

Callaghan's latest merits reading

By DOUG FETHERLING
Any new book by Morley Callaghan deserves close attention, if only because Callaghan is perhaps the most honored of living Canadian writers. But his latest novel, **CLOSE TO THE SUN AGAIN** (MACMILLAN; 192 pages; \$9.95) merits much more.

It has already been touted in advance as his best piece of fiction in 40 years. There are a number of reasons why it is difficult to dispute this claim.

Style is the most obvious. Here Callaghan is writing in top form. The prose is clean and subtle and does its job without showiness.

Another factor however, is what might be called the book's attitude. Just as he has dropped some of the tough-guy stylistic excesses of his earlier work, so too Callaghan has discarded much of the moralizing dear to him in the past.

This is a forceful and moving story, eloquently told, which has much to say about our present condition.

That is not to say that the book is a departure from earlier ones. It is, rather a refinement of them. Close To The Sun Again is a fitting climax to a half-century-long career as a novelist, storyteller and general literary presence.

A BORN LEADER

The subject of the novel is the emotional sterility of Ira Groomer, a 53-year-old businessman who has just returned to his native Toronto (a city which, as in most Callaghan novels is well described but never mentioned by name). Groomer already has had two careers.

During World War II, he was an officer in the Royal Canadian Navy. He was nicknamed "Ribbons" Groomer because of his many decorations. Later, he was with a multinational enterprise, serving as troubleshooter and political fixer in many countries, most recently Brazil.

He is then, a born leader. Those under him call him "Commander" not necessarily because of his war record, but because the epithet seems natural for one so smooth, ruthless, calm and austere.

When we first meet him, Groomer has left the corporation for a life of semi-retirement as Toronto police commissioner. It is not the pressure of business has got to him, exactly. It is rather that he can no longer bear up under emotional bankruptcy.

URBAN LIFE

Callaghan's underlying statement, about the quality of life in today's urban world, is obvious.

The first half of the novel gives us Groomer's background and shows the shape his life takes in Toronto. He is quickly inducted into the local ruling class. He even attempts to cure his melancholy by having an affair with the wife of one of his other members.

But such therapy is unsuccessful and he knows it. Groomer begins to lose even the facade of correctness that has helped make his successful. He slips into alcoholism and must periodically go for drying-out treatments at a private clinic.

At this point the novel suddenly shifts back in time, to the war, and Callaghan slowly, neatly reveals the source of his character's unhappiness.

It seems that, while on convoy duty aboard a corvette in the North Atlantic, Groomer picked up two shipwreck victims—a wealthy young American woman and a man who, it turns out was her bodyguard and lover of sorts. Both, as it happened, were on the lam.

Groomer and the woman all in love, each knowing that the relationship would inevitably come to a bad end. When the corvette was torpedoed, the woman dived overboard and was lost.

It is to compensate or at least cover this loss that Groomer has acquired all the qualities that have made his such a miserable person and a successful businessman.

We do not learn until the end that these war experiences, which are described with what seems to be careful authenticity, are the recollections racing through Groomer's mind as he lies in hospital and are, in fact, his last thoughts before dying.

THE OUTCASTS

Now 73, Callaghan has gone through several distinct phases as a writer and also occasional decades of almost complete silence. Always, though, his fiction has been concerned, often in Christian terms, with outcasts of various sorts.

Clearly this is also the case with Close To The Sun Again. But this, his most controlled and perhaps simplest book, has an extra element.

This is the fact that there must be a bit of Ira Groomer in all of us if we are to succeed, and that this situation is the bane and shame of the society we have made for ourselves.

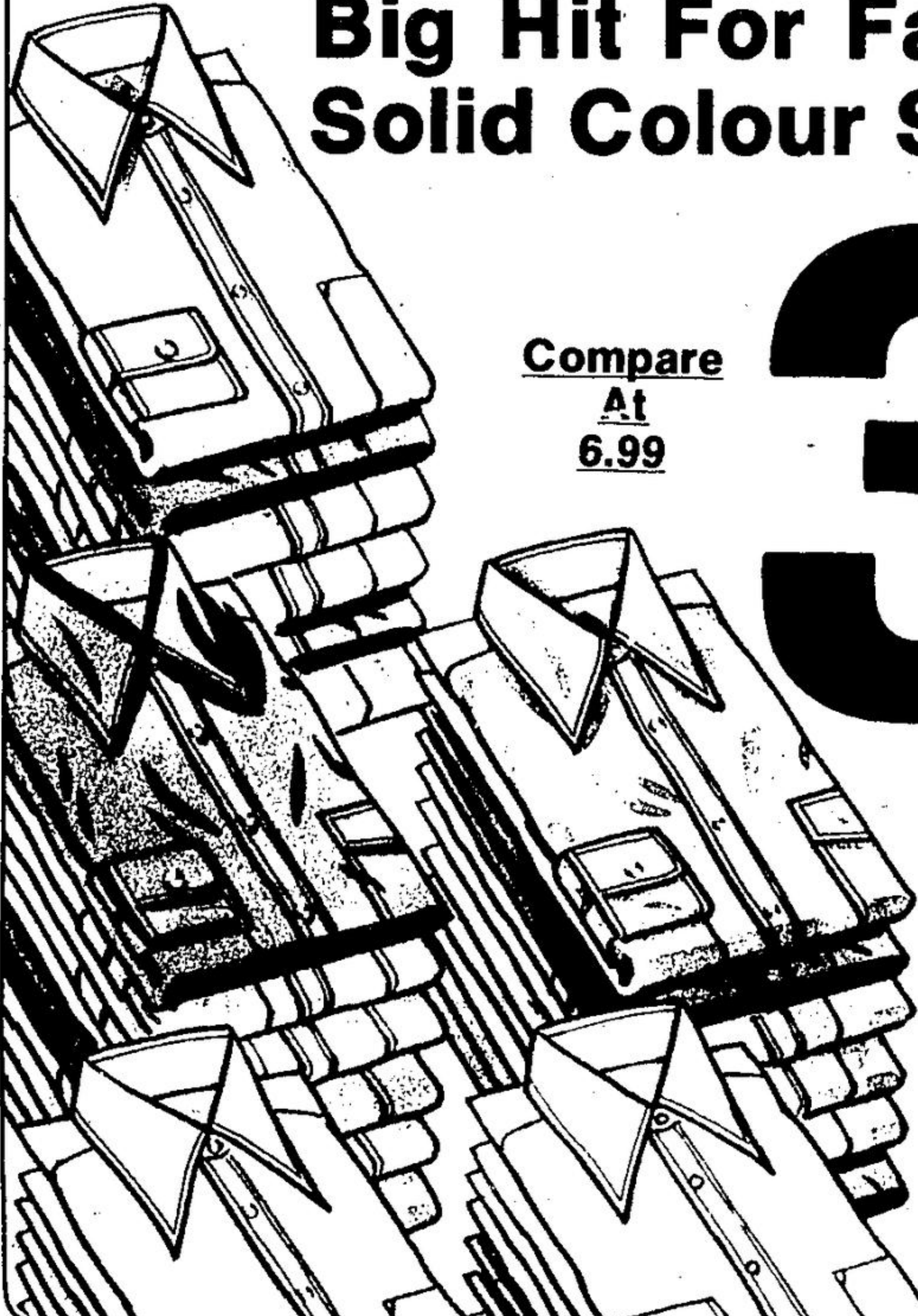
Doug Fetherling's latest book is *The Five Lives Of Ben Hecht*, published by Lester and Orpen Ltd.

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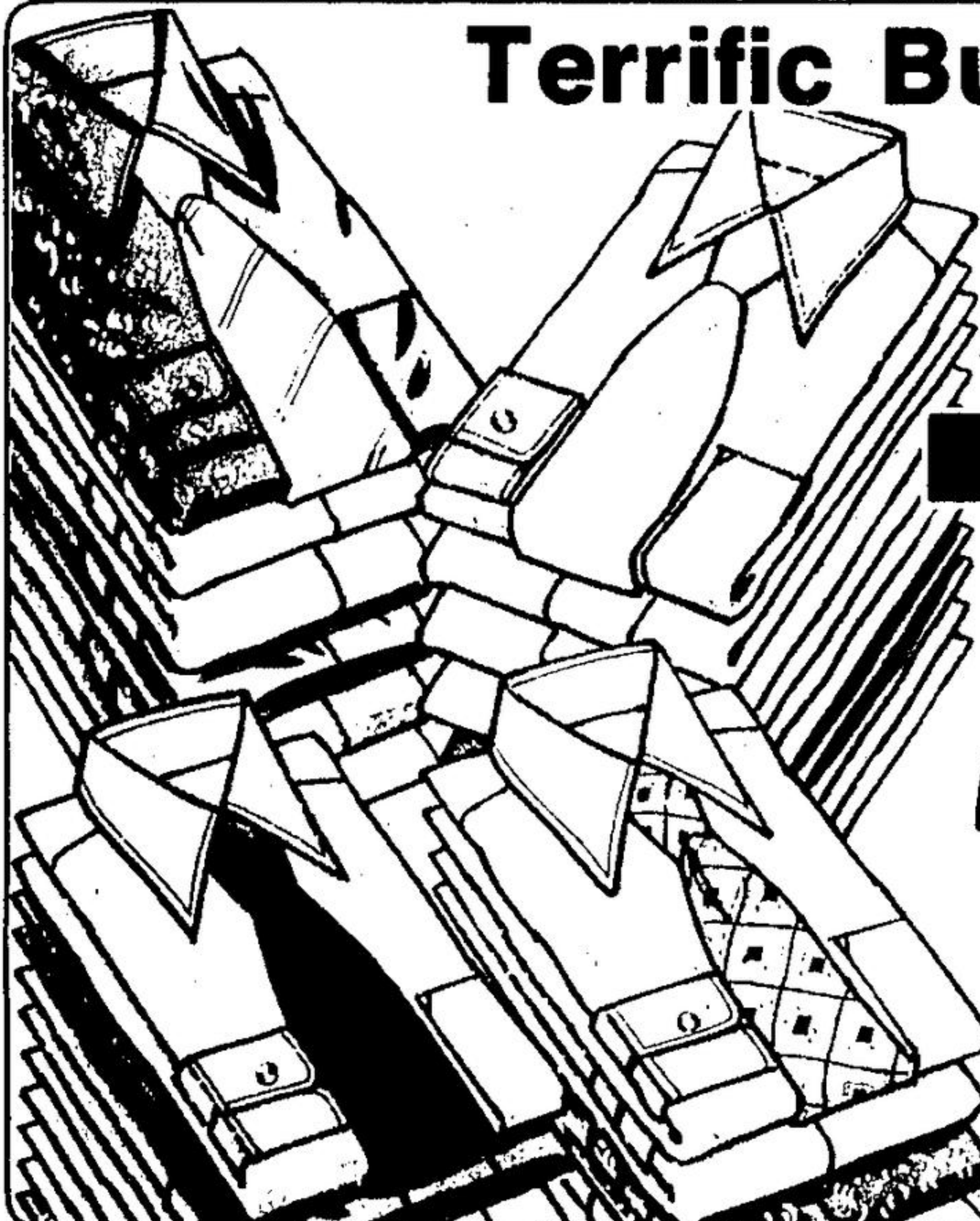
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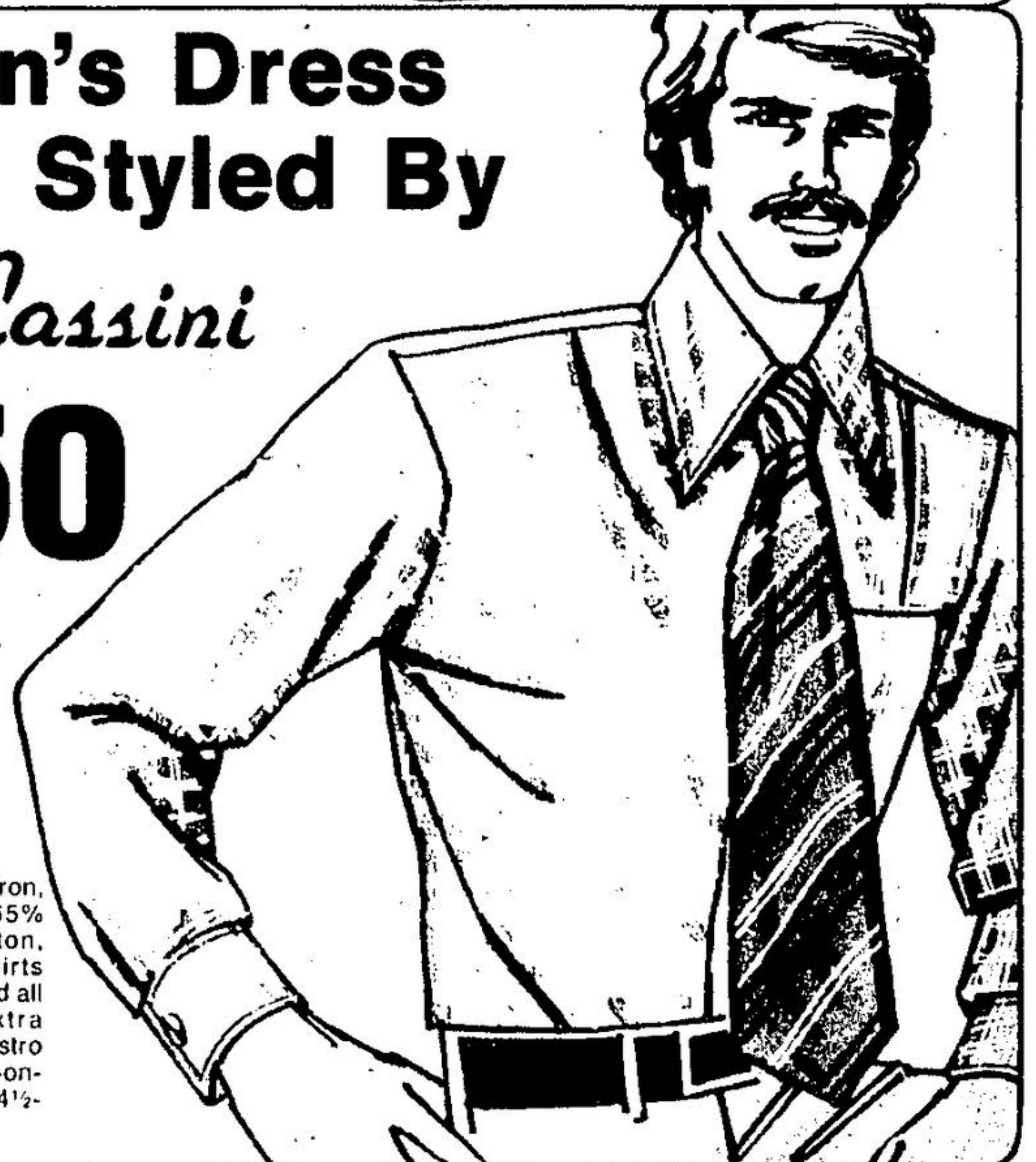


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