

God Bless You!

or, Kleenex Rides the Snuff

By BESS GORDON

THE SNEEZE MAY fill the air with germs, transmitting them from man to man, or woman to woman, or man to woman for that matter; it may also help spread epidemics, create sudden intimacies or lasting rifts, and generally spray the void with a quality that was lacking from it a moment before. Most people are disinclined to take the sneeze seriously or honestly. They are shy or furtive about it, hiding their faces in a blanket or a handkerchief, stifling it with the well known gesture of the hand, or simply *holding back* the full, invigorating force of the explosion in a manner known scientifically as *niesen interruptus*. The latter is by far the most frustrating, and considered from any psychological point of view, has, in the long run, inflicted more harm than good on suffering mankind.

The comfort and release derived from the *wholehearted*, in-

voluntary spasm of the sneeze, most scientists agree, is rarely equalled by any other form of experience. You will forget all about your vitamins and gymnasiums, throw away your diets, anti-histamins and precious dopes, once you've mastered the secret of this involuntary reaction. Yes, one simple, everyday sneeze to which the entire being responds, vibrating like a taut bow from head to toe, — or tip to top if you prefer — is worth the collected works of Dr. Froude and half the papyrus lost in the sacking of Aristotle's library in Alexandria!

Of course there are sneezes and sneezes. Just as there is snuff, hay fever, the "running nose," the queer and complicated ritual of "blowing," the endless scale of inflection ranging from soprano to *basso falsetto* as varied in nuance and significance as the tonal distinctions which separate the hundreds of

odd Chinese dialects, the quality and volume — if I may be permitted to be clinical for a moment — of the viscid secretion of the membrane, the individual preference for tissue, nylon, silk, or linen, the position and co-ordination of the other members of the body, etc. In fact, the ramifications of the sneeze are as varied as humanity itself. From time immemorial, it has been considered by all peoples of the world, the civilized, uncultivated, and primitive alike, as a definite manifestation of man's immortal spirit and his instinct for the preservation of life.

In just this connection, for example, have you ever considered the significance of the "Bless you" or "God Bless you!" which are the immediate response of any decent human being to his fellow man's sneeze, regardless of the type or quality? Why should the Deity be invoked, why "blessing," unless the *nature* of the act were beneficent and the outcome providential? Actually the whys and wherefores of the sneeze-blessing — like the sneeze itself — have been inquired into since (almost) the earliest times.

Here is one explanation of the origin of the blessing (from an ancient Rabbinical text which has since been plagiarized

by a famous British scenario writer, and also served as the plot for a sacrilegious musical comedy by Noel Coward): Not long after the Creation, God issued a general decree that every man should sneeze but once in his lifetime and thereupon immediately depart this world. Now Jacob was not quite pleased with the idea of passing away in "this precipitate fashion." After considerable brooding, he decided to take a cue from Abraham who had so successfully persuaded the Lord to show leniency to Sodom, bringing Him down from fifty to ten "righteous" inhabitants, if they could be found, as reason enough to spare that corrupt city (in a Biblical passage which has been described in certain prejudiced and contemptible circles as the first inspired example of "haggling" in literature!).

He consequently prostrated himself before the Lord, then like Abraham wrestled a second, third, and fourth time with Him, earnestly entreating the favor of being exempted from the decree. His prayers were heard (there is no record of any direct conversation). He sneezed and survived in joy. As did his progeny. The earthly rulers of the universe, learning of this extraordinary circumstance, ordered that all future sneezing be

accompanied by prayers of thanksgiving for the preservation of life. Thus the significance of the sneeze, with God's blessing, was handed down from father to son, and in time came to be expressed by the casual bystander for the benefit of anyone who happened to sneeze.

(Credit where credit is due: this same bit of Talmudic lore has been used by Oscar Wilde in one of his exquisite tales, transplanted into Arabia and given a characteristic, perverse twist which makes it sound French and quite *fin de siècle* in origin!)

AND HERE IS an account of the origin of the sneeze-blessing from one of the truly fabulous medieval French *Livres des Heures*: During a pestilence due, among other reasons, to the primitive sanitary conditions of the time, the air became filled with a paroicious and deleterious exudation, given off by improperly looked after moats and cisterns. Scores who sneezed — it was a sudden, but nonetheless, protracted spasm, with the head flung horizontally back, the mouth agape as though for the most breathtaking "Ah!", the eyes literally popping — dropped dead, almost immediately after achieving the spasm. The bystanders, who were chiefly

warriors, observing the peculiar convulsion of the disease which exposed the victim's throat to them down to the tonsils, fell into the habit of exclaiming with typical French irony, "*quelle blessure béante!*" (translated roughly, "What a gaping wound or hole!"), thus commenting, albeit not very humanely, on the curious death-dealing propensities of the spasm.

After the pestilence had passed, "*quelle blessure*" or "*quelle blessure béante!*" remained in common usage as the conventional reaction to the sneeze, and when the Normans invaded England they brought this usage, among many others, with them. The Albions, in turn, perhaps with unconscious racial pride, corrupted typical Gallic contumely into benediction, exclaiming "Bless yer" or "Blessings be on 't!" whenever anyone near or dear to them achieved a spasm.

Naturally, like so many of the legends which surround the mystery of man's being, his strange instincts and queerer habits, the above seems, to me at least, apocryphal. Most scholars and all reputable documents define the sneeze as an immediate sign of incoming life.

Thus, turning again to the Bible: When Elisha restored the

Shumanite's son, the child's return to life was signified by its sneezing seven times and opening its eyes. *II Kings: v.35*

Or to Greek mythology: When Prometheus flew back and opened the phial containing the solar rays he had stolen, permeating his home-made man with them, the automaton fell a-sneezing, thereby giving the first signs of life. Furthermore, transported by his success, Prometheus offered up prayers for the preservation of this singular being. And the being, remembering Prometheus' ejaculations, offered up the same on behalf of his descendants; the prayers being perpetuated from father to son.

Aristotle had this explanation for the importance of the sneeze: Early civilized man believed implicitly in the head as the seat of the spirit and the base which governed and animated the whole human system; the sneeze, thus, not only announced the existence of the internal and immortal man, but became the most manifest, sensory operation of the human head.

As I've said before, the ramifications of the sneeze are as multitudinous as humanity itself. But what is most astonishing is that an act which once synthesized the whole force and direction of man's living spirit

has come to be significant in relation to health, love, and such lesser human interests.

"God bless you!" is the salutation offered the sneezer in English speaking countries.

"*Gesundheit!*" or "*Leb' wohl!*" among the Germans.

"*Bonne santé!*" where French is spoken.

Neither royalty nor commoner ignore the sneeze. "If his Honour chances to sneeze," declares the *Rules of Civility*, translated from the French in 1685, "you are not to bawl out, 'God bless you, sir', but pulling off your hat bow to him handsomely and make that observation in a genteel undertone to yourself."

Kaiser Wilhelm II preferred the observation voiced. (As who wouldn't?) According to one of the Duke von Eulenberg's letters to a young Lieutenant in Bavaria, the Kaiser's reaction was most morbid on the occasion of an Imperial sneeze during the dedication ceremony of a new Cadet School in Dahlem. Entering his carriage, while the band played *Deutschland Ueber Alles*, he remarked to a favorite aide-de-camp (the dashing Count S.), "I sneezed and not a single solitary soul said *Gesundheit!* That is what it means to be an emperor! A pair of waxed moustaches and an empty helmet would have elicited the

same response."

"Live," or "God keep you!" ejaculates the bystander among the Hindus. "The same to you," responds the sneezer, slyly rubbing his ear with an ingratiating movement of the index and thumb.

"God be praised," proclaims the one who has sneezed among the Mohammedans. "God have mercy on you," responds the bystander. "God guide us and guide *you*," in turn rejoins the sneezer.

Among primitive peoples sneezing is associated with the departure or return of the soul to the nostrils. The soul, the life force, is identified with the breath; and the nostrils are the gates of life.

"Come back," says the Eskimo who has sneezed, addressing his retreating soul. He might otherwise become ill.

When de Soto, in 1542, was interviewing the Cacique Guachoya, the latter sneezed. Thereupon all the Cacique's attendants bowed their heads, opened and closed their arms, and performed various primitive gestures of adulation, chanting such phrases to their chieftain as, "May the sun guard you." "May the sun never set on your smallest member." "May the sun spread and lay his gold over you."

Various other sneeze omens

observed in different climes and eras follow in loose order:

The narrator or an auditor sneezes during the telling of an anecdote: the speaker is telling the truth. (The most common belief.) And you can't sneeze to order — at any rate not in a way that would satisfy any post-pubescent who knows anything about sneezing.

During the wedding ceremony, if the bridegroom sneezes the union will be unlucky.

(Germany)

Two pregnant women sneeze at the same time. They will give birth to daughters near a deserted well. If their husbands sneeze simultaneously the offspring will be male musicians.

(Esthonia)

If a newborn infant sneezes, all danger is past; it is out of the reach of "fairy spells."

(Scotland)

Sneeze once. Someone is speaking good of you. Sneeze twice. Ill is being spoken. Sneeze thrice. Just a cold in the head.

(Japan)

Sneeze. "May you club someone," or better, "May your own wife have twins." (Fiji Islands)

The sneeze is a yawn with virility added.

(Bangkok)

If, among the ancient Greeks and Romans, someone sneezed, the significance of the spasm was determined by the position

of the bystander. Socrates, we have it on no less an authority than Plato, always felt encouraged to go on with what he had undertaken if the bystander with whom he was immediately engaged sneezed on his right side; if the act occurred on his left, however, he gave up the idea of going any farther. (Greece)

The sneeze may claim its singers as well as its thinkers. The following stanza translated from the classical Latin into English in 1605 is a lusty example of how mores and customs change while the sneeze remains eternal:

When you would sneeze, strait
turne yourself unto your
neighbor's face:

As for my part, wherein to
sneeze, I know no fitter

place;

It is an order, when you sneeze
good men will pray for you;

Marke him that dothe so, for
I thinke he is your friend
most true.

And that your friend may
know who sneezes, and may
for you pray,

Be sure you not forget to sneeze
full in his face alway;

But when thou hear'st another
sneeze, although he be thy
father,

Say not *God bless him*, but *Choak*
up, or some such matter
rather.

(R. F. Gent:

"The Schoole of Slovenrie.")

Bless us, bless us all!*

* SNEEZE: to emit air or breath suddenly, forcibly, and audibly through the nose and mouth by involuntary, spasmodic action.

(Webster's Pocket Dictionary, 1930.)

Bess Gordon got tired of hearing people shout Gesundheit! instead of something else, whenever she sneezed, so it was fury as well as scientific interest that galvanized her research into it. She writes poetry and lives in Brooklyn.

Who Gave RUSSIA *the* A-BOMB?

By WILLIAM BRADFORD HUIE

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ON JANUARY 15, 1951, at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City, Thomas E. Murray, a member of the United States Atomic Energy Commission, made this significant statement: "Thanks to such traitors as Fuchs and Pontecorvo, to mention only two — and Lord knows how many more . . . the Russians unfortunately have the atomic bomb."

This was the first official admission of a high crime against free men: the bomb was *given* to the Russians. It was given to them by American, Canadian, and British citizens, and the gift enabled Russia to begin the intimidatory use of the bombs at least ten years before they could have done so without the gift.

The admission that the bomb was given marks a reversal by the government of the United States. Heretofore, spokesmen for the Administration have contended that Russian espionage was unavailing since there

was nothing to steal; and there has been a seven-year government effort to protect the American citizens who gave our secrets to Russia. Dr. Joseph Weinberg, who personally delivered a formula to a Russian agent, is today a protected professor at the University of Wisconsin. Dr. David Bohm, who was a member of Weinberg's Communist cell, was, until recently, a protected professor at Princeton. And Steve Nelson, born Stefan Mesarosh, who headed the espionage effort against the Radiation Laboratories at Berkeley, California, is a free citizen of Pennsylvania.

Immediately after the Second War the Canadian Government brought its atomic spies and traitors to trial, sent them to jail, and published a masterly report on their crimes. But the United States Government first tried to deny that crimes had been committed, then tried to shield the criminals, and finally