

TO
Sam Zimbalist
a nice man who
died to early 1948

February 5
1948

Dear Sam:

It is four a.m. I have been working since 10 last night---back at last to the hours I love---and all night it has been snowing. I just flashed the spots on, and the sight is wonderfully soothing and beautiful, no corners anywhere in the world, everything rounded and smooth and immaculate. The kids and Cleo are asleep, the house is in order, the machines all function smoothly, the larder is full (we could be incommunicado for two months and eat handsomely)---and I feel, for the moment at least, that I am the luckiest and most contented man in the world. If you were here we would break a bottle and light the fire and watch the falling show---through glass, of course! ---and I would tell you all about it. That being impossible, I shall write.

First I shall tell you something which would embarrass us both greatly if I were to speak it. Separated from people as I have been for the past three months, I have had a great deal of time to think about them. I have observed their reactions to the present troubled times; I have had a chance to see how their actions square with their principles. I do not refer to what their principles are---but to whether or not they are lived by, whether or not they are proved in action. I have seen many betray themselves, I have seen many fail in any decent test of conduct, some of them my friends---and I have ~~shook~~ shaken them off with as little feeling as I would toss away a nail paring, and have experienced no sense of loss in the process. Only loathing and contempt and, I must confess---being human and as vindictive as the next---a resolution not to forget and never to forgive.

But through this whole interesting experience, my respect for you has deepened and my affection has grown more profound. Not only for the money you lent me---although that was a life-saver and a great demonstration of faith---but for your attitude toward me and other persons and toward life itself; for your willingness to grant me any belief I cherish so long as it is not harmful to others, even when you disagree with it---and for your personal sense of outrage when that right is denied. This and this alone makes decent men and decent societies, and it is rare, and it is why I feel warm in the knowledge that we are friends.

To get to less interesting things; you are a very lucky man that I have not been working for you since Christmas. For we have been going through one of our customary cycles of minor catastrophes which delay work to the point where the man who's waiting for copy is bound to say to himself at least once or twice, 'Oh no, it can't be, the sonofabitch must be lying!' We have, if you remember, had such periods in the past while on the payroll. It may interest you to know that they also occur on my time, to wit: the trip to Washington simply to be arraigned; Christopher getting bucked off a horse and knocked colder than a mackerel; Virus X for Cleo, Chris and Nikola in rapid sequence (Melissa and I escaping); threatened t.b. on the part of my married sister, necessitating her coming to live with us for a period both for the dry climate and relief from her children; and minor affairs such as a flareup from my idiot mother-in-law and the trial coming up in March. Altogether a busy time, and one during which you would have received a lousy script ---if at all.

To a degree this accounts for my rude failure to thank you for the Christmas things. The package from Blum's arrived and was admired and eaten. However the coffee maker went to Bakersfield, and was not picked up until several days after Christmas. Many of the children's packages had been similarly diverted, so we had a second Christmas on New Years morning. May I tell you that if I die of coffee heart you are responsible. I read the directions carefully, and have never deviated from them, even to the fine point of pouring the water at 185 degrees rather than 212. I make ten cups at a time and---again according to the instructions---keep it hot all night by placing it in a skillet of simmering water. It makes the best coffee I have ever drunk, and is used constantly. It serves a further purpose with guests, since the elaborate ceremony involved in using it impresses them and raises me greatly in their esteem. All in all a fine gift which receives from us the highest possible tribute---constant use.

Now as to how I am existing: very well, I am surprised to say. The crisis has brought out all my craftiness and guile; I am like a shrewd old fox, keeping one eye on the pursuing hounds and the other on my vixen and her whelps---back-tracking and scampering, and snorting a little with pleasure when I squeak through a narrow one and hear the hounds in the distance, temporarily frustrated and baying mournfully.

I have developed a fine technique in dealing with the large creditors---those I told you about, which amount to several thousand dollars in each account. I concluded at the outset I had two choices; either to beg them for terms and rely on sympathy to get them, or to snap at them angrily and set the terms myself. I chose the latter course, and they follow like lambs. For example, I am dealing with the electrical contractor. I owe him eight thousand dollars. I cannot pay him. So I write him a letter in which I make certain complaints about the work. In order to do this I have gone carefully over his itemized statement and found those discrepancies which occur in any transaction. Then I ask him what we are going to do about making the job a satisfactory one. I tell him I do not intend to be unreasonable; that as a matter of fact I am concerned lest he be put to too great an expense in rectifying his mistakes, which are, after all, likely to occur among the most efficient and conscientious electrical contractors. I ask him to reply as quickly as possible. And I enclose a check for \$1,000, noting as if by afterthought that it is attached, and that I shall pay off the balance in similar installments each month. The result is interesting. Our correspondence gets so involved with the bad work I have received that the terms are never questioned; and once established, that account is taken care of much better than by notes or bank loan or any other method. And so down the line. They all feed out of my hand, and doff their hats when they speak to me, and we have so focussed their interest that their principal concern no longer is whether they shall get paid, but whether I shall in the end be pleased. I pass this information on to you in case you overextend yourself at Malibu and find yourself in the fending-off-tradesmen department.

I have taken things away from the Roberts office---no task since there was nothing for them to do---and now I hoard money in cashier's checks and currency, and deal directly out of pocket. I have got the Garfield trust deed in my possession, so the ranch is clear and in a moment of dire necessity I can hock it for an adequate sum. It shall have to be genuine necessity, however, for I am almost superstitious about the place, and shall beg and borrow and steal with great energy before I put it in soak.

Again, our expenses are down so greatly that what money I lay fist upon goes an astonishingly lone

way. And money does drift in. I have one under the counter job which I start tomorrow---only five thousand (how the mighty have fallen!)---but on the other hand only a week's work. I daresay I could come by others if I put feelers out, but I don't intend to do so. Just as I do not wish to hock the ranch, neither do I wish to fall into the trap of getting money by anonymous work in which there is no merit, no satisfaction and no real gain. I have my eye on other goals.

One of the nicest things that has happened is the discovery that I have a reputation outside Hollywood. All though I am as full of vanity and arrogance as the next one, still I had never realized it. I have been approached by three top New York producers, which astounded and delighted me. They appear to have no fear about my name driving the customers away, or how it may affect movie sales. One of them offered an advance sight unseen on anything I wished to do. I took him up. Lawyers are now framing things, and the deal is set. I have finished a first act even. The second offered an advance for me to dramatize a specific property---a very fine and famous novel---I am vague here because I just don't trust the mails---and I am in the course of taking him up too. The third I turned down, because two projects seemed enough.

You better than most---and certainly better than the gentlemen who have sought my services---know how little I understand about the theatre; you know the six plays I have seen in my life. However I set to work in the long night hours trying to learn. Instead of going to Norman Krasna, Garson Kanin and F. Hugh Herbert, I began an intensive reading of Ibsen, Shaw, Chekov and the Irish playwrights. First it was stimulating, and secondly it was instructive. Granted the ability to write dialogue and to construct plot, I believe that the most perplexing problem of the theatre---as differentiated from the screen---is that on the screen we are able to show progression of time, action occurring in relation to time, a steady advancement of the story through the use of time by reason of our flexibility and our dissolves; but in a play time moves ahead only as the clock moves through the course of any single act. Thus the progression can no longer be principally a movement through time, as on the screen, but it must be a dramatic movement ahead in terms of events, characters and ideas functioning in the same time element which governs the audience from the opening to the end of the act. This, I be-

lieve, is the principal difference and the thing I have got to learn.

I cannot tell you how much pleasure it gives me to be writing on something which is mine, something over which I possess complete control, and something which is new to me and fraught with danger and speculation. I am transported back to the time when I was trying to write novels---the same nervous interest, continuing and mounting from day to day; the same wonderment as to whether it is good or whether it stinks; the same trepidation at the thought of failure and the same dreaming of success. My mind is actually working---I am on my own---hammering at the doors of an entirely new way of writing. And I must say---whether I win, lose or draw---I have the feeling of living and of pitting myself against the best that others are able to do. I had forgotten how it felt, and it feels good.

Perhaps I should not be as angry as I am against the weaklings, cravens and liars who have succeeded in banning me from motion pictures. For I feel a sense of relief and a sense of buoyancy at no longer being an employee, at no longer being under the absolute necessity of earning, say, \$75,000 a year. I'm sure I should never have had the courage---or perhaps one should say the foolhardiness---to have left it voluntarily. My feeling now---as of today, that is, with the hope of succeeding elsewhere still strong in me---that I shall never return to films, that if Metro asked me back tomorrow with all forgiven, I should refuse. Hunger, of course, could in time alter that decision. But for the present it stands.

Well, now, enough! I hope all things go well with you. Cleo and I send you our best, and the children have just risen and started shouting through the house at the discovery of the snow. I shall have to try to keep them quiet until Cleo and Melissa get a little more sleep.

Say hello to my friends and piss on my enemies. And incidentally, no one in town, not even my friends or my agent, know of my NY deals or of my plans.

Salutations!