The Library of America • Story of the Week

From *A. J. Liebling: The Sweet Science & Other Writings*
(The Library of America, 2009), pages 749–59.

Originally published in *The New Yorker* (November 22, 1947) and also in *Mink and Red Herring: The Wayward Pressman's Casebook* (1949).

Reprinted in *The Press* (1964).

HORSEFEATHERS SWATHED IN MINK

November 22, 1947

There is no concept more generally cherished by publishers than that of the Undeserving Poor. Newspapers may permit themselves a bit of seasonal sentimentality, like the *Times*'s 100 Neediest Cases at Christmas-tide or the *Herald-Tribune*'s Fresh Air Camps in summer, in which their readers are invited to send in money while the newspaper generously agrees to accept the thanks of the beneficiaries. But the governing factor

in most newspapers' attitude toward the mass of people out of luck is the tax rate. One way to rationalize the inadequacy of public aid is to blackguard the poor by saying that they have concealed assets, or bad character, or both. The words "reform" and "economy" have for so long been synonyms in newspaper usage that a newspaper plumping for economy often feels that it has a license to fake a bit in a good cause.

Reporters and headline writers have a way of cooking up descriptive titles for women involved in celebrated newspaper cases. To name a few that I can think of as I write, there was the Pig Woman, witness in the Hall-Mills murder inquest; the Woman in Red, who betrayed Dillinger to the law; the Bobbed-Hair Bandit, a lady stickup man of the twenties; the Broadway Butterfly, who was strangled to death in 1924; and the Black Dahlia, a woman unpleasantly done in about a year ago in Los Angeles. Sometimes these inventions become generic labels for types of crime, as when, last summer, New York headline writers began calling the taking off of Mrs. Sheila Mannering a Butterfly Murder—an allusion to the similar taking off of Dorothy King, the Broadway Butterfly—and one of the tabloids recently referred to a local cadaver as a Black Dahlia Murder Victim because the killer had written on it with lipstick, in the manner of the dispatcher of the Black Dahlia out West.

New York newspapers added another title to their list a short while back when they invented the name the Lady in Mink for a woman who was reported to have received relief payments from the New York City Welfare Department though she was possessed of a mink coat. (It may be expected that "the Lady in Mink" will soon be contracted to just "Mink" and, as such, will become a part of headline language, like "Butterfly" or "Dahlia" or "Ripper" or "Raffles." The Welfare Department is prevented by law from divulging the names of relief clients, and as a result the reporters felt justified in using the Lady in Mink sobriquet in practically every paragraph of every story they wrote about the case. On October 30th, the *Times* called her, on first acquaintance, merely the woman in mink, but on November 1st it yielded to the vogue and recognized her as a lady. The apparent triviality of the story did not prevent the *Times* from giving it, on the day it broke, the best spot in the paper—the right-hand column of the front page—under this three-column head:

WOMAN IN MINK WITH $60,000
LIVED ON RELIEF IN A HOTEL,
INQUIRY BY STATE DISCLOSES

(The report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights, which was issued on the same day, got the second-best place—a three-column head on the left side of the page.) The drop under the *Times* "Mink" headline read:

42 CASES ANALYZED

INVESTIGATOR SAYS CITY AGENCY HELD
"CLIENT IS ALWAYS RIGHT"

ONE "FRONT FOR BOOKIES"

DEAL APPARENTLY INVOLVED HER LIVING ON AID
WHILE HUSBAND PAID $14,000 IN BAD CHECKS

The story that followed was written by a man named William R. Conklin. I discovered, on reading it, that the all-important "with $60,000" in the headline had been based only on the opening paragraph—a single sentence—of Conklin's report. This sentence read, "The story of a mink-coated, mink-hatted 'relief client' [the necessity for the quotation marks is obscure, since relief client is an accepted term in social-welfare work] who lived at city expense in a hotel at $7.50 a day despite assets of $60,000 was spread on the record of the State Board of Social Welfare yesterday as it opened an attack on administration of a $142,000,000 relief program by the New York City Welfare Department." Nothing in the rest of the piece supported the statement that the relief client had "assets of $60,000." The body of the story stated, beginning near the bottom of the first column, that in 1940 the woman had been awarded a divorce settlement of $40,000 in California, of which $3,400 had never been paid, and "in addition" had sold $20,000 worth of stocks in 1942. It was not made clear whether she had bought the stocks with part of the divorce settlement, nor did the story show that she had all, or any, of the $56,600, or $36,600, whichever it was, in June, 1946, when she applied for relief in New York. As a matter of fact Benjamin Fielding, the newly appointed Welfare Commissioner, announced a couple of days

later that he considered the woman, as she had reported herself to be, too poor to support her child. A fairer headline for the *Times*' story might have read:

WOMAN WHO ONCE HAD
$X NOW ON RELIEF

Conklin, of course, must have known that his story didn't bear out his lead, but some reporters do this sort of thing impulsively, like poker players who occasionally try to steal a pot. It is up to the editors to spot such discrepancies, especially in the case of stories to which they decide to give a big play.*

The mink coat in the case—as most newspaper readers know by now, for Fielding showed a nice flair for publicity in his handling of this detail—was appraised by a fur expert of I. J. Fox & Co. The expert, a Mr. Herman Peroff, said that the coat was from six to eight years old, had a torn lining, and was worth about three hundred dollars at the present market. Fielding allowed news photographers to make shots of him and Mr. Peroff handling the coat—shots in which, after all the fuss, the coat looked so mangy that they proved irresistible to the picture editors of the two-cent tabloids, hostile though they were to the "pampering" of the poor. The *Times* very sportingly took cognizance of the appraisal in the last line but one of the last bank of the headline over its October 31st story —"One Coat Valued at $300," it said—and, on the next morning, gave the following handsome, though slightly equivocal, one-column display to Commissioner Fielding's announcement that the owner of the coat had no funds:

GRAND JURY TO SCAN
RELIEF; CITY BACKS
THE "LADY IN MINK"

I am aware that to half retract, in half of a one-column head, what you have fully stated in all of a three-column head is decidedly better than standard newspaper practice.

To return briefly to the Conklin story and the headings over

*This is one story on which *The New Yorker* did not receive a complaining, or explaining, note from the late Edwin L. James, managing editor of the *Times* and a prolific note-writer.

it, the line "42 Cases Analyzed" did little to help the reader understand that this number represented only about one-thirteenth of one per cent of the Department's burden. (The forty-two cases involved a total of two hundred and seven persons, for whom social workers contended that only hotel lodgings could be found, out of the average of 263,300 persons on the Department's rolls in 1947.) As to the "Front for Bookies" line, the incident it referred to was completely refuted within a couple of days. And the lead sentence, beginning, "The story of a . . . 'relief client' who lived at city expense in a hotel at $7.50 a day," seems to me inexcusably ambiguous. It implies (1) that the woman was living alone in the hotel and (2) that she was paying $7.50 a day just for her room, whereas the fact is that she had her five-year-old daughter with her and the daily $7.50 was to provide for all expenses, including food and clothing, for the two of them. To be sure, you could learn about the existence of the daughter if you read far enough down in Conklin's story, even though he did make her four months old instead of five years—an error that I am willing to ascribe to inadvertence. If you read all the way off the first page and deep into the runover of the story, you found out that the woman and her daughter had long before been moved out of the hotel room they had been occupying and had since then been receiving only $162.20 a month from the Department.

The editors of the *Times*, if called upon to explain the play they gave this story, would doubtless say that they had been actuated not by the details of an isolated case but by the principle of the thing. It would be interesting in this instance to know the nature of the principle upon which the *Times* proceeded. I am afraid that a hint as to the answer may be contained in a further passage from Conklin's story, in which he wrote, "Explaining that state law forbids identifying relief clients by name and address, Mr. Shapiro [the state investigator] summarized twelve cases accepted as eligible for relief by the city's Welfare Department. They included a married woman indicted for grand larceny; a mother who entertained men in her hotel room while her children played in the lobby at all hours; alcoholics; a divorcee with an out-of-wedlock child; an unmarried mother with two children; a male bigamist [if he was a practicing one, why wasn't he in jail, or if he once served

time for bigamy, was he returned by the law to both his spouses?]; and a man separated from his wife and three children who was living with another woman on city relief."

None of these descriptions has any legal relevance to an applicant's eligibility for relief. No law specifies that a woman must be blameless to qualify for a food grant at the prevailing rates of $16.45 a month if unemployed and living in a family group and $21.65 if pregnant—to cite a couple of examples of the "liberal" allowances referred to in a report put out by Commissioner Fielding himself last week as attracting relief cases to the city. All the woman in question has to be is without means. The principle involved in the treatment given the Mink story—if, indeed, it was a case of principle and not of sheer ineptness—seems to be that the poor are poor because of their sins and whatever they get is too good for them.

This is a lot of space to devote to one newspaper story, but I think that Conklin's piece and the headline over it justify detailed consideration. I was saddened by the whole thing because the *Times* is in many respects a sound newspaper, within the translucent mass of which one may occasionally discern the outlines of commendable purposes, fixed like strawberries in a great mold of jello, and of good men struggling feebly, like minnows within a giant jellyfish. The *Herald Tribune*, although officially Republican, covered this investigation by the State Board of Social Welfare (Republican) of the City Welfare Department (Democratic) with considerably more reserve. The *Sun* (Republican) was also more restrained than I had, perhaps unjustly, expected, even if it did at one point take a strong anti-gypsy position. "Gypsies, alcoholics, unmarried mothers, persons in difficulty with the law, neglectful parents and employables who would not work were maintained in hotels," the *Sun*'s October 29th story began, as if Romany blood were per se a reason for reproach.*

The *World-Telegram*, claiming credit on October 27th, the first day of the investigation, for having inspired all the com-

*Hitler thought so. He ordered gypsies and Jews exterminated. Can anyone imagine a New York newspaper writing "Gypsies, Jews, alcoholics," etc.? Just because mitt joints (palm reading establishments) don't advertise, must Papers Pick on Petulengro's People? The Gypsies may have put a curse on the *Sun*.

motion over the Welfare Department by its "revelations" last spring ("*World-Telegram*'s Charges Confirmed by City's Report"), referred editorially to the since-resigned Commissioner Edward E. Rhatigan's "nervy request for an $82,000,000 boost in the $142,000,000 Welfare Department budget," which was, I imagine, getting rather near the *Telegram*'s chief preoccupation with the matter. In view of a recent twenty-five per cent boost in the number of persons on relief, and an additional twenty-five per cent boost since March, 1945, in the cost of living for all of them, such a request would seem to me to be less than "nervy." It is true, however, that an increase in the Welfare Department's budget would bring nearer the day when the State Constitution will have to be amended to permit an increase in the city's real-estate taxes, and that obviously one of the most effective ways of keeping relief costs from rising is to shout that the people on relief don't deserve to be there and to imply that officials of the Welfare Department are Communists who are packing the relief rolls to run down free enterprise. "But," the *World-Telegram* editorial said, "we hope Mr. Fielding, who calls himself 'a plain blunt guy,' also sees the necessity of releasing key positions and policies in the Welfare Department from the grip of the Communist-dominated CIO Public Workers of America." Next day, the *Telegram* was announcing on its front page that a Republican city councilman had "assailed the appointment of Commissioner Fielding, who, he said, was a member of the Communist-dominated American Labor Party." On October 29th, the paper returned to the picayune cruelties of its original "revelations" by running this headline:

PROBE OF STATE
CONFIRMS W-T
WASTE EXPOSE

SHOWS WELFARE DEPT. PAMPERED
CHISELERS IN LUXURY HOTELS

and under it, a story beginning, "Former convicts, alcoholics, neglectful parents, and women who entertained men in their rooms . . ." (All of these, of course, are types to be found in higher economic strata as well.) The reporter, Walter

MacDonald, had evidently not heard about the gypsies. On November 1st, by which time even the *Journal-American* reached the conclusion, inconspicuously, that "the case of the celebrated 'Lady in Mink' apparently had fizzled today into just welfare routine," a *Telegram* headline read:

STATE AID ACCUSES FIELDING
OF SNIPING AT RELIEF PROBE

CITY'S DEFENSE OF RITZY DOLE
IS UNDER FIRE

This, by the way, was on the day that Mr. Fielding collapsed and was taken to a hospital as a result of overwork, causing veiled merriment among old-time Welfare Department employees, who told one another, "Now he knows what it's like to work here." The Department is chronically understaffed.

A day or so ago, I saw a *World-Telegram* advertisement in another newspaper. It was headed, "Sure, New York Has a Heart!", and read, in part, "There are three W-T staff writers in particular who are on most intimate terms with New York's tough-but-soft heart. Their roving job is to peer between the skyscrapers and under the chromium to find the hidden stories —the ones that have a special color all their own. Watch for their sketches of New York's real heartbeats." Maybe this trio, rather than Mr. MacDonald, ought to have been turned loose on the Welfare Department.

Out of sheer perverseness, I suppose, I have leaned backward in an effort not to give *PM* unduly frequent good marks in these random pieces about the press. Perhaps it is because the paper reminds me too often of the repulsive lines forced upon a young American actor, Penrod Schofield, in one of the books I like best to remember:

"I hight Sir Lancelot du Lake, the child,
Gentul-hearted, meek, and mild."

If *PM* were a girl, her face would be shiny, and she would be conscientiously and resolutely promiscuous and tell all her boy friends about their complexes. But on a story like this curious investigation *PM* does a beautiful job. "Buried obscurely in

the testimony, which dealt exclusively with the now-famous 42 'hotel cases,'" John K. Weiss, of the *PM* staff wrote after a day of "revelations," "were such details as these: many of the hotel cases involved mentally disturbed or depressed persons; press hysteria about the hotel cases forced many persons into substandard housing; one case concerned an immature mother who was moved from a hotel directly into a mental hospital. Not once during the day was the fact mentioned that the State had approved the hotel procedure." And Mr. Weiss's colleague on *PM*, Albert Deutsch wrote, "Well, what does one do with such people, subject them to euthanasia? . . . Incompetence in public agency workers and inefficiency in public administration cannot be condoned. Periodic inquiries and exposures of maladministration can only be welcomed by the citizenry. But such inquiries must be conducted on the basis of fair play and sound judgment; it is a nasty business to make a political football out of public relief, and to run a headline-hunting campaign under the guise of a fact-finding inquiry." I can't fault him on that.

[Almost two years after the press crusade referred to above, the late Don Hollenbeck, in his Columbia Broadcasting program CBS Views the Press, brought up the subject of the Lady again. I quote part of Mr. Hollenbeck's talk:

"The Lady in Mink has taken a solid place in the history of New York City, and historians cannot well ignore her in any notes they make on certain aspects of our social life. What actually became of the Lady in Mink we have no idea, but her wraith is back again, and for the story we tell now, she provides the counterpoint. For some time earlier this winter City Editor Paul Sann of the New York *Post* had been receiving complaints from destitute persons seeking relief; they said they were being made to wait in some cases more than a month before any help was given to them by the Department of Welfare. Reporter Joseph Kahn was assigned to get the story. Kahn had earlier got his hands on a copy of a report by the New York City Youth Board's Bronx Pilot project, checked with officials and gone on from there; the Youth Board is a city project, and its panel includes members of civic, church, welfare and educational groups. On it and his own findings Kahn wrote his first story

for the *Post*; it appeared February first under a headline reading 'City's needy wait weeks for relief as new system bogs Welfare Department,' and the story began with these words: 'Thousands of destitute men, women and children in need of home relief are being forced to wait weeks for help. Indigent families who apply for relief must now wait a week for an interview and another two weeks for a visit from a case investigator. Under the law, anyone asking for relief is supposed to be visited within 48 hours; this ruling is being ignored because the department is bogged down in a complete re-investigation of its caseload.' Kahn's story went on to say that the department advised these persons to borrow, stretch their food, go to their friends. And finally, it revealed that the department was behind in its investigations of more than three thousand new requests for relief.

"The original story about people living on luxury relief in hotels involved 37 families—about 120 people—a not appreciable proportion of the 233,000 persons at that time on the relief rolls of New York City. This time—with 275,000 persons on the rolls, three thousand more were affected—a really serious welfare problem, and new applications being received at the rate of three thousand a week. But where two years ago the papers hardly let an edition go by after the first mention in the *Telegram* before they were howling in concert about the relief scandal, it was different this time. Not a single newspaper bothered to follow the lead of the *Post*."]

The theme of the undeserving poor recurs as often as Groundhog Sees His Shadow or Tommy Manville Takes Another Bride. One of the things that puts me off doing the Wayward Press for years at a time, in fact, is its inevitable repetitiousness —given the same opportunity, newspapers will always do the same wrong thing. But in the Spring of 1959, when I was asked, with Louis Lyons, the Curator of the Nieman Foundation, and Dean Ed Barrett of the Pulitzer School of Journalism at Columbia, to judge the New York Newspaper Guild's Page One awards for work done during the year, I am damned if the *Daily News* did not present, *for a prize*, a series on the same threadbare nonsense. This time, I think, it had something to do with Puerto Ricans eating up the profits of the *Daily News* by getting two bottles of milk for one baby.

STOP PRESS. Latest bulletin—The city manager of Newburgh, N.Y., has just announced that he will refuse food to unmarried mothers and their children. He is, accordingly, being hailed as a Messiah by the *Herald-Tribune*, *World-Telegram* and *Daily News*, who propose him as a candidate for Vice-President in 1964, to run on a ticket with Barry Goldwater.

Once we had a Mayor of New York named Gaynor, who lived in Brooklyn and used to walk the Brooklyn Bridge every morning to City Hall, attended by the reporters for the afternoon papers. I was a child then, but when I went to work in 1924 I met a lot of the fellows who had walked with His Honor. There were crusaders then, too, on another pet subject, though for another reason: prurient interest.

"And what about Vice, your Honor," some poor devil would have to ask every morning, because his editor had instructed him.

"What vice?" the Mayor would ask. "Avarice?"

He had hit the publishers' favorite.