A famous writer reveals that he was once a Communist, and tells about his career since he “declined to testify.”

Mr. LARDNER: Because it is a question —

THE CHAIRMAN (pounding gavel!): Leave the witness chair.

Mr. LARDNER: I think I am leaving by force.

THE CHAIRMAN: Sergeant, take the witness away.

Nearly three years had elapsed between that bit of repartee before a battery of microphones and my meeting in the jailyard in the summer of 1950. Along with nine other Hollywood writers and directors, I had lost an appeal of my conviction for contempt of Congress, and the Supreme Court had denied our request for a review of the constitutional issues in the case.

During the same period Mr. Thomas had been brought to trial for putting nonworkers on the Government payroll and appropriating their salaries to himself. Offering no defense and throwing himself on the mercy of the court, he had received an eighteen-months prison sentence, later reduced by parole to an actual term of about nine months.

My own stint was one year, reduced by “statutory good-time” to ten months and by “meritorious good-time” to nine and a half. This last concession of fifteen days was a tribute to my spelling and punctuation, which, I was told by a grateful official at the Connecticut spa, were markedly superior to the institutional norm.

Though far from happy at being where I was, I was sharply aware of the difference between my situation and that of this pathetically aging man. Even if the torch of super-Americanism he had brandished so fiercely during his two years of glory had not already been picked up by Sen. Joseph McCarthy, there was no conceivable political future for Thomas. Perhaps he could return to the obscurity of the insurance business in New Jersey, but no business or social contacts would ever again be easy for a man whose downfall had been so pitilessly publicized.

My own future was at least speculative. I had taken the position that, while public servants are answerable to the people, citizens cannot be summoned, in the absence of even an allegation of an illegal act, to account to government for their beliefs and associations—matters that have traditionally been an American’s own business.

It was a position that had commanded a good deal of support, some of it quite respectable. In fact, I had based it on what seemed to me unequivocal language in a 1943 Supreme Court decision: “If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion or other matters of opinion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.”

Forced confessions, or disavowals, were what the committee was clearly demanding, and I felt it was an abuse of the legislative function that needed challenging. Unfortunately the only legal way to challenge it involved the risk of losing the argument.

The impulse to resist such assaults on freedom of thought has motivated witnesses who could have answered “no” to the Communist question as well as many, like myself, whose factual response would have been “yes.” I was at that time a member of the Communist Party, in whose ranks I had found some of the most thoughtful, witty and generally stimulating men and women of Hollywood. I also encountered a number of bores and unstable characters, which seemed to bear out Bernard Shaw’s observation that revolutionary movements tend to attract the best and worst elements in a given society.

With both these extremes the relationship had been a confidential one, and an added reason for taking the chance of a contempt citation was the fact that I had no legal defense at all if I first admitted my own membership and then declined to implicate other people.

For reasons of no particular pertinence to this story, my political activity had already begun to dwindle at the time Mr. Thomas popped the question, and his only effect on my affiliation was to prolong it until the case was finally lost. At that point I could and did terminate my membership without confusing the act, in my own or anyone else’s head, with the quite distinct struggle for the right to embrace any belief or set of beliefs to which my mind and my conscience directed me.

It was clear, in any event, that my un-co-operative attitude had not improved my status. Long before going to jail I had lost my job. A scant month after my 1947 appearance there was a top-level meeting of the industry that had previously awarded me one of its Academy Oscars—for the picture Woman of the Year with Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy—and a salary of $2000 a week at the age of thirty-one. It ended with a joint public statement declaring my colleagues and me unemployable.

This blacklisted status, expanded to cover more than 400 people from various crafts in movies, television and radio, has persisted ever since. A few of the writers among these outcasts have been able to operate under other names in the “black market.” Others have had to find new occupations entirely, among them carpentry, selling women’s clothing, bartending, driving a school bus and waiting on tables in a restaurant.

For actors, of course, pseudonyms were out of the question, and the only branch of the entertainment world remaining more or less open to them has been the ailing Broadway theater.

While I didn’t anticipate, during my Danbury sojourn, how long and how zealously my former employers would maintain their decree of exile, I could see, in the ample time for reflection provided by my Government, that the prospects were tougher than anything I had faced in a rather sheltered life. I could assume that the newspaper and publicity businesses, in which I had been briefly employed before becoming a screen writer at the age of twenty-one, were not likely to welcome me back. I had no experience whatsoever as a novelist or playwright, and even these relatively open fields were somewhat restricted by the knowledge that my work could not be sold to the movies.

Writing for any of the major magazines was a highly dubious proposition and remained so up to the time of my present assignment. The only two blacklisted writers I know of who have sold their work reliably to magazines in recent years have had to do so under assumed names, despite the fact that both had previously been in considerable demand under their real ones.

The situation clearly demanded a readjustment for which my background had done nothing to equip me. When you are descended from a Lardner who sat on the Governor’s Council in colonial Pennsylvania; and an Abbott who fought with the minutemen at Lexington and Bunker Hill; you find it hard to accept the
"un-American" designation. And the fact that I bore, through no fault or merit of my own, a well-known name in American letters simply made it the most easily remembered among the "Hollywood Ten" by people who read about the case in the newspapers.

As a complicating detail, in the summer of 1947 my wife and I had bought a large house with a tennis court in Santa Monica, on the strength of a new contract with 20th Century-Fox. We had just begun the process of moving in when my subpoena from Mr. Thomas was delivered in September by the local United States marshal.

My employer's reaction to my Washington debut the following month was provocatively erratic. A week after I returned to work, I was asked to waive a contractual provision limiting the studio's use of my services to two pictures annually and to undertake a third screenplay for the current year. Then, after the industry heads had convened at the Waldorf Astoria in New York in November, I was directed to quit the premises on approximately two hours' notice.

I held out in the new house while the case against us progressed slowly from citation by the House of Representatives to indictment, arraignment, trial, conviction and appeal. My tennis game improved; my wife conceived and bore another child, making five for whose rearing and education I was financially responsible; what insecurity I felt was tempered by the general sentiment in Hollywood that the whole thing would blow over like other periodic tempests in the movie business. Among liberals at least, including those who considered my conduct unwise or quixotic, it was widely conceded that I had a clear legal right to take the stand I had.

Reflecting this attitude, the blacklist was not as rigid during this interim as its formal announcement had seemed to indicate. True, the doors of all the major studios were closed to me. But independent and semi-independent producers and the stars and directors who were beginning the now-prevalent practice of forming their own corporations were not nearly so timid as they later became about making furtive arrangements with the proscribed ten.

On completing one piece of work for a prominent star, I met him at his bank, where he drew and paid over my compensation in cash. The amount,
while considerably more
than
I was accustomed to
carry about, was much
less formidable than it would have
been before the blacklist, since even the most
familiar of such secret employers were
motivated in part by the opportunity to
hire our services.
There was also for some of us the
chance to work abroad, where we
encountered the almost unanimous opinion
that what had happened to us was a piece of
temporary American insanity. A Eu-
ropean producer who came to Hollywood
to employ me and to borrow one of
20th Century-Fox's stars found
himself in negotiation with the same
executive who had signed my dismissal
notice. Before he was permitted to sub-
let the actor, for a fee of $200,000, he was
asked who was doing the script. Given
my name, the studio executive said,
"Good man," and O.K.'d the deal.
These and other clandestine movie jobs
enabled me to keep the food supply mov-
ing into hungry young mouths until April
10, 1950, when the Supreme Court an-
ounced its refusal to act on the cases in
the two pilot cases on which the other
eight of us had agreed to stand. This
meant the imminent end of my precarious
existence, and a distinctly reduced standard
of living for my family. The first step was
to finance their upkeep during my ab-
sence by selling the house, into which all
my savings had gone, and moving them
to rented quarters.
Quick sales of property were common
amid the sudden changes of fortune in
Hollywood, and the local trade papers
often carried advertisements with such
eye-catching captions as OWNER GOING
ABROAD or OWNER RETURNING TO
BROADWAY. I composed a notice featur-
ing the line OWNER GOING to Jail, and in-
serted it in one of these publications. A
national news magazine, whose space
rates I could scarcely have afforded,
picked it up as a news story, reprinting
the entire ad, and a Beverly Hills physi-
cian who was doing research in emotional
stress at the gaming tables of Las Vegas,
read it there, mounted his Cadillac before
dawn and concluded by midday a deal
that left me with a net loss of $9000.
The Danbury prison feature hygienic
austerity and a clientele that specialized
in nonviolent offenses such as mail theft,
traffic in narcotics, driving stolen auto-
mobiles across state lines, embezzlement,
tax evasion, and using the mails to def-
and We also had a smattering of
murderers, armed robbers and rapists,
mostly transfers from Army disciplinary
barracks who were permitted to pass their
final months before release in our less
term surroundings.
What qualms I had about being ac-
cepted by my fellow inmates turned out
to be groundless. No matter how sketch-
ily they grasped the issues involved in our
case, criminals of all kinds regarded my
colleagues and me as men who had fol-
lowed the basic underworld concept of
exchanging no unnecessary words what-
soever with the law.
An example of my successful integra-
tion was a Sunday visit from a prisoner
about to be discharged who was con-
cerned about his professional future.
Having heard that I was from Hollywood,
he wanted to know whether I was true
that "a lot of those stars out there go for
the main line."
I was sufficiently assimilated to realize
he was referring to heroin addiction,
but when I confessed my ignorance as to
its popularity among movie actors, the
conversation withered quickly. He was
too polite to say as much, but I think he
concluded I wasn't really from Holly-
wood at all—just one more big talker in
a jail.

The Affair of the Hollywood Ten

In 1947 J. Parnell Thomas (above, right), chairman of the House Committee on
Un-American Activities, charged that Communism had made "serious inroads
in the film industry. Thomas and his investigator Robert E. Stripling (left)
called a parade of witnesses—including ten writers, directors and producers
who skirted questions, were cited for contempt of Congress, tried and jailed.

JOHN HOWARD LAWSON: year in jail, $1000 fine. A one-time
newspaper and Red Cross publicity director, he wrote Counter-Attack, Smash-Up.

RING LARDNER JR.: year in jail, $1000 fine. He won a 1942 Oscar for co-
authoring Woman of the Year, collaborated on Forever Amber.

ALBERT MALTZ: year in jail, $1000 fine. Wrote This Gun For Hire, Desti-
tination Tokyo, won a 1943 Oscar for a documentary, Moscow Strikes Back.

EDWARD DMYTRYK: six months in jail, $1000 fine. After purging him-
self in 1950, directed The Caine Mu-
ty, Broken Lance, The Young Lions.

ADRIAN SCOTT: year in jail, $1000 fine. Before hearings he produced Cor-
nered, So Well Remembered, Cross-
fire. Now he writes screenplays.

HERBERT BIBERMAN: six months in jail, $1000 fine. Directed 1954 film,
Salt of the Earth, which won laurels
in France, was boycotted in U.S.

LESTER COLE: year in jail, $1000 fine. Writing credits: Hostages, Objec-
tive Burma, Men in Her Diary, Presently
writing in London and Hollywood.

SAMUEL ORNITZ: year in jail, $1000 fine. Screenplay credits include
Little Orphan Annie, Mark of the
Vampire. He died of cancer in 1957.

ALVAH BESSIE: year in jail, $1000 fine. Helped write Northern Pursuit,
Hotel Berlin. Now works for San
Francisco night club, the hungry i.

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The Saturday Evening Post

BLACK and convicted of contempt.
LIST. It was made clear beyond misunderstanding that there was no proper pence for past political misconduct except the naming of names: big names, little names, token names, names the Committee already had. It was a ritual, but not a meaningless one. To the unadorned confessors in Washington and Hollywood, it was an act of perfect contrition.

To others, like Robert Rosen, a director who took the "diminished Fifth" in 1951, it was incompatible with "individual morality." Two years of unemployment later, Mr. Rosen conceded that "no one individual can even indulge himself in the luxury of individual morality" and proceeded to spill into the record all the names he could think of.

In this altered atmosphere, black-market offers such as he had received while the case was still in the courts had become extremely rare, and I turned the major part of my attention for two years to writing a novel. It may or may not have been a sign of the times that I submitted the book, The Ecstasy of Owen Muir, to seven or eight American publishers without success, and when it was finally done by a little-known firm, it could not be distributed through ordinary channels and received almost no reviews. In England, at any rate, the reaction was pleasantly different.

There only one submission was necessary, to the eminently respectable house of Jonathan Cape. It was not until after they had accepted the book and written asking for biographical data that I revealed, with some misgiving, the shadier aspects of my past. A partner in the firm replied: "I am extremely interested to learn that you were one of the group known as the 'Hollywood Ten.' I well remember reading about this curious incident a few years ago. There may possibly be some publicity value, let me know in this country, on account of this fact."

Although the novel was translated into several languages and still brings in some revenue, it was scarcely enough to provide what I had come to consider a satisfactory income. While still working on it, I made a few forays into the new field of television writing, which was to become my main source of income for four years. Here I found that certain rather elaborate precautions were required.

The people for whom I was directly working knew who I was, but the men who signed the checks in some instances did not. In others they did, but their records were subject to inspection at a higher echelon. To meet this situation my blacklisted collaborator and I had to use pseudonyms not only on the air but in our financial transactions.

It would have been preferable to keep on using the same name, so that it would become familiar to potential purchasers of our material. We learned, however, that if a writer appeared to be doing more than a few scripts in the same series, there would be a demand for personal contact with him from investors, sponsor representatives and network executives who wished to communicate their views on how to improve the program. A variety of pseudonyms became necessary in order to avoid undue attention.

Cashing a check made out to an imaginary person is not a simple matter when your own name cannot appear as an endorser. You have to open a bank account under your alias, and my recommendation is that you start in the savings department, where no attempt is made to verify your identity. Checking accounts, in New York at least, require credit information, but once your savings account is well established, you can transfer money from it to a new checking account in the same bank without going through the rigmarole.

On your tax return you simply report all income as if it had been paid to you in your own name. You may expect, of course, that at some point the Internal Revenue Service will note that so many thousands of dollars have been paid by a certain corporation to a man who has apparently filed no tax return. They will then trace your bank account through the canceled checks you have deposited and very likely conclude they have a hot lead on a shaky bit of tax evasion. This can result, if you are careful about keeping your records straight, in the rare satisfaction of demonstrating to an eager investigator that no illegality has been committed.

During these years there were movie jobs to be had in Europe, though without screen credit, since foreign producers did not wish to be denied an American release for their pictures. The State Department, however, notified me in 1953 that it would "not be in the best interests of the United States" for me to travel abroad. While it is gratifying to be informed officially that your country can't spare you in a time of crisis, I felt the department was interfering unduly with my personal liberty, but it was not until the Supreme Court reached the same conclusion in 1958 that a passport was issued to me once more.
Hundreds of lives have been scarred by the blacklist, and even I, who have managed to survive it more successfully than most, would not claim that being on it has any compensations to outweigh the penalties and frustrations. But at least the restoration of freedom to travel has taken me to Europe, whereas during my more prosperous decade in California I never achieved more than an occasional trip to New York.

I have also paid a couple of working visits to Hollywood recently, where I encountered restrictions that did not exist abroad, such as having to register in a hotel under a false name so that my producer could telephone me through the studio switchboard.

Despite the fact that this cloak-and-dagger aura persists to the present day, a breach in the iron screen has been effected almost singlehandedly by the fertile talent, capacity for hard work, imaginative flair for publicity, and unswerving devotion to a high living standard, of a writer named Dalton Trumbo. Like the rest of us, he is still officially anathema to the major studios that joined together to launch and maintain the blacklist, yet in a three-month period last year more thousands of feet of film were released under his openly acknowledged authorship than any screen writer has ever inflicted on the American public in a similar space of time in the history of the business.

In 1957 Mr. Trumbo won an Academy Award under the name of Robert Rich for a movie called The Brave One. When nobody came forward to receive the Oscar, it was clear to the industry that one of its pariahs was refusing to succumb gracefully to banishment. Trumbo's name was soon mentioned in a number of movie columns, and although he waited two years before admitting that the prize picture was his, he declined meanwhile to deny it.

In fact, he maintained an astute policy of refusing to deny the authorship of any picture, and his name was attached by gossip to more screenplays than even as energetic a man as he could turn out. But he has privately confessed that it was the quality rather than the quantity of these attributions that touched him most deeply. To the frustration of the actual writers, some of the best work in Hollywood was being assigned by rumor to Trumbo, and the more outstanding the picture, the broader the leer with which he declined to comment.

Otto Preminger, a man of rare discernment among film entrepreneurs, chose Trumbo to write the screenplay of Exodus because he thought he was the best man for the job. But Preminger, too, has a native talent for public relations, and undoubtedly his genuinely courageous decision to announce the assignment to the newspapers was influenced by the publicity value Trumbo had gained by his own gifts in the same area.

A short time later Universal-International, the distributor of Spartacus, confirmed the report that Mr. Trumbo had written that picture and would receive screen credit for it. To casual readers it began to appear that the blacklist was at an end.

What they overlooked was that United Artists, which distributed Exodus, was not a member of the association that formulated the blacklist, and that Universal-International had temporarily withdrawn its membership. Trumbo's achievements had shattered the myth that public indignation would injure the box-

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In the face of this crisis the Academy Board of Governors passed a secret resolution, to be announced only if Wilson were voted one of the five nominees for best-screenplay writer. He was, and the academy, making public its new policy that any nominee who qualified for the blacklist was ineligible for achievement honors, promptly reduced the number of nominations to four. With the ballot thus purified, the board could look forward serenely to its 1957 ceremony. No one had taken any special note of the unfamiliar name Robert Rich among the best-story nominations.

The following year the academy demonstrated that it had added a new trick to its repertoire: It could close its eyes firmly when its leg was pulled. The picture that walked away with most of the awards, including best screenplay, was The Bridge on the River Kwai. The script writer, so it said on the screen, was Pierre Boulle, author of the French novel on which it was based. How Monsieur Boulle had so brilliantly mastered film technique and the English language was no mystery at all to informed people in Hollywood; it was a wide-open secret that The Bridge on the River Kwai was the joint work of two blacklisted men, Carl Foreman and the academy's most relentless gadfly, Michael Wilson.

Again in 1959 the ghost that wouldn't die haunted the academy, that year in a years', seen as the joint work of writers for whom the blacklist still existed for me and all the others who have become disabled by blacklisting men for pictures they had written previous to their exile. By 1956 the academy felt secure in the assumption that this backlog of hot scripts had long since been exhausted.

In that year, however, a movie called Friendly Persuasion was made from an old script by Michael Wilson, whose ostracism in the fall of 1951 had been followed by his winning the best-screenplay award in the spring of 1952, for A Place in the Sun. The producer of Friendly Persuasion announced that Wilson's script had been so rewritten that he was no longer entitled to credit. An arbitration committee of the Writers Guild of America, West, which has final jurisdiction over all writing credits, disagreed. The guild ruled that Wilson's name was the only one deserving credit.

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