

States of the Union

DEATH OF A MAGAZINE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*Yesterday the bird of night did sit,
Even at noon-day, upon the market-
place,
Hooting and shrieking.*

—FROM *Julius Caesar*

NOW THAT *Life* has been extinguished and buried alongside its famous competitors, in a mass-magazine grave, I am ready to confess my role in the entire domino-like tragedy. The fact is, back in 1957, I killed *Collier's*. This careless act hastened the fall of the *Saturday Evening Post*, which led to the fall of *Look*, which brought on the fall of *Life*. Perhaps those four slick, perished pterodactyls, or their rustling ghosts, will forgive me; after all, I was merely incompetent.

The day after *Collier's* folded, a New York *Times* reporter, probing for causes, singled out "the weak advertising promotion. . . . The sales presentations, in particular, were said to lack focus." I had been the sales presentations manager, and that reporter didn't know the half of it. We *all* lacked focus.

Even when it was over, most of us remained strangely misty in our formulations and far from coherent.

We learned of our magazine's demise via a telegram, or guillotine-gram, from Paul Smith, our president, two days before Christmas:

THIS IS TO INFORM YOU THAT AS OF THIS DATE YOU HAVE BEEN SEVERED FROM THE CROWELL-COLLIER PAYROLL STOP THANKS FOR YOUR PART IN THE HARD FIGHT STOP

But most of us severed payrollless did not know how to stop. For weeks thereafter we kept floating back to our offices, where we stared at walls or wandered through corridors that no longer seemed to lead anywhere. We were survivors in life rafts, aimlessly circling our capsized mother ship. (Actually, there were two capsized ships: *Collier's* and its giddy sister schooner, *Woman's Home Companion*.)

Periodically, although without real hope, we checked the community bulletin board for any job possibilities that might be posted there. "Burlington Hosiery needs an all-around copy man." "*Look* will hire three salesmen! Ask Gary Fitch on Eighth floor."

Nearly 100 salesmen had been set adrift in the disaster. The oldest was a white-haired gentleman

named Monty. He had been selling ad space for the corporation since before World War I, and he had brought in the Coca-Cola account at a time when "coke" to most people still meant a lump of coal. Now, postponing his fate, he appeared punctually each morning at his office—shirt starched, shoes gleaming—and fired off reassuring letters to his old accounts:

Dear Mac:

Don't be fooled by the Eastern press and their prophecies of doom. We're not licked yet. You and I both have weathered many storms in the past and, God willing, we'll weather this one too. We're going to have a great year, Mac, and I'm counting on you for at least 13 four-color pages. . . .

Those letters were never sent out. Monty's young secretary would type them and then, after he had signed each one, she would furtively tear them up. I don't think he ever knew.

But I have wandered down the wrong corridor again. I was telling you how I killed *Collier's*, or failed to save it, anyway. Being young

and careless of my talents, I had, a few years before, drifted into advertising and was soon lost in a wilderness of prickly computations, pyramiding statistics concerning the American public's buying habits. With my colleagues in marketing I shared the delusion that if I could just reach the top of the pyramid—that is, if I could *count* and *tabulate* those billions of individual daily purchases—I would be crowned king of the marketing hill. If Sisyphus were alive today (and who is to say he is not?), he would take a job in marketing.

When I joined *Collier's*, early in 1957, I found that even at noonday, the bird of night did sit upon the market-place. My job was to put together arguments that salesmen could use—arguments about our audience's buying propensities, our "healthy" circulation, our competitive ad rates. It soon became clear, however, that both our readers and our advertisers had grown alarmingly indifferent to our wares. Moreover, what readers we were still able to attract did not, it appeared, pay much attention to the advertisements. Inexplicably, at the height of a national economic boom, while millions of Americans were buying like crazy, our readers had jumped off the great spending carousel. And our advertisers were not far behind.

There followed months of statistical hysteria. Each day our research director, an edgy young man who resembled Woody Allen, frantically punched the keys of a small desk-calculator, hoping the machine's mindless stutterings (which echoed those emanating from the executive suite) would somehow suggest The Solution, some magical combination of numbers that might dispel the gathering storm. (He was finally forced to resign, not because he had failed—everyone at *Collier's* did that—but because he had humiliated a superior by rejecting the man's sexual advances.)

As the catastrophe drew nearer,

our lunches at Toot Shor's, a favorite haunt of our small driven band, grew extravagantly longer. We made calculated use of our expense accounts at the bar, fearing that soon the bottles would be empty, the spigots tapped out. Most of the schemes "to save the magazine" that we proposed during those anxious yet, in retrospect, sweetly buzzing days, were concocted in a fog of boozy euphoria. Not that it mattered. We all sensed the sober truth, namely that *Collier's* and *Woman's Home Companion* did not compute. We were poor little sheep who had lost our way, and having a fine old time.

THE PLAN my bosses finally agreed upon was to try to persuade General Mills to buy \$1-million-worth of advertising, amounting to 100 pages in the two magazines during the coming year—four pages in each and every issue of *Woman's Home Companion* (a monthly) and two pages in each and every issue of *Collier's* (a bi-weekly). It was, to say the least, an improbable idea, born of desperation and a touch of temporary insanity.

Under the leadership of a corporation vice-president, whom I shall call Bud, we formed a "strategic task force"—most of the executives at Crowell-Collier were veterans of World War II vernacular—and began to assemble our arguments. They emerged, inevitably, in the form of charts and graphs proving that our audience was fanatically hooked on breakfast cereals, pie mixes, baking flour and other products made by General Mills.

Then, in an effort to enliven the soggy numbers, we painted them on huge, round cards that we placed inside a specially constructed, simulated wooden vault. At a timely moment during the General Mills presentation, Bud was supposed to spin the combination lock on the vault's door (*Collier's* and *Woman's Home Companion*: the right com-

bination! Get it?), whereupon the door would swing open to reveal all those round cards.

I seem to recall, alas, that the vault had been my idea, which may explain why I still feel responsible. In any case, three weeks before Christmas and after several shaky rehearsals, we crammed the vault and its ungainly contents into a monstrous "presentations case" (fake leather!) and shipped it to Minneapolis. Bud had arranged a make-or-break meeting at General Mills headquarters and he wanted me there to lug the presentation around. It weighed 276 pounds.

Some 50 stony-faced executives awaited us in a dark brown conference room. Bud and I hoisted the presentation case onto a small table and opened it, the top swinging back to form an easel. About a dozen ordinary rectangular cards featuring warm-up material had been placed in front of the vault, concealing The Big Surprise.

Bud's hands trembled as he began the "pitch." I stood near him, removing each rectangular card on cue. When Bud finally worked his way down to the vault, he paused and smiled at his audience. "Now I know you've all heard those rumors that we're going out of business. Well, that's a lot of nonsense . . . a lot of wishful thinking by our competition. I can assure you we're in business to stay, and the proof is right here in this vault. Because, gentlemen, we have the perfect combination for your marketing needs (Bud twirls the combination lock), a great selling opportunity for General Mills (Bud flings open the door), a truly extraordinary . . ."

He was interrupted by a loud, soul-shattering crack. I glanced at the vault just in time to see the door falling off its hinges. I lunged—too late. The whole gerry-built contraption, too frail to sustain either our computations or our hopes, heaved an eschatological sigh and fell with a crash at our feet.