

The Importance of People

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Illustrations by Alvin E. Sugarman

WE'RE BEING INVESTIGATED

THE GRAPEVINE throbbed with news. "We're being investigated! There's a committee from the Patriots' Party coming to faculty meeting."

Reactions were mixed. Mr. Bates, the principal, harbored many bitter thoughts concealed by his customary bland expression. Another of these witch hunts. Another miracle of tact and diplomacy to be accomplished. Maybe a few books would be withdrawn temporarily and put back on the shelves when the shouting had died. He wished there had been time to give the new teachers a pep talk on how to practice passive resistance when these irate citizens descended on the school.

Timid little Miss Pitt felt pangs of acute indigestion when she heard the news. She did hope that her father hadn't come with the committee. He was so angry at the Communists since all those foreigners had moved into their neighborhood. It would be very awkward to explain Father's presence to Mr. Bates, who was impatient with family ties.

Betty Morris, the dean of girls, felt outrage and then a sudden, startling compassion for these frightened people who so feared the future that they must fight with wooden swords against painted bogey men. Maybe they remembered newsreels showing roads packed with refugees carrying pitiful bundles of their salvaged pasts. These "investigations" were only symptoms of a fear and unrest much larger than anything the Patriots' Party had been able to define.

George Roberts, whom everyone depended on in time of crisis, looked the committee over and felt none of the solicitude for diplomacy of Mr. Bates, the nervousness of Miss Pitt, or the compas-

sion of Betty Morris. He was just plain mad. His hands were cold. His ears buzzed. His bad eye, a reminder of "tough luck" shortly before V-E Day, hurt the way it did when he was upset. Not that he was frequently upset. He was known as an easy-going guy. In his own neighborhood he cheerfully played second fiddle to his perky, red-haired wife. He was held unresistingly beneath the chubby thumb of his year-old son. He was treasurer of the veterans' organization, and he sang a dependable baritone in the church choir. His students regarded him as an authority in all fields of knowledge—including how a guy could buy his girl a corsage for \$1.43. In short, he was a steady man until he encountered scapegoating.



He glared at the investigating committee as they made their speeches and hurled their accusations. Phony patriotic clichés. Dreary exhumations of

the great who had been, in their day, attacked in the same way.

The spokesman concluded, "We must protect our young people. We want to visit classes and see just what's going on. We want our questions answered."

The principal cleared his throat to launch his prepared statement. It was too late.

"I'll answer your questions. My name's George Roberts. American History, social science, and assistant dean of boys. When you accuse this school of radicalism and subversive activities, you're flying blind."

"Are you a real American?"

"My great-grandparents on both sides broke ground in this state for houses, schools, churches, little independent businesses. They were always around to do things that needed doing. We Robertses are as American as linsey-woolsey."

Someone asked, "Are you a Communist?"

"No, I'm not. My affiliations are an open book. I'll be investigated any time it's necessary for national security. Me, a Communist? I wouldn't be caught dead in any organization that stands for one answer to all questions. I'd like to see the party that could tell me what newspaper I can read, what radio program I can listen to, what I can think and say—and what I can't."

"Then if you're not a Communist, why aren't you one of us?"

"Doesn't it ever occur to you that you may stand for the same kind of one-track thinking as the Communists? Don't you see the millions of good, substantial Americans who get along very well without support from professional agitators or professional patriots?"

"Now see here, Mr. Roberts," said one of the committee, "you're offending taxpayers who support your job."

"Any time my job depends on hiding my convictions, I'll buy an interest in my brother's hardware store and stop calling myself a teacher."

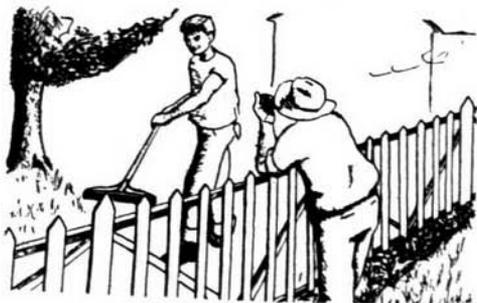
"Do you deny you've been teaching about Russia?"

"Of course I've taught about Russia. What kind of nonsense would keep youngsters from knowing that millions of people, living in a huge country sprawling over about a sixth of the globe, recognize a different economic system from ours. We've studied all kinds of materials trying to find out something of what those millions of people are like. We've analyzed the Party Line, and none of the kids has rushed out to start a revolution or parade the streets singing the Internationale. They're too much sold on the American privilege of

looking at all the evidence on any question.

"If you aren't satisfied, come on over to the school. I'll take you through the library to find all the subversive literature. We'll black Russia off the maps and globes. We'll cut out the life of Lenin from the encyclopedia. We'll censor the newspapers and clip all the dangerous materials. We'll take the radios out of the classrooms for fear someone will listen to a newscast mentioning Russia. That kind of stuff is familiar. I know just how it's done because I spent four years and most of a good eye fighting a country that did those things to people. Now I'm getting out. This room isn't big enough for all of us."

And he went home, leaving Mr. Bates to juggle the blazing chestnuts.



Later that afternoon as George raked the lawn furiously, hating himself for creating a public to-do, Dr. Williams, his neighbor, leaned on the fence.

"I heard about you, young fellow. News travels fast. Boy, you were undignified. Your speech was badly prepared and not too logical. I'm ashamed of you, losing your temper like that."

"I know. Now it's over, I feel lousy."

"As I said, you were very unwise. Most of the people I've talked to say if there's any trouble, they're on your side. One sentimentalist even called you the Fighting Schoolmaster. Now pass me over some pipe tobacco. I'm too lazy to go into the house for some."



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