

SOMEBODY HOLD MY COAT

BY BILLY ROSE

EVERY now and then I write a serious column.

When I do, a baby blizzard of letters hits my office, and in angry words my correspondents inform me that serious questions should not be discussed by a Broadway clown with breakaway suspenders and a nose that lights up.

Well, maybe the letter-writers are right, and then again maybe they're wrong. Perhaps I ought to confine my writings to razzle-dazzle and razzmatazz, and let the Thinkers do the thinking — but I'm not so sure. Where does it say you have to take fencing lessons before you can stick pins in balloons? Where does it say you have to have an FBI badge before you can holler, "Stop thief"?

Of course I know how easy it is for a fellow with a syndicated column to become deafened by the thunder of his own thoughts. I've seen it happen to several gents I know, and I'm not saying it can't happen to me. However, I don't think it will. Nine columns out of ten, I expect to be peddling that ever-lovin' popcorn and

doing my old soft-shoe dance. But now and occasionally, when I feel like hollering I'm going to stand up on my hind legs and holler.

I'm not saying that my palaverings rate being carved on the pyramids. But I am saying that I have as much equipment for palavering as most of the practicing experts: a typewriter, a byline, and a hell of a nerve.

Will somebody please hold my coat?

For openers, let me tell you about a letter with a Brooklyn postmark which I recently got in the mail. The envelope contained a sheet of ruled yellow paper — the kind that sells for a nickel a pad. Across the sheet an unprintable racial crack was lettered in red crayon. There was, of course, no signature.

When I was younger, I used to get mad at these anonymous attacks on Jews, Catholics, Negroes and Protestants. But no more — I've boned up on the hate hucksters and I know what's bothering them. I know that they're sick, that they've got big miseries in the head, and that when they write their little murder notes

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they're looking for relief, much as you do when you reach for an aspirin.

Another reason I can't get mad at an anonymous correspondent is that I've known him all my life. When I was a kid on the East Side, his name was Albie. He was a frustrated little cuss — not very bright in his studies and not enough of an athlete to make any of the teams. And to add to his miseries, his old man drank a lot and sometimes would kick him around for fun. He started getting even with the world by beating up kids smaller than he was. I was one of those kids, and he gave me a rough time until I attached a hunk of iron to a sewing-machine strap and belted him on the head.

A few years later I changed schools, but Albie was still in my class, except this time his name was George. Once he threw a rock at my grandfather. I remember the old gent coming home with blood on his cheek and protesting it was just a scratch. When I started out to avenge the family honor with my trusty strap, he stopped me. He said George was suffering from an old sickness, and that I couldn't cure it by hitting him over the head with a hunk of iron.

When I went to high school, George went right along with me, but this time he had still another name — Otto. One day, in front of other kids, Otto tried to pin a murder rap on me. I told him I had an airtight alibi: I wasn't anywhere in the neighborhood when He was killed, and I had witnesses to prove it.

Otto was calling himself Frank when I met him five years later. He was wrapping bundles in a downtown wholesale house, and he told me the reason he couldn't get a decent job was that the bosses were all Catholics or Jews. When I offered to introduce him to a Presbyterian boss, Frank said they were the worst of all — slave drivers.

During my first twenty years in show business, Frank wrote me once a month. But to keep me guessing, he used different names and different styles of penmanship. Sometimes he made it even more complicated by mailing his letters from cities like Boston, Detroit and Scottsboro, Alabama.

I didn't see Frank again until we met in Germany in 1945. His name now was Vic, and he was a Special Services officer. He told me how much he was impressed with the cleanliness and good manners of the Nazis, and confided that we had fought the war on the wrong side. When I asked him about Dachau, Buchenwald and Auschwitz, he assured me it was a lot of propaganda.

Since he got out of the Army, Vic has stopped signing his letters. This worries me. It means that my old buddy is sicker than ever, and that in addition to thinking like a rat, he's now hiding out like one. Poor little spiritual numskull — when his head fills up with more hate than it can hold, the only way he can stop the pain is to get out his red crayon and nickel pad of paper.

Sometimes he mails his bile and bilge to a priest. Sometimes the address is the home of a colored family. Sometimes it's me. . . .

The other day, as I was about to toss his latest letter into the wastebasket, I happened to notice the stamp on the envelope. It was a stamp I hadn't seen before — one that the Post Office Department had just put out. It showed four men, their arms linked, standing on the deck of a sinking vessel. It commemorated one of the great war stories — the four chaplains aboard the troopship *Dorchester* which was torpedoed in the North Atlantic in 1943.

Two were Protestant ministers, one was a Jewish rabbi, the fourth a Catholic priest. When they found there weren't enough preservers to go around, these men of God handed over their life-belts to soldiers. And when last seen, they were knee-deep in water on the sinking ship, each praying in his own language and according to his own faith:

"Our Father, Who art in Heaven . . ."

"Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam . . ."

"Shma Yisroel Adonoy Elohenu Adonoy Echod . . ."

As I sat there looking at the scrawl in red crayon and the canceled stamp, I felt like the mathematics teacher who, discouraged by a pupil's inability to add two and two, suddenly remembered that the human race also produced Einstein.

II

It's a good thing for my friend in Brooklyn that he didn't send along his name and address. Had he done so, I would have mailed him a story about Flatbush which might have confused him even more. . . .

Last summer while driving past a church on St. Felix Street, I heard a set of chimes that did nice things to my ears. They were unusually good chimes, and figured to have cost a lot of money. Naturally, I wondered how they happened to be in the belfry of a modest church in a modest neighborhood.

"What's the church with the chimes?" I asked a newsstand proprietor.

"Methodist," he said. "Hanson Place Central Church."

"Have they had those chimes long?"

"No," said the newsie. "They put 'em in last spring."

Next day I did some telephoning, and I liked what I found out.

When Rev. John Emerson Zeiter heard about a new type of electrically-controlled chimes called Carillon bells, he told his congregation about them and said it would be a nice thing for the neighborhood if people going to work in the morning and coming home at night could hear those beautiful chimes. He told his flock the bells cost a lot of money, and suggested they contribute a little something from time to time. Maybe in a year or so, the church could afford the bells.

Next day a member of his parish phoned. "I've been discussing the bells with my partner," said the parishioner, "and we'd each like to donate a third of the cost. But there's a hitch."

"What is it?" asked the Reverend.

"Well, my partner is Jewish," said the businessman, "and we were wondering if that would make any difference."

Reverend Zeiter said it wouldn't make any difference at all.

"We think," continued the businessman, "that it would be a good idea to find a Catholic to put up the other third. After all, people of all faiths are going to enjoy these bells."

Next day a Catholic in the neighborhood offered to put up his third, and the bells were ordered. At the dedication ceremony a couple of months later, a plaque was put up on the wall of this Methodist church, and inscribed on it were the names of the Catholic, the Protestant and the Jew. . . .

Do I think that the story of the Carillon bells would have straightened out the twisted mind of my anonymous friend? Of course not. Do I think the people in Flatbush who hear the chimes are going to be kinder and more tolerant? Again, of course not.

Why, then, do I bother mentioning the bells? Well, I guess it's because I'm chump enough to think that even one drop of clean water falling on a dusty street is important. It may clean up an inch of ground and give some-

body else an idea. One of these days — and I don't expect to be around to see it — a lot of drops of clean water may fall and a lot of dust may be washed away.

III

Speaking of dusty streets, let me tell you about a very famous one that could use a little clean water — Broadway.

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred when a Negro goes up to the box office of a legitimate theatre and asks for a good ticket, he's told, "Sorry, we're all sold out." If he waits around, however, the colored man may be treated to the exquisite humiliation of seeing the next fellow in line buy the ticket he was told wasn't in the rack. The Negro can see the show, but only if he's willing to settle for something high in the balcony, a row or two below the level where you start receiving spirit messages.

What happens when he presents a ticket he bought through the mails? They let him in, but only because there's a state law which makes the operators liable to prosecution if they don't. Can the Negro buy orchestra seats to our flop shows? Sure — but so can anybody without a scarlet-fever sign on his chest.

Am I accusing our high-minded playwrights and producers of setting up a color bar at their box offices? I am not. However, I am accusing them of doing nothing to lower the bar that has always existed. I'm accusing them of failing to instruct their

box-office employees to look only at the color of a man's money, and not at that of his skin. Such instructions — and a little watching — are all that is necessary to get our New York theatres in line with the Thirteenth Amendment.

If the lads I'm leveling a finger at tell me that this comes as a surprise to them, I'm going to be suspicious. Surely they are aware of the widespread discrimination practiced by Manhattan headwaiters, room clerks, cocktail-lounge hostesses and rental agents. Surely they can't be naïve enough to think ticket-sellers are functioning on a higher level.

I have no quarrel with the box-office boys themselves. They're doing what they're doing because it's been handled that way for years, and because they think it will please the boss. But once the boss tells them different, that'll be the end of it.

When we've straightened out the Jim Crow situation in the New York theatre, we can tackle some of the other cities in the glorious free states of the North — Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit and Chicago. Before we start pointing fingers at the South, let's make sure our own fingernails are clean. . . .

Another thing about intolerance in New York that worries me is the hold it has on kids. I get a little sick whenever I read about grade-school youngsters defacing synagogues and ganging up on classmates of a different color. It means that these children are

learning the *five* Rs, with Race and Religion as the added starters.

And I'm not blaming their teachers. I know that these poor devils are doing the best they can with the little they have to work with. But I *am* blaming the politicians and public who keep pigeon-holing the complaints about outmoded textbooks and overcrowded schools.

Not long ago a kid offered to bet me a quarter that the population of New York City was 4 million. I told the tot it was closer to 8 million, and asked him where he got his information. He told me in his geography book.

When I asked the child some questions about American history, he knew all the answers up to Teddy Roosevelt and Admiral Dewey. That was as far as his history book went, he said.

I went around the next day and took a look at his school. The walls hadn't been painted in twenty years. Only a few rooms were equipped with electrical outlets. For 600 kids, there was one faucet for drinking and washing. The paper-towel container was empty and there wasn't any soap. When I asked how come, one of the teachers told me the city budget didn't provide for such luxuries.

As I walked home I remembered a line about kids in the Constitution of the United Nations: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed."

When I got home, I phoned the

Public Education Association, a voluntary group trying to improve the New York school system, and asked for some facts and figures. Well, I almost wished I hadn't. They made me ashamed of the town I'm always bragging about. . . .

There's a building up in Harlem that used to be a prison. Twenty-five years ago the Police Department decided it was unsafe and abandoned it. Today it's called P.S. 125. The school kids eat their lunches in the cells. The wealthiest metropolis in the world hasn't even bothered to remove the iron bars.

P.S. 86, erected in 1889, has a seating capacity of 2059. It's a 6-B school — kids five to twelve. To get to a lavatory, the youngsters have to go down to the basement through an unheated passage. These lavatories have no flushing facilities, and there isn't a sink in the entire building.

P.S. 16 in Brooklyn has its toilets in the yard. Ditto for P.S. 127 in Manhattan. And for 26 other schools.

By modern standards, 287 New York schools, attended by 150,000 children, are firetraps. P.S. 58 has exits on only one side of the building. And if that side caught fire, it would be just too bad.

According to education experts, New York needs 9000 more classrooms and 10,000 more teachers, plus 600 assorted doctors, nurses and dental hygienists. Not to mention modern textbooks, workshops, gyms, musical instruments and some decent furniture. . . .

If this condition exists in a \$50 billion town like New York, it's reasonable to assume that it's a lot worse in a lot of other places.

The English are skipping plenty of meals these days, but they're spending twice as much of their national income on education as we are. And the Russians are spending six times as much, proportionately. Next time you stand up and sing *The Star-Spangled Banner*, remember we're spending 6 per cent of our national income for booze and smokes — but only 1.5 per cent to teach our kids to think straight.

IV

While we're on the subject of kids, you might be interested in a letter I wrote recently:

The President of the United States
The White House
Washington, D. C.
Dear Mr. President:

It isn't often a fellow gets a chance to do something nice on a big scale. Well, you've got that chance.

As you probably know, there's an awful lot of kid-hungry people in this country. One out of every nine marriages is childless, and there just aren't enough kids up for adoption to go around.

I got a dramatic reminder of this not long ago when some papers around the country printed that my wife and I were planning to bring over 25 European orphans.

For days, the postman laid stacks of letters on my desk from couples in every one of the 48 states. They told me how lonesome they were, and how much it would mean to them to have one of these children. They even mailed in snapshots of the spare rooms where the kiddies could sleep and the toys they could play with.

Of course, Mr. President, your State Department wouldn't let me bring the 25 tots in, but if I had brought in 25,000, I could have placed every one of them in a fine home. Evidently a lot of would-be pops and moms want something around the house that makes noise besides the radio.

Well, I know where there are enough kids to go around twice — and you do too. They're the war orphans in the DP camps of Europe — kids of many different religions and nationalities. And I think you'll agree that they're the thing most worth salvaging out of the scrapheap that used to be Europe.

I got a close-up of these small fry a few winters back when I was in Germany, and I particularly remember some I saw at Landsberg. A full-scale Bavarian blizzard was doing its stuff as I trudged past the shacks in which 6500 DPs were waiting for the world to make up its mind what to do with them.

Off in a corner of the camp, I heard laughter coming from one of the shanties. I walked in, found

myself in a makeshift laundry and ducked under some wet clothes hanging over a dirt floor. Near the washtub, a bunch of kids were playing with a doll they had made out of knotted rags. And they were laughing — laughing like kids anywhere laugh. As I stood and watched them, I'm afraid I wept a little, because I couldn't think of any set of kids in the world who had less to laugh about.

Under our present quota system, it takes up to eight years for such youngsters to get visas — years when they should have somebody to wipe their noses, dab Mercurchrome on their knees and buy them red wagons for Christmas.

These kids wouldn't compete for anybody's job, and they wouldn't know a foreign ideology if it came up and bit them. There are organizations standing by to pay their passage, post the necessary bonds, and arrange for legal adoptions. And the whole program could be so administered that the children wouldn't be dropped into our congested cities.

There it is, Mr. President. Thousands of people hungry for kids, thousands of kids hungry for people. Surely there must be some way to get these two lumps of loneliness together.

Respectfully,
BILLY ROSE

Of course I never got an answer to this letter. President Truman had

more important things to think about — like building an extra porch on which to sun himself.

v

Around that time I sent an open letter to another busy gentleman, but unlike Mr. Truman, this chap didn't neglect his mail. My letter was promptly answered on the front pages of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, and the answer was full of words like "provocateur," "white slaver," and "yellow journalist." Here's the letter which inspired these compliments:

Premier Joseph Stalin
The Kremlin
Moscow, USSR
Dear Mr. Stalin:

Every now and then, you throw knuckles at the American press and say it ought to be muzzled. On your drop-dead list are certain newspaper and magazine publishers, including, of course, Henry Luce, bossman of *Time* and *Life* magazines.

If you can spare the time, I'd like to tell you a story about this Luce gent. It involves Henry, me, *Time*, a kidney-shaped desk, and what the fancy-adjective boys call "the freedom of the press."

Some time back I wrote a column about an old lady whose corpse got mixed up with the corpse of a two-star general. Shortly after it appeared, one of *Time's* research girls phoned me. "Is it true," she asked in a station-wagon voice, "that the

desk in your office is kidney-shaped?"

"What's it to you," I asked, "whether my desk is shaped like a small intestine or a big toe?"

"Oh, we just wanted to know," said Miss Station Wagon. "We're doing a piece about that switched-corpse story you wrote. It's been around for quite a while, you know."

"I get it," I said. "Your magazine is going to hang me out to dry again. This will make the third time in as many months that you've used me for the back end of a shooting gallery. Well, I know a juicy item about one of your editors, and I wonder how he would like it if I spit in his eye all the way from the Mexico City *Herald* to the Paris *Herald Tribune*?"

"I don't think he'd like it at all," said the *Time* tot. "Let me call you back after I've talked to the head of my department."

When an hour went by without my phone ringing, I called a Park Avenue hotel and got Henry Luce. "Mr. Luce," I said, "it's about time your gang stopped using me for target practice. I understand that *Time* is going to run a piece about my pitching chestnuts instead of horseshoes, and I'd appreciate it if you'd tell them to lay off."

Mr. Luce said he'd look into the matter, and ten minutes later my phone rang. It was T. S. Matthews, managing editor of *Time*.

"Mr. Luce called me," he said,

"and told me about your request. The story you're sore about isn't much of a story, but if I kill it, I might as well put on my hat and walk out of this office. I'm either editor of this magazine or I'm a trained seal."

And that's all there is to this yarn, Mr. Stalin. *Time* printed the story the following week, and when the boys at Lindy's kidded me about it, I took refuge in Ben Hecht's old line — "Never mind what they say about you in a newspaper. Tomorrow someone will wrap a herring in it."

Why do I bore you with this trivial tale, Mr. Stalin? Well, I guess it's because it may have something to do with the freedom of the press around here as compared with what it is in your country. It's a safe bet that if the Russian equivalent of Henry Luce were to tell one of the hired help at *Pravda* to kill a story, there wouldn't be any back-talk about putting on hats and walking out of offices.

Am I trying to say that stories never get slanted or killed in the American press? Certainly not. There will be different slants as long as there are different publishers, and there will be pressure to slant and kill stories as long as there are readers and advertisers.

But around here it's not just one big pressure — it's a lot of little pressures working in different directions. The results may not

be perfect, but, kidding aside, don't you think our newspapers are a lot better than they are in countries where the blue pencils are all in one pocket?

Sincerely,
BILLY ROSE

The Russian reaction to my letter to Joe Stalin wasn't any more violent than my own reaction the other day when I read an article by a man who said he was in favor of slavery, and was willing to start the ball rolling by becoming a slave himself.

No, this piece wasn't written a hundred years ago. It appeared in a recent issue of *Commentary* magazine, and its author is Pinchas Goldfeder, who has been a DP in a German camp for the past three years. His proposition is simple. He will sell his sinews and soul to any American who will pay his passage, and provide him with a roof and three squares a day. He says he has nothing to lose by such an arrangement — not even hope. That disappeared long ago.

In addition to several hundred thousand DPs, Mr. Goldfeder says there are 50 million Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Englishmen, Italians and Central Europeans who would be interested in a similar arrangement. These people, he claims, would rather live as 1500-calorie-a-day slaves than die as 600-calorie-a-day freemen.

Mr. Goldfeder estimates that at least 15 million could be comfortably enslaved in the United States, with benefit to all concerned. To begin with, 5 million could be used

to do the dirty jobs the average red-blooded American doesn't relish — street-cleaning, janitoring, ditch-digging, coal-mining and the like. Another 5 million could be used as domestics, so that in addition to two cars in every garage, we could have two slaves in every garret.

American industrialists, says the author, could put the remaining 5 million to work as laborers and agriculturists in the various undeveloped areas of the world. What's more, they could be carried as assets on company books and, of course, depreciated yearly.

But most important, the cost would be low — probably no more than \$200 per slave, f.o.b. New York or San Francisco. And by using low-grade foods, the cost of maintenance per head would be little more than the upkeep of a six-cylinder car.

Mr. Goldfeder says he's fed up with slogans about freedom, equality, brotherhood and humanity. Slaves, he points out, could be brought in without changing our immigration quotas, and without our having to use the dirty word, "immigrant." He maintains that all this would be thoroughly in the American tradition, since we once carried on a brisk

traffic in white indentured servants and Negro slaves.

Mr. Goldfeder calls his scheme "A Practical Plan to Settle the DP Problem, with Malice to None, with Profit to All. . . ."

All right, gentle reader, you can relax now and unclench your fists. I've taken you in, just as *Commentary* magazine took me in. You see, when I got to the end of this article, I found that the author was not a foreigner at all, but an eminently respectable Pennsylvania Quaker named Herry-mon Maurer, who says he chose to write in this vein about the DP problem because "sometimes you are faced with an injustice so monumental as to make ordinary arguments seem useless."

His piece reminds me of one written by Jonathan Swift back in 1729, which he called "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burden to Their Parents or the Country, by Fattening and Eating Them."

Shortly after Swift's satire appeared, an eminent English writer reviewed it and said it made him ashamed of his country. I don't know about you, but Mr. Maurer's piece affects me the same way.



GENERAL OMAR N. BRADLEY

BY DONALD ROBINSON

AS CHIEF OF STAFF of the United States Army, General Omar Nelson Bradley is quite possibly the most important soldier in the Western world. Right now he is in charge of the organization of this country's land forces. If war does come, he will almost certainly be the Supreme Commander of the combined Western Armies. He will get the post partly, of course, because American troops, rather than European, will form the backbone of these Armies, and because Bradley is the top American military man. But his appointment will not be merely a triumph of expediency. Bradley is ideally equipped for the job, and military men here and in Europe know it.

Bradley has the reputation of being a realist. The reputation is well merited. He is always cool, logical, completely imperturbable; it is virtually impossible to jolt him out of his calm self-assurance. During the Battle of the Bulge, for example, Bradley was commanding the Twelfth Army Group. At the height of the battle some of the correspondents attached

to his headquarters became jittery over the prospect that the *Wehrmacht* would overrun Luxembourg City, where they were stationed. Although the Germans were only a few miles away, Bradley assured them that this would be impossible; he had, he explained, assigned three crack divisions to hold the line. "And suppose the Krauts break through those divisions?" the correspondents inquired nervously. "They can't," Bradley said placidly. "I know how those outfits fight." And the Germans couldn't.

A man who refuses to be panicked is a valuable asset in Washington nowadays. Last spring a high Army commander in Germany cabled the Pentagon a frenzied warning that the USSR would begin a shooting war in a matter of days. All Washington, the White House not excluded, was gripped by hysteria. Bradley quietly arranged a meeting of his intelligence officers, and with them reviewed the available information on Soviet troop movements, Red Army supply dumps, and the disposition of the Soviet Air Force. On the basis of these data, he

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