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For his latest blood-feud Belli has once again pitted himself against a tough customer—Dallas, Texas. According to a sociologist who served some time there recently, Dallas is run by an upper-crust that calls itself the Citizens' Council, a happy little oligarchy that knows everything it wants is right because it has the money and the power to prove it. Other recent visitors report that typical denizens of Dallas are mean-minded, mean-spirited yahoos, so poisonously ignorant and parochial that they begin frothing at the mouth when someone uses a word they don't know (like the psychological term "fugue-state," which so perturbed Ruby's prosecutor, Henry Wade), or when they meet up with someone who isn't quite convinced that Barry Goldwater is the brightest guy around or who has doubts that the Golden Age will be ushered in as soon as Earl Warren is impeached. As for the typical Dallasite's chest-thumping patriotism, the general impression seems to be that he'd vote for Khrushchev for President if it would make him some fast dough. Dallas is

the place where judges read comic books while court is in session, where jurors go to sleep while experts testify, where the prosecutor refers to a defendant as "the Jew boy" and cutely insinuates that the defendant's lawyer is a Red because, to quote Mr. Wade, "He writ a book about Roosha" (*Belli Looks at Life and Law in Russia*, by Melvin M. Belli). Maybe it was only a trick of fate that Oswald killed Kennedy there, but no other city in America would have been so appropriate. A year before the assassination, writer John Bainbridge in *The Super-Americans* called Dallas "the murder capital of the world."

Belli, having had his own dose of Dallas, fired away with a few of his trusty bellistic missiles. He told the Ruby-trial jury, "Thank you for a verdict of bigotry and injustice"—on national TV yet. He has publicly berated the city's "dictatorial" Citizens' Council and its "publicity-conscious" prosecutors, maintained that his client was "railroaded," pointed out that the trial Judge, Joe Brantley Brown, is locally known as "Necessity" Brown,* and summed up his impressions of the biggest city in the greatest state in the union this way: "Dallas is a city of hate and shame, a rich, oligarchical, festering sore." Somehow the parlor Fascists who run Dallas (and most of Texas), the men who hired a public-relations man to protect Judge Brown, who let everyone know, apparently successfully, that they wanted Ruby convicted, and who through the plutocratic right-winger H.L. Hunt offered Belli \$100,000 *not* to defend Ruby, didn't cotton much to such loose talk. Ever since the that the beady eyes of Texas have been upon Melvin Belli. After I got back to San Fran.

cisco," he says, "I found that my insurance policies had been canceled, a book publisher had reneged on bringing out my *Black Date: Dallas*, my mortgages were called, my name withdrawn from official lists of lawyers, my credit was frozen, TV shows and lectures canceled. I'm not paranoid, but it's those bastards in Texas who were behind it. You can't imagine the strength and power of that wicked city of Dallas—they're really vicious down there." Despite his vast experience with vendettas, Belli

was genuinely awed by the swiftness and the authority with which the Dallas multimillionaires had retaliated, and also by all the hate mail he suddenly began getting from down there (a rather tame one began, "Dear Rectum"). He was, of course, about as intimidated as a bull someone has whacked across the head with a dandelion. As soon as he found the time, he sat down in his San Francisco office, erected a new motto on his bulletin board (DELEND A EST DALLAS!!!), and began furiously and joyously completing *Black Date: Dallas*. "Those stinking bastards," he promises, "won't know what the hell hit 'em."

For people living on the Coast, this rehearsal of Belli's background is probably somewhat familiar. There Melvin Belli is a celebrity. Everyone knows about his three marriages and two divorces, everyone knows he keeps a skeleton in his office named Elmer, everyone knows that it was he who said, apropos of his efforts to get a divorce for Barbara Hutton and Prince Troubetzkoy, "It's practically settled—only a few million dollars is keeping them from being apart." Back East, though, hardly anyone had even heard of him before the Ruby trial. In fact, today the first question any Easterner asks him is, "Did Oswald really kill Kennedy?" The first question a West Coaster asks is, "Where's your next trial? I want to be there."

As an Easterner, I questioned him almost exclusively about the Ruby trial when I saw him a few weeks ago in New York. He was staying at the Americana Hotel, and I had telephoned him for an interview. It was 2 in the afternoon when I could see him, but he was still in his pajamas, the remains of a lavish breakfast

—the kind you see in Doris Day-Rock Hudson movies—lying on the table, and on a nearby bureau, stuffed with papers, a red-velvet briefcase. Once he had leafed through an issue of *Fact* he agreed to co-operate with a story, though when I eagerly pointed out that this article would give him national publicity, he gave me a scornful look and boomed, "I've had far too much national publicity already." Diplomatically, he added, "Actually, most of the press has been fair, very fair." I called to his attention the snide things *Time* had said. "Yes, well the editors of *Time* were fair, but their bastard in Dallas hated me. And I hated him."

In person Belli is not the overweight owl he appears to be in his photographs. He is, in fact, quite tall, as graceful and as athletically built as a first baseman, and extraordinarily handsome. His speaking voice is magnificent, as delightful to listen to as the late Leonard Warren's singing (which it resembles), and he radiates charm, confidence, and happiness in being alive. Female jurors, I suddenly recalled, have occasionally complained to judges after a trial that Belli had "hypnotized" them into siding with his client.

We agreed to continue our chat the following day, at John F. Kennedy Airport, before he took off for San Francisco, and overnight I boned up on his background and prepared a list of questions. The next day he arrived at the airport a few minutes after I did, and I watched as the porters carried out his red-velvet luggage, slyly glancing at the name-tags. Belli and I spent about half an hour together, I jogging after him scrawling down everything he said, he striding along buying papers, checking the schedules, and ogling the airline stewardesses.

My first question was, "Would you have defended Oswald?" "Of course I would have, otherwise I would have had to hand in my shingle. I'm to hire to anyone."

Why did he take on Ruby as a client? "I was eager to take on the Ruby case because I believed then, and I know now, that Jack Ruby is a sick man, and I thought I could do something for him, for psychiatry, for law, for tolerance. The Rubys promised me a fee of

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\$100,000, but the only thing I came out of that trial with was a stack of bills the Rubys left, their checks marked 'insufficient funds,' and the knowledge that our good common law can still be raped in some American cities. I didn't receive one cent in fees from them, and I don't suppose I'll ask for anything now, though I will submit a brief for the appeal. They can throw it in the wastebasket if they want to. Of course I don't blame them for getting another lawyer—I couldn't stay in Dallas after the trial, or anywhere in Texas. But I would do today exactly what I did then.

"Because I was present and learned firsthand what went on in Dallas from the time our President was assassinated until that Dallas jury returned its verdict against Jack Ruby, I cried out that the jury was bigoted—not from hearsay, but because I am the father of 5 children and I am in fear for my law, and for my country, because of the sickness and hate I saw in Dallas.

"When Clarence Darrow tried the Scopes case and a guilty verdict was announced, he too cried out such exact words as 'bigot,' 'hypocrite,' and 'narrow-minded.' Samuel Leibowitz went to Alabama to try the Scottsboro case and 'railroad' was just *one* of the words he used to castigate the jury. He spoke of the jurors 'looking like frogs sitting on a log, their thin cruel lips stained with tobacco juice. . . .' Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter cried out against the jury *and* the judge in the Sacco-Vanzetti case, and with far more vitriol and vehemence than my remarks against a more bigoted set-up in Dallas.

"The president of the American Bar Association, Walter Craig, said I was guilty of 'unethical conduct' as a lawyer because I publicly denounced the Dallas jury on national television. But he spoke for no one but himself—he had no right to speak as the president of the A.B.A., and he hadn't consulted with any committees. He didn't tell the news media when he called his *ex parte* news conference that he and I have had *personal* animosities throughout the years. And where was he when the Dallas prosecutor said on TV, about Oswald, 'Oswald is the guilty man,

there is no doubt about it, and we are going to fry him?'"

I questioned him about Ruby's future, and about the trial. "Ruby very early gave signs of being psychotic, and anyone who wanted to see it could have. There's no question now—he's deteriorated. He's tried to insert his finger in a light-bulb socket, he's tried to bash his head against a wall. Everyone knows his conviction will be reversed on appeal, automatically, and they're all embarrassed as hell down there—they'd all like to shove it under the rug. Dallas is worse as a hate city now than it was at the time of Kennedy's assassination.

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"President Kennedy had been warned against going to Dallas by Adlai Stevenson, who'd been spat upon and hit *over* the head with a sign there. President Johnson and his wife were spat upon while entering the Adolphus Hotel. We knew from the moment that the Ruby case was assigned to be tried in Dallas that, if it were to be kept there, we'd lose our case in the trial court. We knew that it'd have to be reversed upstairs on appeal, then transferred to another county.

"But we had no conception then of the magnitude of the errors, of the prejudice we'd meet during this trial. It was a mockery and a kangaroo court. Something we didn't know when we came to Dallas to move for a change of venue was that Judge Brown had made up his mind, and had so *reported*, that the case couldn't be transferred from Dallas. We were allowed to go through 3 horrible weeks in futile gestures moving for a change of venue. After that, we were refused an opening statement. We were refused the right to see impeaching statements ('There's a Dallas ordinance against it'). The judge looked unabashedly to the prosecution for his rulings, and sustained *each and every one* of the state's motions—without even listening to them or even understanding them. They actually had *signals* going between them! *OVER*

"Judge Brown at one point appointed an 'impartial medical examiner.' We submitted our client for an 'impartial medical examination.'

(F.R.)

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When the results were found to be *abnormal*, the D.A. leaked a story to the press that the results were *normal*. The judge then called us into chambers and locked the report in his desk drawer. He threatened us with contempt of court if we told the true story, and the true findings and conclusions of *his* impartial expert. Later, in open court, the judge disowned his own impartial expert!

"And another time, when I cited authorities showing that the case was a bailable one, some 15 of them, I was advised by the court that these were not in point—because 'They're nigger killings.'

"The Texas law that forbids any statement made by a prisoner (unless in writing) after his arrest was completely ignored by His Honor. The principal state's witness was a Sergeant Dean, who was in charge of security—that's a laugh—at the time of the Oswald shooting. He was allowed to testify as to statements allegedly made by Jack Ruby at least a half-hour after Ruby's arrest. It's interesting that Sergeant Dean later complained to his Chief of Police that the F.B.I. had accused him of lying. And if he was lying, it's not hard to figure out why.

"In picking this jury, by the way, we exercised all of our pre-emptory challenges, and we were given 3 extra by the court. This jury was thrust down our throats. Of some 178 talismen, there were only two Jews, two Negroes, and two Catholics; The rest were white Protestants. One of them had as her nephew the policeman who regularly does the TV show for the Dallas Police Department. And she knew her police department, all right—she waved to the principal police witness while he was on the stand! Our challenge to her for cause was disallowed. By this time, we were out of pre-emptory challenges.

"One juror, and this was told to Judge Brown by a reporter on the Dallas Morning News (but Judge Brown didn't report it to us), had stated to an employee of his that if he got on the jury he would 'send Ruby to the electric chair.' After the verdict, Judge Brown acknowledged that the reporter had told him this.

"The end-result was that we were forced

to go to trial before a jury of 12 Dallas citizens, all determined to protect the image of the city—at any and all costs. The verdict had to be one of bigotry and hypocrisy, because unconsciously, if not consciously, Dallas had to redeem itself. These were all loyal Dallas citizens, and they had to put Jack Ruby in the public abattoir to show that theirs was a lawful city. That was their public duty. The verdict was reached in 50 minutes—not in 2 hours, as everyone thinks. After those 50 minutes, the jury sent out for Coca-Cola and laughingly spent the rest of the 2 hours waiting for Brown to return to court.

"When the verdict was smugly reported, I stood and said to that jury what every impartial newspaperman in that courtroom felt, 'Thank you for a verdict of bigotry and injustice.' I had told the court that the verdict would be one of bigotry and injustice if we were forced to trial in Dallas, and I would have been less than honest if I hadn't the courage to speak the words that were in my mind and in my soul and in my heart."

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When I asked the old question "Did Oswald do it alone?" Belli looked at me with alarm, and began, "The fact that you, an intelligent man—" I hastily cut in that yes, I thought Oswald was alone, but an amazing number of otherwise-rational people seem to have doubts. "Of course Oswald did it alone," Belli resumed. "My investigative staff is better than the Attorney General's, and I know as much about the assassination as any man alive. Oswald was just a crazy man. He didn't know Ruby and Ruby didn't know him. I know why these rumors spread. It was because the Dallas police and the D.A. wouldn't quash them. I tried, and without prejudice to my case or the state's case, to get the D.A. to announce during the trial that there was no truth to these rumors. But the prosecution felt they could get some prejudicial benefit by encouraging these rumors—it made Ruby look like a monster instead of just the sick man he is. So these rumors, which hurt us immeasurably abroad, continued. They hurt us because it was made to appear that our law-enforcement agencies, local and national, the F.B.I., could not

or would not report the 'plot' in all its particulars. There was even a rumor that President Lyndon Johnson, a Texan, assisted in having Kennedy done away with to succeed his office!"

X Well, I asked, was there anything about the Ruby trial that "won't come out in our lifetimes"? "No, no, a thousand times no!" he roared. "That was a horse's ass thing for Justice Warren to say." He did add, nonetheless, that there was something most people don't know, namely, that the night before the shooting a Dallas policeman and his girl friend spoke to Ruby, trying to get him to approve of the idea of having Oswald lynched. "They picked on Ruby because they knew what a weak-minded guy he was. The cop and his girl just disappeared, and I could never locate them, so I didn't mention them at the trial."