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THE PHOENIX NEST

Edited by Martin Levin

On Borrowed Time

liked to get his John Henry on paper, just in case.

Uncle John would lean back in his swivel chair, which had a noisy creak, and hook his thumbs in his vest while he looked the customer over to see if his character was up to the mark. Uncle John had a white, Victorian-style mustache, and he would tug at it now and then while he studied the man for any sign of loose living or any tendency to exaggerate the extent of his collateral.

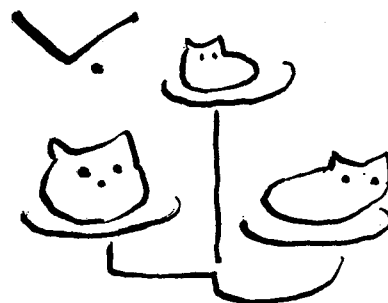
After preliminary negotiations, Uncle John would snap open the cover on his gold watch and, after checking the time, he would get into his Buick and drive out to the customer's place. There he would look over the fence a long while, studying the hogs or the cows for signs of incipient weakness that might carry them off before the note was paid.

A customer was expected to make his loan good on time, and any request for extension of credit for reasons other than fire, flood, drought, tornado, hog cholera, hoof-and-mouth disease, or disastrously falling corn prices was at least a possible mark against a man's character.

Calvin Coolidge—or maybe by then Herbert Hoover—was in the White House. Both of them were against debt in all its character-destroying forms.

One hundred billion! Whoo-ey!

—ROBERT S. ALDRICH.



Let's All Be Cute

NOT LONG AGO I had occasion to call up the County Drain Commissioner. He seemed like a pretty nice fellow and the conversation was cordial at both ends; not effusive, perhaps, and certainly not brilliant, but sensible and adult. I found out what I wanted to know and I thought I was terminating my share of the dialogue in these commonplace words:

"Well, thank you very much, Commissioner. Good-bye."

"Bye-bye," said the County Drain Commissioner.

I said to myself, "Look, Scotch-boy. You ought to be as good at that kind of

The Solitary Huntsman

The solitary huntsman
No coat of pink doth wear,
But midnight black from cap to spur
Upon his midnight mare.
He drones a tuneless jingle
In lieu of tally-ho,
"I'll catch a fox
And put him in a box
And never let him go."

The solitary huntsman,
He follows silent hounds,
No horn proclaims his joyless sport,
And never a hoofbeat sounds.
His hundred hounds, his thousands,
Their master's will they know;
To catch a fox
And put him in a box
And never let him go.

For all the fox's doubling
They track him to his den.
The chase may fill a morning,
Or three score years and ten.
The huntsman never sated
Screaks to his saddlebow,
"I'll catch another fox
And put him in a box
And never let him go."

—OGDEN NASH.

The \$100-Billion Character Gap

IT SAYS in the financial pages that consumer credit in this country will reach \$100 billion this year. That means people have bought that much stuff and haven't paid for it yet.

When I was a boy it was considered very bad to be in debt for more than a nickel or two. "He owes money," people whispered of some reckless fellow. They didn't have to add that he was probably a rascal who would steal your lawn mower.

Of course, not everybody was in bad cess just because he was down on the books for a 6 per cent note. It depended. My people were in a country bank in the Midwest. If the debtor was a respectable citizen and a man of good character who kept his family and his hogs (or "collateral," as they called them around the bank) well fed, and didn't drink and gamble or talk crackpot socialist ideas, my people considered him just as good as anybody else, even if he was a Democrat.

In those days everybody knew what was meant by "good character." If a man said he was going to pay up on such-and-such a date, he would. You could count on him. Though at the bank they



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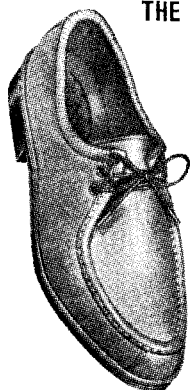
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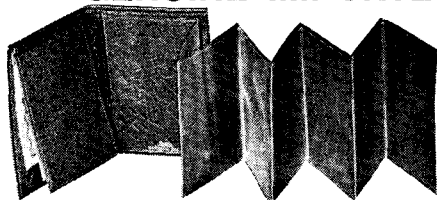
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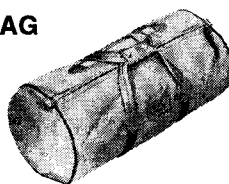


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cuteness as any politician in the trade." So I said:

"Drey bid mans say bye-bye. Me say bye-bye, too."

"What's that? What did you say?"

"Said bye-bye."

"Yeah. Sure. But what was that other stuff?"

"Me coot. Tommissioner awsul coot."

"Now just a minute. Are you some sort of a nut?"

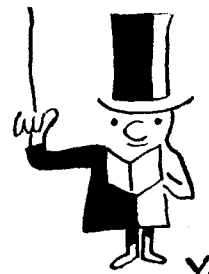
"Torse I is. We bofe nuts. Oo dray bid nut."

"I'm a what?"

"Dray bid coot nut."

I heard some strangling noises coming over the wire and then the Commissioner seems to have hung up.

You see, when I was a boy, the only times I ever heard the expression "bye-bye" was when a mother said to her offspring, "Now, darling, say bye-bye to the nice gentleman," and in the title and refrain of a song which achieved what I must call unmerited popularity. "Bye-Bye, Blackbird" is the way it went. But nowadays it is spreading like—how many



plagues was it the ancient Egyptians had to put up with? This "bye-bye" business is spreading like every one of them. It is not too much to call it a Developing Social Phenomenon. If you think not, try calling up the County Drain Commissioner.

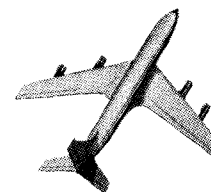
So I decided to make a little investigation. I made notes of all my dealings with everybody for a month or so and I ascertained that "bye-bye" is the usual way of ending a telephone conversation among these individuals and groups:

My broker, my wife's female relatives without exception, a retired major-league shortstop, 90 per cent of the people who have anything to do with the theater, amateur and professional, the great majority of parking-lot attendants, and the man who comes twice a month to cut the grass.

I am not on what you'd call telephone terms with the White House or members of the Cabinet. But I'll bet a dollar that it's spreading up there, too.

It might be argued that all this is making a mountain out of a molehill—that the "bye-bye" situation is a pretty small affair compared with, say, the incidence of unmarried motherhood in our secondary schools. I suppose I agree.

—RUSSELL MCLAUCHLIN.



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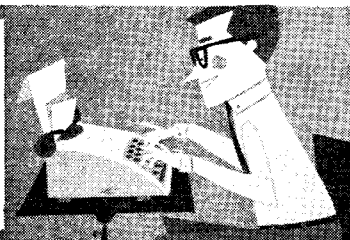
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Top of My Head



SVETLANA ALLILUYEVA
NEW YORK,
U.S.A.

DEAR SVETLANA:

I SEE by the papers that you have been looking for a secluded place where newspapermen can't find you and where you can write a book of memoirs of your life with father, Mr. Stalin. From your photos you seem to be a fine figure of a woman, and I would be honored if you'd consider a free offer to share my office with me.

The office, located in mid-Manhattan, is small, but most uncomfortable. Which for a good writer is as it should be, because if you're too comfortable you may fall asleep. And that, Svetlana, shows up in one's writing.

The office is divided into two parts. There's a small office in front of a partition, and one in back. I sit in back. There

A Peaceful Negotiation

are two desks. Well, not quite. The desk in front is a bridge table with a cute little portable typewriter on it. That'll be yours. One thing though—every time you swing the carriage back to start another line, the cute little portable kind of flies off the table, so you have to be alert to catch it in flight. It makes writing a challenge. Which, you will agree, good writing should be.

As small as the portable is, it eats up ribbons like mad. But I'll change the ribbons for you if you don't want to get smeared, Svetlana. I like changing ribbons. It keeps me from typing. Anything that delays writing—changing the ceiling light, resetting the air conditioner, giving myself a manicure, sharpening pencils, applying iodine to my manicure—I have all the distraction paraphernalia a writer could hope for.

And talk about seclusion! There hasn't been a newspaperman here in ages. It's

not that I'm hard to get. I suspect it's that I'm hard to take. They always interview me on the arts. I'm more interested in global affairs.

I have at hand some information from highly peachable sources who have some highly misinformed facts. For instance, when our flag was set afire in France (Are you friendly with them now? I forget), I said to one newsman that I thought it was a despicable act to burn a country's flag. If they had burned only a star or two—Mississippi or Alabama—but not a whole flag. . .

Well, anyway, Svetlana, you'll enjoy all the seclusion in this office that you could want. Oh, yes, the boy from the drugstore across the street does come up with sandwiches. They have quite a selection. There are tuna, meat loaf, pot roast, and on Wednesdays they have delicious meatball sandwiches.

I could have the boy drop off the sandwiches in front of our closed door. (Are you in favor of closed doors? I forget.) This will save us the tip I usually give the boy. I say "us" because I've always had the rule here with collaborating writers that each pays the cost of what he orders. It was getting out of hand. Some of the boys, along with the sandwiches, were ordering aspirin, pep pills, tranquilizers, electric pads, Pepto Bismol, and other writers' accessories.

So the rule is, Svetlana, that we each pay for our own. Oh, by the way, I hope you're using American money. The drugstore man is a little peculiar about rubles. Nothing personal, you understand. What can you expect from peasants? (Are you friendly with them now? I forget.)

There's one thing, though: Your publisher is Harper & Row. Aren't these the people who had all that unpleasantness about some book or other with figures like \$500,000 and serial rights? Well, the incongruity of this small office with that kind of big talk is too overwhelming even to contemplate. If you have business lunches with Harper and/or Row please have them at the drugstore. There are inconspicuous counters in back, near the phone booths.

I hope you will favor my offer, Svetlana. In a world where Peace is suspect, and Collaboration treasonable, we could well become that tiny spark that sets the flame of Brotherhood.

You with your book, and me with my musical. Oh, I didn't tell you, I'm writing a musical based on Elia Kazan's book, *The Arrangement*. It's called *Elia, Darling*. Now do you see why you'll have the seclusion you want?

I do hope your answer will be *da*. Notice? I know a little Russian myself. So how about it—uh—Lana? (Do you mind?)

Ya tebia lyublyu. (Is that in or out? I forget.)

—GOODMAN ACE.

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