

Quiet, Praise the Lord

By DESMOND HALL

BLOWING his nose repeatedly, Robert Blanchard sat waiting in his bathrobe for his doorbell to ring. His apartment was a tall, gaunt, gloomy room, admirably suited, except for its one horrifying talent, to the purpose for which he had rented it.

A young, shy anthropologist, Robert intended to compose here a monograph on certain little-known aspects of a remote Australian tribe, which he hoped would win him some mild anthropological glory and a subsidy from the Prewitt Foundation. Progress had been slow, however, because the apartment could talk.

Its voice was rich and various, uttered through the hot-air grate in the wall. Robert had paid no attention to the old building's heating arrangements when he had rented the apartment, not suspecting that the system of hot-air grates was to interfere with the composition of the monograph by keeping him sharply up to date about his neighbors' affairs. There were six of them, all women. He did not know and did not want to know their names, but he had classified them according to the habits of their speech, which came floating to him through the hot-air grate. In the apartment below lived Enthusiastic, Complaining, Eager Questioner, and Surly. In the apartment above lived only two: Languidly Haughty, and Quiet, Praise the Lord.

Although no, by George! he said to himself as he waited for his doorbell to ring; he was changing that here and now. No longer Quiet, Praise the Lord. Wantonly Inconsiderate.

He had rather liked Quiet, Praise the Lord because he heard her voice so seldom, and, when he did, it was soft and pleasant; but he felt fully justified, now, in changing her name. She owed her new name to her habit of forgetting her key.

Until several days ago there had been only the one bell, on the ground floor; but then the landlord had installed separate bells—buzzers, actually—in each apartment, and push buttons and name plates downstairs. The night after this was done, Robert's buzzer had buzzed. He had pressed the catch that released the downstairs door and waited curiously to see who his visitor might be.

A girl. A nice-looking girl.

"I'm so sorry," she had said. "I forgot my key and rang our bell and then I remembered there's no one home, so I rang yours."

He knew by her voice that she was Quiet, Praise the Lord. "Perfectly all right," he had said, "no trouble," and returned, a little bemused, to his desk.

Once, all right; twice, even; but three, four times—shocking. He no longer bothered to open his door to see who it was; just pressed the catch and then, sure enough, heard her quiet footsteps passing. She knew he was always in. She had calmly assigned him the role of a kind of fourth-floor doorman.

The fifth night it rang, Robert had ignored it, to teach her a lesson. Someone else must have let her in. An hour later, still annoyed, he had gone for a walk in the park and caught his cold. Her fault. Tonight, if the buzzer rang, he was determined to open his door and give Wantonly Inconsiderate some blunt home truths on good manners.

He had just finished blowing out the nose drops he had put into his nose when, sure enough, the buzzer went off. He drew his bathrobe around him, pressed the catch, and opened his door.

Footsteps pounded up the four flights. The prepared lecture left Robert's head. It was not Wantonly Inconsiderate; it was a young, heavy-set man.

"Well?" Robert said, as this gross ringer of doorbells strode toward him. "What do you want?"

The heavy face thrust forward aggressively. "What the hell business is it of yours?" it demanded in a thick, revolting voice (Belligerent).

"What the hell business is it of mine?" Robert cried. "All the business in the world, that's all!"

"Is that so?" Belligerent said. "Listen, funny-looking—you going to get out of my way or do I have to push you out?"

"Is that so?" Robert said, and hated himself for the feeble idiocy of his speech; but no other words would come, no ringing challenge and defiance. He could only feebly parrot the other's hateful words. "Is that so?"

"Certainly is!" Belligerent shouted, and shoved him. Robert shoved back, lost his grip on his bathrobe, and then was not sure what happened.

He was lying on the floor, and his jaw felt as though something had kicked it. He was vaguely wondering about this when he became aware that, behind him in his apartment, the hot-air grate was speaking.

"But I was here last night!" the hot-air grate said. "I was waiting for you!"

"I know you were here," the hot-air grate said angrily. "I saw your light, but don't tell me you were waiting for me, oh no!"

"How can you say that?" the hot-air grate cried. "It isn't true!"

"No?" the hot-air grate sneered. "I only rang about fifty times! And then tonight this funny-looking duck asking me what the hell I—"

That was Belligerent and that was Wantonly Inconsiderate.

"Anyway," the hot-air grate said grimly, "I got one satisfaction, anyway. He won't forget that in a hurry, not if I broke his jaw the way I figure I—"

"What do you mean?" Wantonly Inconsiderate cried. "What did you do?"

But maybe not Wantonly Inconsiderate. Good Lord, Robert thought with horror, what if his buzzer's buzzing last night was not Wantonly Inconsiderate but—

He got to his feet and ran downstairs. Holding the front door open, he pressed the button opposite his name. And the latch clicked.

But he was not in his apartment.

He ran upstairs and knocked on her door. She opened it. "Wantonly Inconsiderate," he said earnestly, "I've discovered I've been making a horri—"

She stared at him.

"What am I saying!" he cried, and blushed, thinking how it must have sounded to her. "Of course I don't mean Wantonly Inconsiderate. I mean Quiet, Praise the Lord. Quiet, Praise the Lord, I've been falsely—"

Red and furious, Belligerent towered up behind her. "I guess some people don't know when they got enough," he said ominously.

"But there's been a—" Robert began; but then Belligerent's fist bounced off his jaw and he heard Quiet, Praise the Lord screaming; but he did not care, for he had become, suddenly, a different person—Savage.

LATER, he was sitting in her apartment, with his right hand in a basin of ice water, to reduce the swelling. Belligerent had left, under his own power—which was remarkable, considering the flight of stairs he had fallen down.

"You see," Robert said, still fearing he had not adequately explained it, "when they put in the buzzers, they mixed up my wiring and yours, so when you buzzed my buzzer all those times I thought you were doing it on purpose but of course you weren't, except the very first time, when you'd buzzed yours and remembered Languidly Haughty wasn't home and then buzzed mine, and then you thought I'd answered because you'd buzzed mine when really I answered because you'd buzzed yours, except that of course you hadn't. So, when he thought he was buzzing yours last night, he was really buzzing mine. That's why I wanted to apolo—"

"You don't have to," she said. "I'm glad it happened, except for your hand and your face. I haven't known him very long, and I didn't realize what sort of person he really was. But why did you call me Quiet, Praise the Lord?"

He told her about the hot-air grate and the names he had given its various voices. When he had finished, she went into another room for a moment and came back with a small box in her hand. "Elizabeth," she said, "—I mean, Languidly Haughty—talks in her sleep sometimes, and I use these. Now let's try something."

When she had explained it, he returned to his room and put the wax earplugs in his ears.

After a while he took them out and spoke into the hot-air grate. "Did you really shout?" he said into it.

"I am hoarse," her voice assured him.

"I—I don't know what to say," Robert stammered brokenly into the hot-air grate. "It's all come so suddenly—meeting you, and now these wonderful things—"

"You come up and I'll fix you some hot lemonade. Good for that cold," said Quiet, Praise the Lord, quietly.

THE END

He was in her apartment, with his right hand in a basin of ice water, to reduce the swelling



GILBERT DARLING

Collier's SHORT SHORT



The Rev. Dr. Daniel A. Poling is the G.O.P.'s candidate for mayor. Democrat Joseph S. Clark, Jr., is making race on reform platform.

Preacher v. Reformer

By JOHN DENSON

With machine candidates eliminated from the mayoralty picture, long-suffering Philadelphians can't lose—no matter who wins the November 6th city election

TWELVE fresh pages on your calendar will curl and be torn away before the 1952 national election. Another winter of Presidential speculation, a spring full of wildly prancing dark horses and shy candidates, a summer with blaring political conventions, all will come and pass into the misty place of scarcely remembered things by the time the country makes up its mind on the next chief executive. Nevertheless, a year ahead of the big decision, Republican leaders in old but booming Philadelphia contend—openly and privately—that their fight for City Hall is really a preview of the fight for the White House.

"We'll throw a long shadow," these leaders say. "If we win, the Republican party can be dead sure that we'll carry Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and the nation in '52. If we lose, then it's anybody's guess so far as we're concerned. There are a lot of Democrats who secretly agree with us that the city election is the first skirmish."

This is strong emphasis, perhaps too strong. What the Republicans mean to say is that they believe they have detected wide dissatisfaction among the electorate with the Democratic administration at Washington and that they are hoping hard that this will be reflected in the Philadelphia vote a week or so away.

Actually, the election probably will be tipped one

way or the other by the personal effort and appeal of two vastly energetic men who are not professional politicians—Dr. Daniel Alfred Poling, a preacher, the Republican candidate for mayor, and Joseph Sill Clark, Jr., an unabashed reformer, the Democratic candidate. Aside from any possible 1952 implications, the character and caliber of these nominees make the Philadelphia election of considerable significance. Up, down and across the nation, those who struggle for better municipal government will count a victory won because the "old pros"—the political connivers in the smoky rooms—are afraid to face the voters themselves.

Driving east on Market Street on a chill, dripping morning, the gray-haired cabby made the rather obvious observation that there was a terrific battle for votes going on. He was in a mood somewhat like the weather. He wagged a finger toward Philadelphia's pigeon-infested City Hall, a stone mass that blocks the city's busiest streets and provides a sharp example of municipal extravagance and political architecture. The City Hall cost \$24,000,000 and took a third of a century to build.

"You see that," the cabby said. "If the candidates are going to clean up the town, I think they ought to start by tearing it down. I say tear it down."

Neither candidate was likely to make such a

drastic proposal, not right now, anyway, but the cabby's outburst showed that a great deal of heat was being generated by this election in the stanch and proud birthplace of American independence.

All through the bloody-nose campaign, Republican candidates for municipal offices have kept ear and eye on Washington and those sweat-inducing investigations. They have taken sharp jabs and sideswipes at the more vulnerable members of President Truman's official family and, during pauses in the strictly local scuffling, have reminded voters of issues that are likely to be important nationally a year from now. They've also sent out a call to the two Republican U.S. senators from Pennsylvania, James H. Duff and Edward Martin, and to Governor John S. Fine to speak for the city ticket and thus give the election big-time party billing.

At the same time, the Democratic candidates have done their mightiest to keep these larger issues out of the campaign. A Democratic nominee for a top city office told me: "I want no part of the national issues and I don't think they have anything to do with a local election. We're not going to let any outside Democrats come in to speak and I'm not going to let the Republicans heckle me into discussing what's going on in Washington. This is Philadelphia's scrap." (Continued on page 38)

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