

## MY GRAY COAT

BY: GUS DICK ANDROS

My first winter in New York was the coldest I had ever experienced. I had never worn a hat before, and my ears were freezing, my teeth were chattering and walking the cross-town streets I would get so cold I would tremble all over.

When I arrived in mid-August the heat was insufferable, and I never thought the clothes I brought with me would not be sufficient. But the winter months were different, and as the cold weather continued and I got desperate, I called my mother and asked her to send me money for a new overcoat. Listening to my complaints about the cold, she felt sorry for me and telegraphed money. I had no choice but to go to Robert Halls, a place where you could buy off the rack. I was convinced that I had gotten a good deal, and my new gray overcoat was very handsome.

Going to school on the GI bill didn't leave me with very much money. I had one luxury I didn't want to give up, though, and that was the twenty-five cents I spent for one beer a night at Charlie's Bar around the corner from Carnegie Hall, where all the dancers met for a social life. I would nurse my one beer all night.

On my way to Charlie's I felt well dressed in my new apparel, and in my eagerness to show off my new coat, I got to the bar earlier than my friends. I had a little money left over from my great buy, so I could buy a second beer if I needed.

While enjoying my beer, a small dog began to nibble my ankle. The dog's owner came to my aid, "If my dog likes you, then I like you." I smiled, but I didn't want to talk to this man.

"Could you help me? I have to make a call and I don't have my glasses with me. The number is in this book." He handed me a thick address book in which to look up the number. I began to thumb my way through the book and my eye caught sight of names of people like Marlene Deitrich, Joan Cawford, and many other stars. I was impressed. I found the number and gave it to him. He asked me to watch his dog while he made the call. When he returned he said, "Let's leave this dive and go to a real club."

"No thanks, I'm happy here at Charlie's. I can afford the beer here." I said.

"No, it will be on me."

I said, "No thanks, I'm not here to be picked up."

"I didn't mean that. There are no strings attached," he said apologizing, "I just want company."

I thought about it a minute and said, "I'll go, but just remember what I said. I'm not for sale."

He put his dog under his arm and we were out of there. As I walked by Charlie he winked at me as if he knew something I didn't, but I knew there couldn't be any real danger or Charlie wouldn't have let me leave the bar. We caught a cab and headed to the theater district.

"Stop the cab! I must see Ralph," my companion suddenly said. We got out of the cab and entered the stage door of a Broadway theater. He walked up to the desk and the doorman seemed to know him. "Tell Ralph that Paul Porter is here." Without delay the doorman delivered the message, and we were escorted to the dressing room. I still didn't understand what was going on. Imagine my surprise when I found myself in the dressing room of Ralph Bellamy. Mr. Bellamy was in his shorts, having just finished his performance of *The Detective Story*.

I was introduced and Mr. Bellamy's dresser made drinks for everyone. "I hope you like scotch, that's all I have," Mr. Bellamy said.

"That's fine with me," I answered.

"Are you in the theater?" Ralph asked while he pulled on his pants.

"Yes, sir, I'm a dancer with the American Theater Wing."

"That's a great program, I wish it had been around when I started."

"You've done pretty well without it," Paul said. "How is Ethel?"

"We are divorcing."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Paul said and turned to me to tell me they were talking about Ethel Smith, the organist. I felt that I was overhearing things that I shouldn't know.

Even though I had been in the army and had danced with the San Francisco Ballet, I still felt like a country bumpkin in Mr. Bellamy's dressing room, watching him take off his makeup.

After we left Ralph at the theater, we went across the street to the "Theater Bar." The bar was full of the after-theater crowd and there were no tables available. Paul looked around and called out, "Kay, can we join you?" I looked across the room and saw he was talking to Kay Francis, the movie star.

"Of course, there is always room for you," Kay motioned for us to join her table. I sat down after the introduction, and Paul's dog jumped into his lap. I just stared at her; I

couldn't count how many times I had seen her on the screen. She had on a fur coat that enveloped her, but that face I knew. I had recently seen her in a movie at a 42nd Street theater.

Kay Francis always played the "other woman" with a dry sarcastic humor. In person she was nice and polite to me, asking me about my interest in the theater. She was surrounded by a number of star groupies, constantly making a fuss over her, but she seemed to ignore them. I guess because I looked sincere, Ms. Francis paid more attention to me and my career.

Round after round of drinks came and went. Paul slipped me money under the table to buy a round of drinks. We must have sat there for at least an hour. I knew it was time for me to leave. By then Paul was drunk and asked me to call him a cab. I stood up and put on my new coat, and turned to Kay and said in my best Okie manner, "I must go, I have class tomorrow morning. It has been a pleasure to meet you. I have been a great admirer of yours for a long time."

She took my hand and politely thanked me, "I wish you a lot of luck. This is a rough business, just don't give up--keep auditioning." With her other hand she patted me on the cheek.

I had to help Paul into a cab. I walked home because I didn't have enough money to afford a cab, but I had my new gray overcoat to keep me warm. I don't think I would have felt the cold even if I were naked, because I had had the greatest night of my life. When I got back to my room, I thought if it hadn't gotten so cold I wouldn't have a new coat and I wouldn't have gotten to Charlie's early. I felt that I looked so good that I caught the eye of Paul, a Hollywood director. I never saw him again.

As I took off my new gray overcoat, my heart jumped to my throat-- there, hanging down the back of the collar, was the price tag from Robert Halls.