

THE OVERCOAT

A Story

BY SALLY BENSON

IT had been noisy and crowded at the Milligan's and Mrs. Bishop had eaten too many little sandwiches and too many iced cakes, so that now, out in the street, the air felt good to her, even if it was damp and cold. At the entrance of the apartment house, she took out her change purse and looked through it and found that by counting the pennies, too, she had just eighty-seven cents, which wasn't enough for a taxi from Tenth Street to Seventy-Third. It was horrid never having enough money in your purse, she thought. Playing bridge, when she lost, she often had to give I.O.U.'s and it was faintly embarrassing, although

she always managed to make them good. She resented Lila Hardy who could say, "Can anyone change a ten?" and who could take ten dollars from her small, smart bag while the other women scurried about for change.

She decided it was too late to take a bus and that she might as well walk over to the subway, although the air down there would probably make her head ache. It was drizzling a little and the sidewalks were wet. And as she stood on the corner waiting for the traffic lights to change, she felt horribly sorry for herself. She remembered as a young girl, she had always assumed she would have lots of money when she was older. She had planned what to do with it — what clothes to buy and what upholstery she would have in her car.

Of course, everybody nowadays talked poor and that was some comfort. But it was one thing to have lost your money and quite

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another never to have had any. It was absurd, though, to go around with less than a dollar in your purse. Suppose something happened? She was a little vague as to what might happen, but the idea fed her resentment.

Everything for the house, like food and things, she charged. Years ago, Robert had worked out some sort of budget for her but it had been impossible to keep their expenses under the right headings, so they had long ago abandoned it. And yet Robert always seemed to have money. That is, when she came to him for five or ten dollars, he managed to give it to her. Men were like that, she thought. They managed to keep money in their pockets but they had no idea you ever needed any. Well, one thing was sure, she would insist on having an allowance. Then she would at least know where she stood. When she decided this, she began to walk more briskly and everything seemed simpler.

The air in the subway was worse than usual and she stood on the local side waiting for a train. People who took the expresses seemed to push so and she felt tired and wanted to sit down. When the train came, she took a seat near the door and, although inwardly she was seething with rebellion, her

face took on the vacuous look of other faces in the subway. At Eighteenth Street, a great many people got on and she found her vision blocked by a man who had come in and was hanging to the strap in front of her. He was tall and thin and his overcoat which hung loosely on him and swayed with the motion of the train smelled unpleasantly of damp wool. The buttons of the overcoat were of imitation leather and the button directly in front of Mrs. Bishop's eyes evidently had come off and been sewed back on again with black thread, which didn't match the coat at all.

It was what is known as a swagger coat but there was nothing very swagger about it now. The sleeve that she could see was almost threadbare around the cuff and a small shred from the lining hung down over the man's hand. She found herself looking intently at his hand. It was long and pallid and not too clean. The nails were very short as though they had been bitten and there was a discolored callous on his second finger where he probably held his pencil. Mrs. Bishop, who prided herself on her powers of observation, put him in the white collar class. He most likely, she thought, was the father of a large family and had

a hard time sending them all through school. He undoubtedly never spent money on himself. That would account for the shabbiness of his overcoat. And he was probably horribly afraid of losing his job. His house was always noisy and smelled of cooking. Mrs. Bishop couldn't decide whether to make his wife a fat slattern or to have her an invalid. Either would be quite consistent.

She grew warm with sympathy for the man. Every now and then he gave a slight cough, and that increased her interest and her sadness. It was a soft, pleasant sadness and made her feel resigned to life. She decided that she would smile at him when she got off. It would be the sort of smile that couldn't help but make him feel better, as it would be very obvious that she understood and was sorry.

But by the time the train reached Seventy-Second Street, the closeness of the air and the confusion of her own worries had made her feelings less poignant, so that her smile, when she gave it, lacked something. The man looked away embarrassed.

II

Her apartment was too hot and the smell of broiling chops sickened

her after the enormous tea she had eaten. She could see Maude, her maid, setting the table in the dining-room for dinner. Mrs. Bishop had bought smart little uniforms for her, but there was nothing smart about Maude and the uniforms never looked right.

Robert was lying on the living-room couch, the evening newspaper over his face to shield his eyes. He had changed his shoes, and the gray felt slippers he wore were too short for him and showed the imprint of his toes, and looked depressing. Years ago, when they were first married, he used to dress for dinner sometimes. He would shake up a cocktail for her and things were quite gay and almost the way she had imagined they would be. Mrs. Bishop didn't believe in letting yourself go and it seemed to her that Robert let himself go out of sheer perversity. She hated him as he lay there, resignation in every line of his body. She envied Lila Hardy her husband who drank but who, at least, was somebody. And she felt like tearing the newspaper from his face because her anger and disgust were more than she could bear.

For a minute she stood in the doorway trying to control herself and then she walked over to a window and opened it roughly.

"Goodness," she said. "Can't we ever have any air in here?"

Robert gave a slight start and sat up. "Hello, Mollie," he said. "You home?"

"Yes, I'm home," she answered. "I came home in the subway."

Her voice was reproachful. She sat down in the chair facing him and spoke more quietly so that Maude couldn't hear what she was saying. "Really, Robert," she said, "it was dreadful. I came out from the tea in all that drizzle and couldn't even take a taxi home. I had just exactly eighty-seven cents. Just eighty-seven cents!"

"Say," he said. "That's a shame. Here." He reached in his pocket and took out a small roll of crumpled bills. "Here," he repeated. And handed her one. She saw that it was five dollars.

Mrs. Bishop shook her head. "No, Robert," she told him. "That isn't the point. The point is that, I've really got to have some sort of allowance. It isn't fair to me. I never have any money! Never! It's got so it's positively embarrassing!"

Mr. Bishop fingered the five dollar bill thoughtfully. "I see," he said. "You want an allowance. What's the matter? Don't I give you money every time you ask for it?"

"Well, yes," Mrs. Bishop admitted. "But it isn't like my own. An allowance would be more like my own."

"Now, Mollie," he reasoned. "If you had an allowance, it would probably be gone by the tenth of the month."

"Don't treat me like a child," she said. "I just won't be humiliated any more."

Mr. Bishop sat turning the five dollar bill over and over in his hand. "About how much do you think you should have?" he asked.

"Fifty dollars a month," she told him. And her voice was harsh and strained. "That's the very least I can get along on. Why, Lila Hardy would laugh at fifty dollars a month."

"Fifty dollars a month," Mr. Bishop repeated. He coughed a little, nervously, and ran his fingers through his hair. "I've had a lot of things to attend to this month. But, well, maybe if you would be willing to wait until the first of next month, I might manage."

"Oh, next month will be perfectly all right," she said, feeling it wiser not to press her victory. "But don't forget all about it. Because I shan't."

As she walked toward the closet to put away her wraps, she caught sight of Robert's overcoat on the

chair near the door. He had tossed it carelessly across the back of the chair as he came in. One sleeve was hanging down and the vibration of her feet on the floor had made it swing gently back and forth. She saw that the cuff was badly worn and a bit of the lining showed. It looked dreadfully like the sleeve of the overcoat she had seen in the subway. And, suddenly, looking at it, she had a horrible sinking feeling, as though she were falling in a dream.

In Red and Brown

By Max Nomad

The communists suddenly dispossess the rich and gradually enslave the poor. The fascists suddenly enslave the poor and gradually dispossess the rich. This is the real difference. All the rest is poetry and theology.

There are three sorts of revolutionists: politicians with a gun, gangsters with a philosophy, and dreamers bent upon martyrdom. The politicians and the gangsters change the realities of history. The martyrs supply the myth necessary for the maintenance of the new status quo.

In Russia it takes the average worker the equivalent of six months' wages to buy an overcoat. However, he is not without compensation. He owns the factory in which he works. At least so his paper tells him. And he owns that paper too. This too he learns from his paper.

Their "idealism": the self-deception of the hungry wolf who thinks he will treat the sheep better than the tiger who has had his fill.

There was a man who violently attacked the consumption of meat as most detrimental to health. When asked what he recommended instead, he suggested carrion. He was insane. There are many men who, having pointed out all the shortcomings of democracy, quite seriously recommend dictatorship.

There are no escapes from Russian jails. Can it be because of the security these institutions offer from the permanent threat of being arrested?

In one of Frank Harris' short stories the budding toreador says, "I like the bulls." In somewhat the same way the fascists and the communists love the dissatisfied masses on whose backs they rise to power and fame.

► *Ancient nations that followed the path of appeasement — to extinction.*

CASE STUDIES IN ISOLATIONISM

BY FREDERICK H. CRAMER

THE STUDENT of ancient history coming to his studies fresh from a reading of the morning papers has the uncanny experience of finding today's headlines fitting easily into events which rocked the world about two thousand years ago. That world, too, had its totalitarian aggressors, its vacillating democratic politicians, "interventionists" and "isolationists."

The totalitarian techniques of appeasement and Fifth Columns, the device of lulling later victims into a feeling of false security while conquering immediate prey, are not modern inventions. Philip of Macedon, who conquered one by one the disunited city-states of ancient Greece, knew those procedures as well as Hitler. He paved the way for a world empire which obliterated all traces of democracy for centuries. His triumph ended the dream of a democratic federation of antique states held by such inspired democrats as Demosthenes and Isocrates. Later, when his New Order had broken into contending pieces, a new military

power — Rome — rose in the west. Once again the aggressor state profited by the disunion, the local greeds, the appeasement moods of other nations to rivet its authority on the world of those times. Listening to the speeches of present-day leaders, the historian remembering Athens and Carthage and Rome says to himself, "Isn't this where I came in — two thousand years ago?"

In the ancient as in the modern period, there was a strong trend toward political union embracing the entire realm of western civilization. This was natural, since then, as now, there was a striking similarity in the social, economic and cultural background of all the major states. The social system which unfolded in antiquity roughly corresponded to our own bourgeois capitalist development. For the same reasons the tendency toward the unification of that civilization, in some form, was extremely powerful. We now know that such unity might have been achieved on a democratic basis — if the