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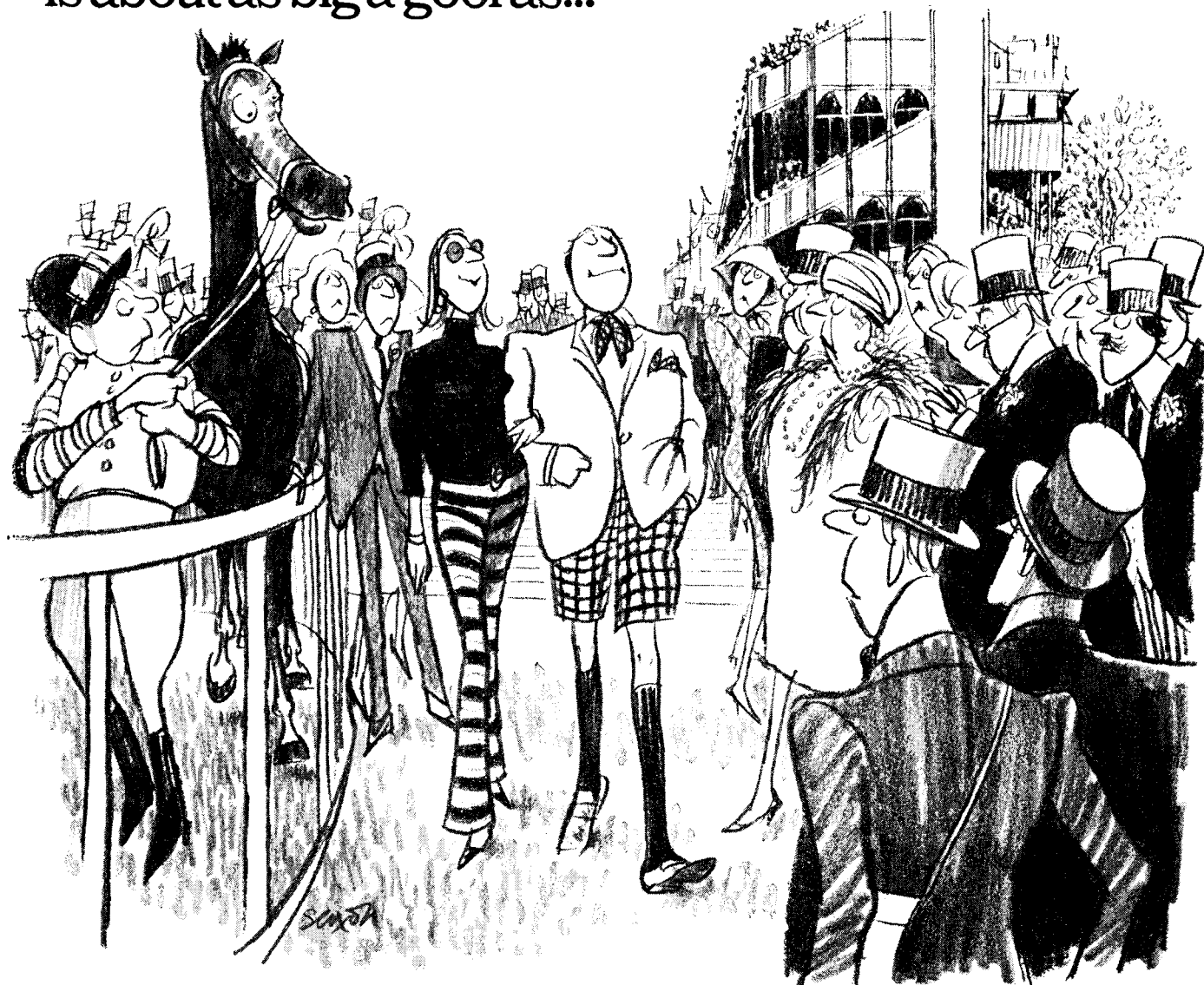
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Top of My Head

Goodman Ace

The Earnest Business of Being Unimportant

FOR SOME YEARS NOW there has been a framed, neatly lettered little sign on my desk which reads: IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO OVERESTIMATE THE UNIMPORTANCE OF PRACTICALLY EVERYTHING.

And every morning I earnestly resolve to aspire to that benign euphoric state. But the gods specifically in charge of fouling up my days intervene.

This morning, for instance, the coffee from the drugstore, which has always come with cream, came black.

I had the ominous feeling that the gods bode me no good this day when on the half-block walk to my office a cab driver stuck his head out the window and asked after my health: "What's with you—you blind or something?"

This half-block walk from the apartment to work is the doing of my doctor, who some months ago earnestly told me it was important I exercise. "Walk to your office," he suggested. And it wasn't easy finding an office that close.

On my last visit he asked me if I was still walking to the office. "Every morning," I told him. "Good," he replied, "and you show it." He never asked; I never told him.

After passing the time of day with the cabby, I continued walking, trying earnestly to shake off this unimportant sense of being trapped on the bridge of San Luis Rey on my way to an appointment in Samarra.

It didn't help to see a sign in the window of a new restaurant about to open: COME OPENING DAY AND GET A FREE GIFT. As opposed to gifts given to you that you pay for.

Then at the office, the elevator which is usually nonstop, stopped eight times before the tenth floor. And following that came the black coffee.

To the guy who wrote that it is impossible to overestimate the unimportance of practically everything, these annoyances would seem petty and due to the overreactions of an overwrought mind. OK, I'll buy that for me, but it is a blatant oversimplifi-

cation, and it dismisses entirely the cause of these overreactions which have spread over the earth.

To this harried mind, the cause is simply that the world is over-warred. So earnestly important has destruction become, that our everyday, matter-of-fact conversation bristles with talk of missile sites, search out and destroy, Hamburger Hill, and body counts. It's as if the whole world is on a suicide kick.

But each day I try to remember it is impossible to overestimate the unimportance of practically everything. When I run across a newspaper story in which the Defense Secretary proclaims, in spite of the fact that three sons of one family went down with a U.S. ship, it would be "less compassionate to say that members of the same family may never voluntarily serve together," I know he means in a kindly way that the family that goes to war together gets killed together.

When I hear a former Defense Secretary say we can get most of our ground combat forces out of Vietnam by the end of 1970, and then our President smilingly replies he would hope to beat that timetable, my overwrought mind applauds. Because I know he means maybe mid-1970. Maybe June or July. It's only 1,000 to 1,500 bodies sooner or later.

When I hear the President at a news conference say that as far as violence and lawlessness go he is "fed up to here," I feel his choice of that phrase comes from a naggingly bothering conscience that reminds him there are millions of citizens in this land of plenty who are not fed up to anywhere.

So you see, despite that detail of fuzz up there in the sky ready to knock me over the head, I'm earnestly trying to live up to the little sign on my desk. All it takes to perform the magic is a little sleight of mind.

The only time I fail is when I read the plans for the triple warhead known as MIRV. I don't know exactly what those letters stand for, but to my mind they spell out Murder Incorporated Retaliatory Vehicle.

And when the President changed the name of the Anti-Ballistic Missile to Safeguard, instead of my being more secure, I began to think he was begging the question, like changing the packaging of a discredited detergent. It's the thing in Washington these days. Don't be surprised if one day the Bureau of Internal Revenue will be known as the Audience Participation Program.

But always remember: "It is impossible to overestimate the..."

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