

# Top of My Head

Goodman Ace

## A Letter to His Readers From a Constant Writer

THIS IS MY first fan letter to what I've always considered the most literate and perceptive group of mail-senders who ever put poisoned pen to paper.

But, boy, did you readers ever flunk out in your latest batch of bombardments. In the column of June 7 there were listed the names of some of the hundreds of renowned artists who appeared at Carnegie Hall since it opened in 1891. In this there was incorrectly, and purposely, inserted the name of the Italian violinist and composer, Signor Niccolò Paganini. He died in 1840.

It seems to this constant writer that the readers are not doing their required research, if indeed it took any research at all. Any kindergarten child who knows the lyrics to "Happy Birthday" would have known that the Signor was in no condition to have appeared at Carnegie Hall in 1891.

But only one complaining letter came, and she complained about the wrong thing. Mrs. M. Londeberg Smith of Edina, Minnesota, wrote: "A list of names is a bore. As a writer, I understand why you did it. An easy deadline," she accuses. My answer to that is: "Oh yeah, Mrs. Smith?" And that's only for openers. "Which do you think is easier to spell, Serge Koussevitzky or Tom Smothers, Giulio Gatti-Casazza or Samuel Finley Breese Morse? To say nothing of doing research in a book called *Portrait of Carnegie Hall*.

"That easy deadline took twice the usual time anything else would have taken, Mrs. Smith, as it would have you, too, and I'm willing to bet you the ten irretrievable bucks it cost me to buy that book."

I write this fan letter not in anger, readers, because your envelopes, if I may paraphrase your letters, are "the first I turn to," when our mailman remembers to saunter by and drop them off here. I open each in gleeful anticipation, with just a soupçon of "What did I do wrong now?"

And when your letters tell me in no uncertain terms where I went astray I say, "How true!" and "How lucky I am to have such bright and helpful readers who take time out of a busy life to tell me off." And then I murmur, "Que sera, sera. Why me, why me?"

Some of the letters get here before the print on the magazine and your

blood pressures have had time to gel, if that's the word I want. (Hold it! I'm not asking, you understand.)

The column offering to send you the "word" the Smothers Brothers used on their TV show is a point in case. Would you believe the requests for the word came three-to-one from women? They did. Including one from a fair lady in Elmira, New York, with an italic typewriter, who insisted I send the naughty word in a love letter.

A pleasant and fringe benefit of this job is that I learn a lot from the readers. However, your letters on the unfortunate S. F. B. Morse caper of last April, which you all remember with great glee as the high point of my stupidity, when I referred to Samuel Finley Breese Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, as Robert Morse—even proofreaders don't read me—did much to confuse me even more.

Especially these two letters, one from Howard Whetsel of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the other from Alan M. Dorhoffer of Post Washington, New York.

Mr. Whetsel writes that the telegraph was invented by a Teuton named Friedrich Gauss, who probably didn't tap out "What hath God wrought!" but "*Gott im Himmel!*" He also says that Mr. Gauss had a brother who was the really brilliant one: "He was the kind of a fellow who could give you the square root of boxcars as they passed the station," writes Mr. W.

Now Mr. Dorhoffer writes: "The apparatus used by Morse was developed not by Morse, but by Alfred Vail of Speedwell, New Jersey, and by Ezra Cornell, who later founded Cornell University. They developed the pipe-laying device that would carry the telegraph wires. Although Vail and Cornell devised the system and made it work, their chief verbal partner and associate, S. F. B. Morse, is credited with the entire system."

Well, before I tap myself for another ten bucks for another book to research all that, I'm going to tap myself out an SOS. Whetsel meet Dorhoffer, and may the best man win.

For now—(Hold it again! I just saw that. "May the better man win.") For now, thanks for your patience with my informational gaps. After all, you've been reading much longer than I've been writing. To err is human, to forgive is divine mail.

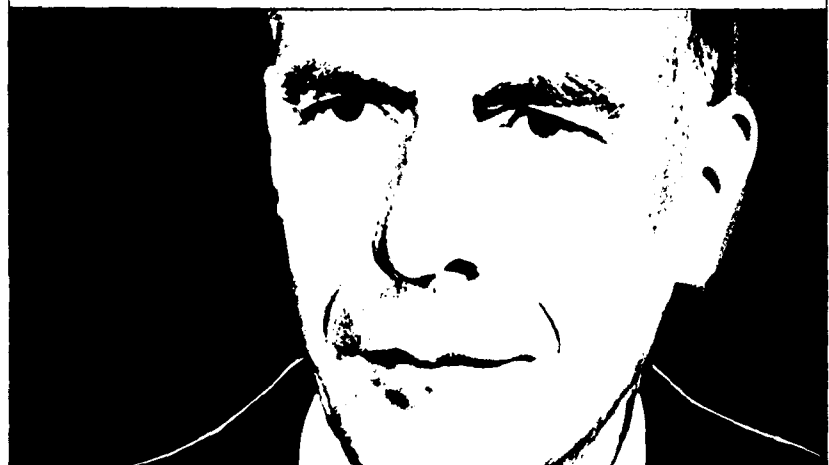
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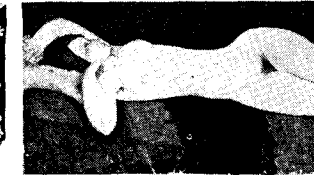
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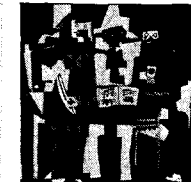
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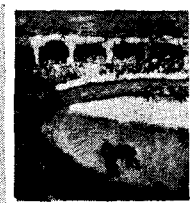
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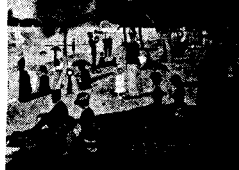
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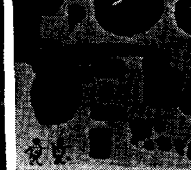
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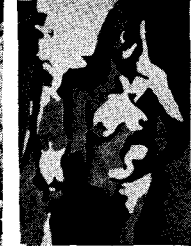
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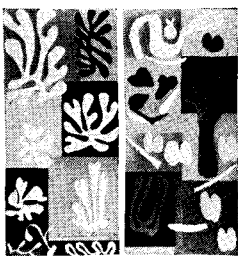
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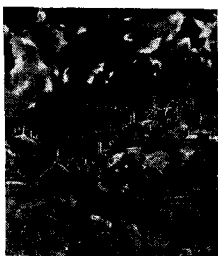
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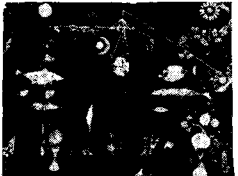
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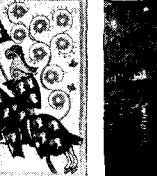
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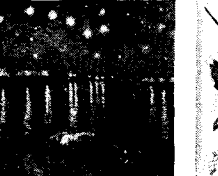
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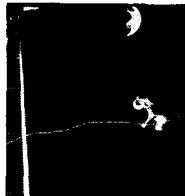
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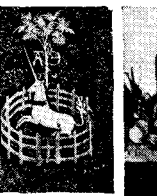
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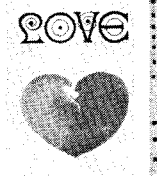
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# Trade Winds

Cleveland Amory

**Is history obsolete?** That little question, one which may well be, shall we say, of more than passing interest, was asked in a series of articles by Dr. Jack Bloomfield in the *New York Column*.

"The teaching of history," Dr. Bloomfield wrote, "could well be following in the disappearing footsteps of the classics." And he quoted Professor Charles Sellers of Berkeley, a member of the California Statewide Social Sciences Study Committee, as saying, "Virtually no one except the history professors on this large and representative committee saw much value in retaining history in the curriculum at all."

No history in the curriculum at all! Out the window. Well, it figures—as the saying goes, unless mathematics has gone too. And we can even figure why the California Statewide Social Sciences Study Committee figures that history doesn't relate to, as another phrase goes, where it's at. Of course, history does relate to where it was at, but where it was at, nowadays, is apparently nowhere. Or perhaps we should say *nowhere*. Because, after all, you can hardly expect the "Now" generation to be interested in just plain old then.

All right, suppose Santayana did say

that those who are ignorant of the past are condemned to repeat it. Look at it this way. These kids won't *know* they're repeating it.

And another thing you will have to admit is that they'll be happy. Remember "Happy is the nation that has no history." Well, with *really* no history, these kids ought to be Adam and Eve. Never mind Fun City—we'll have a whole Fun Country.

We won't be completely without history anyway. Because up at Harvard, during the late unpleasantness, there were leaflets which not only announced "Harvard New College" but also announced brand new courses. One of these was called "Motorcycles and Sex." Another, however, was a history course. It was called "History of Self."

We can see this course now—taught in six parts. First, "My Environment: How I Was Egypt Out of My Birth-right." Second, "My Parents: They Were Both Greek to Me." Third, "My Adolescence: I Run Away from Rome." Fourth, "My Middle-Age Problem." Fifth, "My Comeback: How I Learned to Relate to My Renaissance." And sixth, last but not least, "Modern Me."

It sounds terrific, doesn't it? We only

hope we don't get so interested in it we won't have any time for "Motorcycles and Sex."

**Quiz question:** If you went to an annual meeting and the first thing everybody did was to drink three toasts—one to "Stan," one to "Babe," and one to "Fin"—what would you be at an annual meeting of?

If you guessed Old Timers' Day at Yankee Stadium, you guessed wrong. The answer is a meeting of The Sons of the Desert. And, if you don't know what *that* is, that was a movie, son, in the days when they really made 'em. And the stars were none other than the late but immortal Stan Laurel and Babe, publicly known as Oliver Hardy. Fin, incidentally, was James Finlayson, Laurel and Hardy's nemesis.

The Sons of the Desert include more than a thousand members who meet every six weeks in individual "tents" all over the country to do honor to what they regard as the greatest comedy team, bar none, in entertainment history. They are also, bar none, the most faithful of all fan clubs.

But, as we learned attending their annual meeting at the Lambs' Club, don't say "fan" to any one of them. In fact, John McCabe, Grand Sheik of The Sons of the Desert, author of *Mr. Laurel & Mr. Hardy*, and head of Communication Arts at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan, informed us they were not a fan club but a buff club. "A fan," he told us sternly, "is wildly idolatrous. A buff is a discerning critic." Then, looking around the room at the faithful, which included Lucille Hardy Price, wife of Oliver, and Mary Cohan, daughter of George M., he added: "If there are any people here who aren't buffs, they should get the hell out."

Nervously we assured him we were definitely a buff, and took a large drink of beer. He took a sip of his drink. "A buff," he continued firmly, "knows how to hold his liquor, too."

We guessed, looking at the constitution of The Sons of the Desert, he would have to. Article VIII of this declares, "The Annual Meeting shall be conducted in the following sequence: a) Cocktails, b) Business meeting and cocktails, c) Dinner with cocktails, d) After-dinner speeches and cocktails, e) Cocktails, f) Coffee and cocktails, g) Showing of Laurel and Hardy film, h) After-film critique and cocktails, i) After after-film critique and cocktails."

Make no mistake, though, The Sons of the Desert are serious. Most of them have seen every one of Laurel and Hardy's ninety-nine films. Furthermore, although they consider *The Music Box* the best and *Atoll K* the worst, they



"As part of the new de-emphasis on violence, play up the line that he's fighting evil because he hates evil, instead of fighting evil because he loves to fight."