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# If She's the Answer, What's

By Tom Donnelly

## Donnelly's Revue

If a genius combining the talents of Tennessee Williams, Sigmund Freud, Machiavelli and Sherlock Holmes, should arise to tackle the job, we may get the real Martha Mitchell story. Otherwise the woman who has been called (by Shana Alexander in Newsweek) the heroine of the Watergate affair, will remain something of a mystery: a loud-mouthed enigma. The sphinx without a secret is a fairly familiar phenomenon; Martha may be the first babbling brook without a secret.

From the first moment the dread word "Watergate" crossed Martha's lips, I've had the most enormous difficulty understanding exactly what she was trying to tell the world. I've had even greater difficulty getting a fix on why the reporters she has come in frequent contact with have been so chary of asking Martha leading questions. They haven't asked the biggies, like "Where was John on the night of June 17th?" and they haven't asked the small questions, like "How come they offered you a day-old club sandwich that time you were a political prisoner?" I mean, who has a leftover club sandwich? Leftover meat loaf and leftover spinach, yes. But a leftover club sandwich? There has to be a little story there, somewhere.

As you no doubt recall, a Martha Mitchell who was far from being a household word went before the TV cameras in November of 1969 to announce that a

peace demonstration in Washington put her in mind of the Russian Revolution; she said the capital was overrun with a weird breed she identified as "the very liberal Communists." On the theory that "You ask a silly question—" reporters did not press Martha for a definition of "liberal Communist." It could be that the habit of doing more quoting than querying, stemmed from the lady's debut on the national stage.

It's understandable that not too many burning questions got asked when Martha phoned a reporter friend from California to say, "I love my husband very much, but I'm not going to stand for all those dirty goings on." When the caller is heard shouting "Get away! Get away!" and a telephone is ripped from the wall there isn't much a reporter can do to keep the interview alive.

But it was along about here, I think, that I began to find the Martha Mitchell saga, as reported in the press, approximately as hard to get hold of as, say, "Finnegans Wake." When Martha phoned again and said, "I'm still a political prisoner and I'm talking surreptitiously," it seems she wasn't asked, "Who's holding you a prisoner and why?"

The next question was: "How do you feel about John's resigning as President Nixon's campaign direc-

## the Question?

tor?" Martha said she felt great about it, wondered why nobody'd inquired after her at a Nixon news conference: said "I've been a prisoner for so long"; and hung up.

Yeah, why *didn't* anybody ask about her at Nixon's press conference? Possibly they were still stunned by that interview Martha gave a New York reporter. Having told again how those five thugs held her down while one of them stuck a needle in her bottom, Martha climaxed her recital with, "I was a patriot until I got assassinated. What country can I go to?" She also said, "I doubt seriously if I want any of the current candidates in the White House." Note that particular plural. File it and brood upon it.

As she prepared to quit Washington in favor of New York, the erstwhile political prisoner and assassination victim confided to the press that she was "Free, free as a bird!" She did say she was still furious at the varmint who stuck that needle in her. She added "I don't know whether my husband is mad at him or not."

The record doesn't show that anybody said, "Gee whilikers, Martha! Why isn't your husband mad at a brute who abused his wife in this unseemly fashion?"

I have asked some of the reporters who have specialized in Martha Mitchell interviews why the scent of non sequitur hangs so heavy over their collabora-



United Press International

Martha Mitchell: "Heroine of the Watergate affair."

See REVUE, B3, Col. 1

# Okay, Martha, What's the Question?

REVUE, From B1

tions. I've told 'em that if they got a chance at Garbo and applied their Martha techniques the result would be something like this . . .

GARBO: "Everyone wonders why I have guarded my privacy so zealously. Here is my secret. I have a twin sister who suffered the most bizarre misfortune on the very day that we arrived in Hollywood. You see, she . . ."

REPORTER: "Yes. Tell me, is it true that Adrian is your all-time favorite designer?"

The ladies of the press who have really covered her deny that there is anything out-of-focus about their Martha stories. Then they say things like, "Well, sure she's full on non sequiturs. She's a Southern belle." Another said, "There maybe isn't a lot of logic in what she says, but I'll tell you one thing. She doesn't lie." And: "It's hard to pin her down. She'll say, 'I'm saving it for my book.' Or, 'You're a good reporter. Why don't you go find out?'"

One said, "Martha is a Tennessee Williams type, with tremendous sensitivity about some things. She may be unable to intellectually present her fears but she's been trying to say something. She may not have known the specifics of Watergate but she sensed danger on an instinctive level." Danger to her husband or to the country? "Both. Maybe."

I reminded Martha's reporter friends that the Pentagon papers affair had inspired the wife of the then Attorney General to deliver this bulletin: "I deplore the indiscreet judgment, that smells of political implications on the part of the press, which has reached such an extent that it may result in complete suppression of the press—in which event it will have caused its own death." The reporters said they'd forgotten jolly Martha had spoken in that unpleasantly intimidating way, and anyhow, that was so long ago. (It was in July of 1971.)

A few weeks ago Martha was telling the press that

she "feared for her husband" though she couldn't say why at the time. But she was going to "name names," she said. Just watch her! The other day the Pauline Revere of Watergate got her chance to sound forth in a great big way when she appeared in a Manhattan law office, childhood Bible in hand, to give a deposition in that \$6.4-million civil suit brought by the Democrats. "She disappointed everyone," reported Time magazine, "by confessing that she had no personal knowledge of the Watergate affair."

What an anti-climax for Martha-watchers! All she had going for her, she said, was her "woman's intuition." She knew something was wrong, she said, and if she could have put her finger on it, she would have. Her testimony had some value, inasmuch as it reminded us all that it isn't easy, being a star. "When the Vice President didn't want to do anything, they called on Martha Mitchell," she said.

She also announced that she'd done "three quarters of the Hill's mail. There is not a senator or congressman on the Hill I haven't done most of his work for him." Naturally nobody asked Martha to amplify that a bit, anymore than any lawyer present asked her why, in her opinion, that "gauche" bodyguard took off his shoes and socks and walked around barefoot in her Waldorf suite when Martha was entertaining "all the dignitaries in New York."

But possibly the reporters on the Martha Mitchell beat have been intuitively right in not trying too hard to fathom the mystery of the woman who once appeared on a TV talk show to toss bouquets at her beloved leader ("I think President Nixon is probably one of the sexiest men in the country. He is cute. He is adorable. He has a great sense of humor and he is just—well he is my man. Don't tell Johnny") and is now crying "Resign! Resign!"

The reporters might reach the conclusion that instead of playing "La belle dame sans merci" towards the Watergate gang, Martha is just another belle out of order.