd phrases, strange condensations, curious abbreviations, and esoteric verbal symbols is relatively unknown to the public. For an uninitiated citizen to try to fathom Hollywood argot or the language of the film trade paper *Variety* is to come unexpectedly upon the Tower of Babel. The exuberance, buoyancy, and sheer playfulness of show business talk would seem to make it simple to com-

prehend, but it continues to defy understanding even by the most sophisticated outsiders. Indeed, Hollywood as a whole has hardly been honored for its mastery of language, either oral or written. It is more celebrated for its Mrs. Malaprops (male and female) than for any stray Demosthenes or Cicero it may have in its midst. But, notwithstanding this alleged cultural inadequacy, it has given birth to more colorful phrases and neologisms than any other segment of our population unless it be the underworld.

The examples applicable to a par-



"A Chirper Bleating."

ticular craft within the film industry itself are diverting and uncommon, but their use is strictly limited to technicians. The domain of the electrician, or "juicer," has its own peculiar vocabulary in which lighting experts are called "gaffers" and installations are made by "riggers" with the aid of assistants dubbed "carbon monkeys." These, however, do not infiltrate nor-



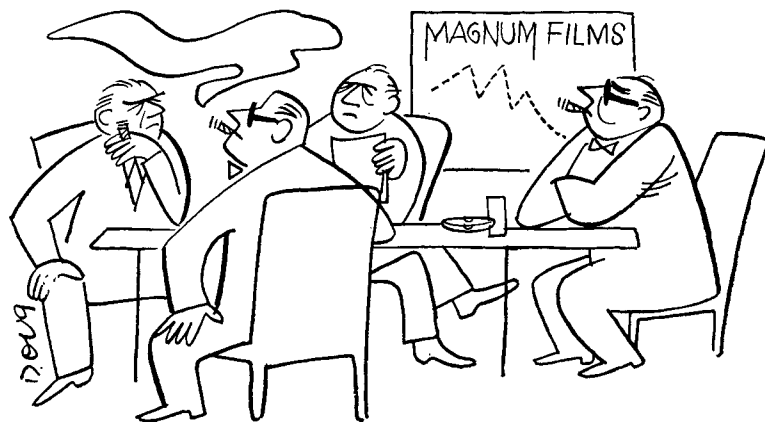
"A Flack Tub-Thumping."

mal conversation. This is equally true of their glittering world of lights, in which the largest and the smallest lamps are known respectively as "ash cans" and "inky dinks," a miniature spotlight is a "baby," a diffusion light is a "goon," and still other specific light sources are referred to as "crackerboxes," "friers," and "dishpans." The sound specialists have still another vernacular containing a series of onomatopoeic words identifying imperfections in a sound recording as "bloops," "gargles," and "wow-wows." Unexpected sound defects are styled "gremlins" or "termites," and an uninvited echo is hailed as a "polly."

I pass hurriedly and almost disdainfully over the array of contractions and compressions employed in Hollywood, for these reveal nothing of the dynamism or the pyrotechnics of which show people are capable. Such truncated trivia as "sked" for schedule, "subsid" for subsidiary, "admish" for admission, "spec" for spectacle, "niterie" for night club, "celeb" for celebrity, or "sesh" for session denote nothing but lip laziness. They exist solely by omission of syllables or letters, instances of what grammarians call syllabic syncope. They have neither vitality nor novelty. Nor are they invariably indigenous to Hollywood; they demonstrate little but the same slovenliness of speech found with alarming frequency throughout America.

It is the more generic words of show business parlance, those not confined to any one trade or profession, those that reflect ingenuity rather than sloth, that are more revelatory of the bizarre, creative diction of film workers. It is in this realm of colloquialisms, nomenclature, epithets, nicknames, and idioms that Hollywood demonstrates its striking penchant for authentic style and eloquence.

No Hollywood film that has achieved a wide audience is greeted with the drab encomium of being called a hit or a success. It is either a "wow" or a



"Making the Scene."



"A Sheepherder and a Baby."

"wham" or a "sock" or a "boff" or a "blitz" or a "sizzler" or a "whammo." It may also be deemed "snappy" or "torrid" or "blooming" or "hotsy" or "tall" or "brisk" or "whopping" or "lusty" or "fancy" or "red hot" or "happy" or "rosy" or "lush," surely a series of sounds that sing their song of triumph more effectively than the lusterless locutions of ordinary acclaim. Should you find this gleaming cavalcade of words inadequate or limiting in any way, a picture that thrives at the box office may also be pronounced "sturdy" or "hefty" or "lively" or "trim" or "stout" or "frisky" or "hardy" or "handsome" or "happy" or "zingy." It may likewise be regarded as "mighty" or "busy" or "sweet" or "lofty" or "slick" or "potent" or "bustling" or "loud" or "soaring" or "crisp" or "bountiful."

Nor is Hollywood any less fecund in describing those films that attain only a modicum of public approval. These are reported as being "modest" or "sad" or "slim" or "tame" or "pale" or "NSG." If they are out-and-out failures it is obvious that they are "nixed" and will have to "exit" or be "bumped" or "folded" or "shuttered" or "pulled" or "shrouded" or "yanked" or do an "el foldo."

It is in the literary sphere of its activities that Hollywood manifests—as indeed it should—an even greater verve and flair. A scenarist does not write a screenplay; he "pens" it. But the composition of a story outline does not bear this distinction; it is invariably

"knocked out." Any screenplay that lacks the sheen provided by brilliant dialogue is patently in need of a "dull polish." If, on the other hand, its sophistication and subtlety give rise to a fear that it may not appeal to a mass audience, it is advisable to "dumb it up a little." The inevitable resolution of a carefully posited series of events is succinctly termed the "pay-off." The hero and heroine who quarrel constantly during a film, only to embrace each other lovingly at the finale, are indulging in a fighting romance. No Hollywood writer would consider his screenplay complete unless he included a dramatic device to lend it novelty, a device known as a "gimmick." And this gimmick is especially valuable to strengthen, or "hypo," the central dramatic element, or the "weenie." Should a story seem overcrowded with characters, the process of depopulation is referred to as the "write-out." A narrative concept is not considered or reflected upon or thought about; it is "attacked." Certainly it is never discussed; it is "kicked around."

In areas distinct from writing there are also ingenious and fascinating expressions. A publicity representative carries on his duties as a "flack" or a "tub thumper." Nor, in pursuit of his profession, does he praise a picture; he either "trouts" it or he "puffs" it or he "plugs" it or he gives it "the pitch." The story analysts who read advance proofs of books for film purposes are "galley slaves." Specialists in a field of knowledge do not advise or counsel; they "expert." A deal is "firmed," not closed, and the subsequent contract is a "pact" which is "inked" rather than signed. An option is not exercised; it is "hoisted." A film does not open in a theatre; it either "bows" or "preems," depending upon its commercial importance. Nor does it play for a week; instead it holds for a "stanza" or a "frame." The director does not direct nor the producer produce; they both "helm" or "rein." An assistant director in charge of extras is a "shepherd" and no performer ever acts; he "thesps" or "emotes." A pretty girl with an abundance of sex appeal is either a "tidy unit" or a "cobra."

This largesse in language reaches new heights when a singer emerges as a "chirper" or "thrush" who "pipes" or "bleats" and "shellacs" or "waxes" a platter when she makes a recording. Much more than incidentally, if the record is a success she enjoys a "click." A drive-in theatre is transformed into an "ozoner" by Hollywood's word magic. A conference is a "huddle," and when you participate in it you "make the scene." Any idea is necessarily a "wrinkle." Anything gratuitous is auto-

matically "cuffo." A performer is not hired but "lassoed." A dance is a "strut," and every laugh is a "yock." Here is a land where an actor who works simultaneously in two pictures is a "bicycler." Hollywood does not start or begin or commence a picture, but "buds" it; it does not disagree with a captious critic but "blasts" him; it eschews flying in favor of "winging" or "avioning" or "skying"; it would rather "lens" a picture than photograph it; and it "Tommys the tanks" instead of having its films exhibited in small towns. (This latter expression has historical basis stemming from the 1880s, when more than 150 theatrical companies playing "Uncle Tom's Cabin" were operating throughout the country.)

Perhaps George Bernard Shaw's bequest to create a new alphabet to simplify the English language might better



"A Tidy Unit or a Cobra."

have been granted to Hollywood, for no community displays greater zeal in rendering our tongue more efficient, effecting economy of expression, and endowing it with color, power, and flexibility.

Cinemese or Hollywoodese may well be a semanticist's horror, a pedagogue's nightmare, and a philologist's despair; but it remains a delight to those thousands who consider it as peculiarly their own. Here is a language to relish and savor and enjoy, accessible to everyone but "civilians," or those who are not show folk. To Hollywood, these civilians remain tragic, pathetic, bereft, unenlightened members of the human race doomed to speak only the King's English. Never will they experience the freewheeling glory of the *Lingua California*. Never will these Philistines know the wonder of a tongue that is at one and the same time a wow and a wham and a sock and a boff and a blitz and a sizzler and a whammo!

# Leaves from the Northeast

By GRANVILLE HICKS

VAN WYCK BROOKS has edited "A New England Reader" (Atheneum, \$8.95), and of course there is no one better equipped to do the job. As he demonstrated in "The Flowering of New England" and "New England: Indian Summer," he is acquainted with all the major writers the region has produced and with scores upon scores of minor writers. And, though he was born in New Jersey, he has been a New Englander by adoption most of his life.

One will find in the volume all the names one expects, from Governor Bradford and Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards through Bryant, Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Lowell. The historians are there—Prescott, Motley, Parkman, and Adams. There are a dozen poems by Emily Dickinson and a dozen more by Robert Frost.

Many of the selections, and some of the most interesting ones, are not so obvious. We find, for instance, a fascinating extract from George Ticknor's "Journal," describing meetings with Byron, Southey, Madame de Staël, and Chateaubriand. Louisa May Alcott appears as the author not of "Little Women" but of "Hospital Sketches," an account of her experiences as a nurse during the Civil War. From Thomas Wentworth Higginson's "Army Life in a Black Regiment"—now available in a paperback, by the way—Brooks takes a lively account of a military adventure. Clarence King, Frank Bolles, and Joshua Slocum write vigorously about storms on land and sea, and there are nature notes by Martin Taber and Henry Beston. Brooks has not forgotten Gamaliel Bradford, as too many people have, and he has had the happy idea of including a few pages from Samuel Eliot Morison's "Admiral of the Ocean Sea."

No anthologist can satisfy everyone, and Brooks does not always satisfy me. I should like to have more of Bryant and less of Holmes. For Thoreau I should have preferred parts of "Civil Disobedience" or "A Plea for Captain John Brown" rather than familiar passages from "Walden." Perhaps Whittier's "Snow-Bound" is worth the nearly twenty pages Brooks allots to it, but I am not convinced. Lucretia Hale's

"The Peterkin Papers" hasn't worn well enough to deserve revival, and if J. P. Marquand stands up, Clarence Day doesn't. The poems by Edwin Arlington Robinson are good, but most of them have appeared in numerous anthologies, and there are other poems of his that ought to be better known. In addition to these complaints, I regret that the notes are so sketchy.

Several of the inclusions raise puzzling questions. We find, for example, an essay on Zola by William Dean Howells and an extract from "The Bostonians" by Henry James. Howells, though a native of Ohio, may pass as a New Englander because he was so thoroughly imbued with the New England spirit, but James seems problematic. If he is to be included, why shouldn't Melville be, for "Moby Dick" was written in the Berkshires and the *Pequod* sailed from Nantucket under the command of a New Englander? And why, I wonder, did Brooks choose Howells's essay on Zola, excellent as it is, when there are such fine passages in the novels about both Boston and rural New England?

SOME of the authors strike me as not particularly representative of the New England spirit. George Santayana is one of them, and to deepen the mystery Brooks uses extracts from "Soliloquies in England" rather than "The Last Puritan." Edna St. Vincent Millay was born in Maine, but I don't think anyone would guess it from the poems in this anthology. I can't see much of New England in F. Marion Crawford or George Woodberry or Bernard Berenson.

"More than a province, less than a nation," Brooks writes in his Introduction, "New England has always had a certain coherence of its own, and from Cotton Mather to Robert Frost and E. E. Cummings it has shown the same consistency of character." This is a thesis that his anthology does not sustain. In the early part of the volume one recognizes a considerable degree of coherence, and some of the later writers—a Robert Frost, a Henry Beston, a Samuel Morison—show notable affinities with their predecessors, but others do not.

Brooks goes on, "Literature in New England has possessed a special quality

that one can distinguish easily and almost define." His own attempt at definition, however, is weak:

This quality has been made up of strains, manifested from the first, that appeared in less degree elsewhere in the country, among them a religious toughness that encouraged solid intellectual work, together with a fervent love of learning.

What the other strains are he doesn't say, and I cannot discover them from an examination of the contents of this volume. Nor can I see in all of the selections the religious toughness and the fervent love of learning of which he speaks.

THE definition of regional character is a tricky business. I was born and brought up and educated in New England, and I have had many ties with the area even when I lived elsewhere. One of my closest friends, on the other hand, was born in Indiana, and, though he has actually spent more years in New England than I have, I think there are differences between us that can be attributed to his Midwestern boyhood. But these differences, when you get down to it, are not very important in comparison with the similarities that have resulted from our exposure to much the same cultural influences. I am unwilling to deny that there is such a thing as the New England character, but I'm not sure that it is, even though perhaps it once was, an important literary force.

Some critics have regarded regionalism as a key to the understanding of American literature, and Brooks himself has made a good deal of it. I am skeptical. At its highest New England culture was merely a division of American culture, which was a division of Anglo-Saxon culture, which was a division of Western culture. If you look at Thoreau, for instance, or at Frost, who is so self-conscious a Yankee, you find that the New England element does not bulk so very large. Look at the Deep South, which at the moment is much more aware of its identity than New England, and much more inclined to make something of it; you discover that what is peculiarly Southern is of only secondary importance even in a William Faulkner or a Flannery O'Connor. New Englander that I am, I am wary of large claims. Brooks concludes his Introduction: "For these younger writers continued to affirm the old word of New England, faith in the individual, a passion for justice, a love of life and a clear belief in its ultimate goodness." Whatever else may be true of these affirmations, they surely are not peculiar to New England.