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Life Without the News

A ONE-DAY newspaper strike was reported recently to have caused some dislocation of habit among Londoners. Sad stories were told later of "glum-looking travellers, obviously missing knowing what was going on in London itself and in the world beyond." This suggestion of glumness came from the newspapers themselves, which have sound reasons for wanting to be missed. The gloom noticed in buses and trains might have been the normal look of Londoners going to work, exposed rather sharply by the removal of newspapers from all those faces. Many people were said to have taken refuge in magazines, which are not nearly so concealing. Undoubtedly, they missed their newspapers; but it would be interesting to know just how much they missed the news.

An observer who watches people reading newspapers on a train will be struck by the general air of placidity. They are browsing on wide pastures. Without visible emotion, they acquire information about the latest murder, receive a new opinion on the cause of lung cancer, glance at some report of human misery—a flood or an earthquake, a long way off—until by easy stages, and yawning slightly, they come to affairs of state and high policy, or pass quickly through them to pages devoted to sport. Watching the process, the observer might have difficulty in deciding if it revealed a state of contemplation, a diligent searching for facts, a titillation of the nerves, or the indulgence of a habit.

If a man listens to a BBC broadcast at 7.0 a.m., he will often notice that the news is thin. Some bulletins are made up almost entirely of statements by political leaders. "Mr. Eden—or Mr. Dulles—has said..." is a familiar open-

ing, from which it may be inferred that the next few minutes will contain no information of real importance. And yet, on such a morning, the train traveller will open his paper and find all its columns neatly filled, and with the usual number of headlines. There is, of course, news from home as well as from abroad; but if he looks closely at what he reads the traveller may see that much of it has no more substance than the broadcast which ran its neglected course while he splashed in the bathroom. Viewed detachedly, a newspaper is a miscellany. It is not, and cannot be, a faithful reflection of life around us, but is really a little world of its own, created on the assumption that some events are more interesting than others. Reality is there, though softened and blurred—until at some time of great or tragic experience the design is shattered, and life itself takes command of the printed page.

It could be said truthfully on some happy days that nothing has happened which requires a headline. But newspapers must come out; the space must be filled; and readers must have their accustomed diet. A few days without the news will not plunge us deeply into ignorance, though it is a useful precaution to hear at least the "headlines" from the BBC. But people deprived of their papers become restless—rather like smokers trying to give up cigarettes. And, of course, they can never be sure that they are not missing a little more than the soothing murmur of the printed page. On the black Monday when London was without newspapers it was reported that bookmakers had their "worst day for years." Almost anything can happen when the channels of information are blocked.

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