CHAPTER
8

Dogs: A Digression

I always call dogs "he." It don't do to notice everything.

—Mrs. Gordon in *The Ladies of the Corridor*

Don't let me take any horses home with me. It doesn't matter so much about stray dogs and kittens, but elevator boys are awfully stuffy when you try to bring in a horse. . . . You can always tell that the crash is coming when I start getting tender about Our Dumb Friends. Three highballs, and I think I'm St. Francis of Assisi.

—"Just A Little One"

Sic—*as in dog.*

—Dorothy Parker

Bonne Bouche was all that Mrs. Hazleton could ask of a pet. She was tiny, she was noiseless, and she had a real talent for sleeping.

—"The Bolt Behind the Blue"

ALTHOUGH SHE invariably found people disappointing, Dorothy Parker found a sort of solace in her dogs ("Four-legged people—but nicer"). In her mature years, she was rarely seen without them, nestled on her lap or tucked away under her bar stool into the small hours.

It all started as a by-product of her dysfunctional family life at the turn of the century, when, as a young child largely ignored by her siblings, she poured out her affection on the pack of undomesticated French bulldogs and Boston terriers—Rags, Nogi, and Bunk—who were allowed the run of the Rothschild house. They would be reincarnated many times over—as would their erratic household habits.

In no particular order there was Amy—the stray she picked up in the street when she saw a truck driver trying to kick it. Instead, Mrs. Parker kicked the truck driver, snatched up the dog, and took it to the nearby studio of her friend, painter Neysa McMein, where it proceeded to eat all the rose madder paint.

A Scottie that Alexander Woollcott christened "AWP" when the dog managed to "christen" Woollcott three times in a single car ride.

A poodle called Cliché "because the streets are carpeted with black French poodles."

A blue Bedlington terrier called John: "I picked him out because Bedlingtons are trained to root up gardens and hunt otters, and my New York apartment was simply infested with otters." John contracted mange. ("He *said* he got it from a lamp post.")

When she lived with Eddie Parker, they had a Boston terrier she called Woodrow Wilson "because he was full of shit." Her failure to housebreak him did nothing for the condition of the apartment. ("Yes, it does seem a bit Hogarthian.") Nor was

Dorothy Parker with her dachshund, Robinson (1962).

the decor helped by the presence of a canary named Onan "because he spilled his seed upon the ground."

Her regular New York haunts learned to tolerate the Parker pet foibles, but Hollywood was a different story. When her current dog behaved in the lobby of the Beverly Hills Hotel as it was used to behaving at home, the manager was understandably irate.

"Miss Parker, look what your dog just did!"

Drawing herself up to her full five feet and nothing much, she replied haughtily, "*I* did it," and walked on. But after that, she left the dogs at home and referred to the hotel ever after as "the place where the elephants go to die."

It was, after all, not an isolated incident. When her dog was sick on the carpet in the middle of a party, she was heard to mutter, "It's the company."

Her experience taught her only one invaluable lesson: "I do believe that you should select for your personal use, if you live in the city, a dog whose size recommends himself for metropolitan life. Anything larger than a Shetland pony is perhaps a shade impractical. . . . There was that Airedale I had once, I remember. It was during his reign that my apartment came to be known as the Black Hole of Calcutta.

"You see, when he came into my life, he was seven weeks old and about the size of a three-dollar Teddy bear. And an Airedale would appear to be an entirely suitable dog for city-wear; you see thousands of them . . . walking carefree and unconcerned along the avenues, usually with very pretty ladies respectfully occupying the other end of their leashes. But this was a sort of super-Airedale. In the wholesome air and sunlight of Manhattan, he grew and he grew until many people advised my entering him in the horse show. We would go out for a little walk, he and I, and my feet would never be on the ground during the entire excursion.

"Indoors he developed the habit of sofa-eating; he became indeed, a veritable addict. Give that dog an ordinary sofa, such as your furniture dealer would be glad to let you have for a nominal sum, and he could make a whole meal off it. If you ran out of sofas, he would be philosophical about the matter—he was always delightfully good—and make a light snack of a chintz-covered arm chair. Once, I recall, he went a-gypsing and used a set of Dickens, the one with the Cruikshank illustrations, for a picnic lunch."

Eventually, she gave the dog to some friends who lived in the country.

"There was a sad scene at our parting. I was the sad scene. He never gave me so much as a backward look. But that is ever my story. My dearest wish would be to be one to whom dogs gave all their devotion; but they always cast me off like a withered violet when anyone else comes in the room. It is their indifference, I suppose, that holds me."

In "Love Fashion, Love Her Dog," she advised the readers of *Vogue* on how to view a dog as a fashion accessory.

"When a woman has a wardrobe stocked with bulldogs, and the style suddenly changes to Scottish terriers, what is she going to do about it? She can't have them made over, unfortunately. She might lay them aside, for the proverbial seven years, until they become fashionable again. She might even bestow them, with her antiquated clothes, on some deservedly poor family. She might send them to the country to rest their jangled nerves after their social season."

One of the few advantages she found in Hollywood was that there she and her dogs had room to breathe.

"I love a big yard full of dogs. There are two additions—a four-months-old dachshund, pure enchantment, named Fraulein, and a mixed party called Scrambles who is, by a happy coincidence, the one dog in the world you couldn't love. This gap in her character causes us to lean over backwards to ply her with attentions, and so she's worse than ever. You don't know anybody who wants a half-Welsh terrier, half-Zambi, do you?"

Dogs—even at secondhand—helped her through her Hollywood hell. A telegram to a friend read, "IN ORDER TO WISH YOU A HAPPY CHRISTMAS I AM INTERRUPTING WORK ON MY SCREEN EPIC—LASSIE GET DOWN."

One film she was involved with featured a canine performer. "They got one who looked little short of ideal but he wasn't really bright. They just plain couldn't make him do anything he was supposed to do, so finally in their despair, they put him on wires. Day upon day, they jerked him through his scenes like a marionette, which was, understandably, wearing, and the director was beside himself. After they had gone through one scene with him more than sixty times, the embittered man threw down his megaphone and cried, 'This can't go on! We'll have to

> Your manners are a total loss,
> Your morals, something awful.
> Perhaps you'll ask, as many do,
> What I endure your thrall for?
> 'Twas ever thus—it's such as you
> That women always fall for.
>
> ("To My Dog")

put another wire on him.' And the cameraman, who was peering through his frame, said, 'Christ, he looks like a zither now.'"

In France she bought a Scottie called (by a previous owner) Daisy. Daisy was smart but oblivious to the wishes of her new owner. "Why, that dog is practically a Phi Beta Kappa. She can sit up and beg, and she can give her paw—I don't say she *will*, but she can."

On another occasion in Munich, it was a thoroughbred dachshund, Eiko von Blutenberg, she promptly renamed Robinson. "He has no sense and so is at ease in any drawing room." Back in New York, Robinson was her constant companion, so much so that when she finally retired for what was left of the night, she would give the dog one of her sleeping pills so that he did not wake too early in the morning.

Poor Robinson came to a sad end. He was attacked by a much larger dog and badly mauled. When the owner of the other dog tried to claim that Robinson had started it, Mrs. Parker replied witheringly, "I have no doubt he was also carrying a revolver." Sadly, Robinson did not survive the incident, throwing her into a deep depression.

Other animals did occasionally cross the Parker path. Climbing into a taxi one day, she found herself sharing it

"Whatever is, is good," your gracious creed.
You wear your joy of living like a crown.
Love lights your simplest act, your every deed.
(Drop it, I tell you—put that kitten down!)
You are God's kindliest gift of all,—a friend.
Your shining loyalty unflecked by doubt,
You ask but leave to follow to the end.
(Couldn't you wait until I took you out?)

("Verse for a Certain Dog")

with two baby alligators the previous passenger had thoughtfully forgotten. Hurrying home, she put them in the bathtub and went about her business. She returned to find a note from her maid: "I will not be back. I cannot work in a house where there are alligators. I would have told you this before, but I didn't suppose the question would ever come up."

Leaving a hostelry on Sixth Avenue, she saw a cab horse and decided he looked tired and in need of a friend, so she went over and kissed him. She said she'd be happy to kiss him again and even go to Atlantic City with him if he were to ask her. "I don't care what they say about me. Only I shouldn't like to have that horse going around thinking he has to marry me."

Or there was the time Woollcott was agonizing about putting down an unwanted litter of kittens. How *did* one kill a cat? "Have you tried curiosity?" (or, in another version of the same story, "kindness").

In Hollywood, she and Woollcott were invited to dinner by a host who lived near the edge of a wood and was in the habit of putting out food to draw out the wild animals for the delight and amusement of his guests. On the first night, nothing happened. The host insisted they return the following night. Still no show. "Well," said the perpetually helpful Mrs. Parker, "I thought we'd at *least* get the after-theatre crowd."

"Animals are much better than people. God, I love animals. . . . Look, I'll tell you what let's do, after we've had just a little highball. Let's go out and pick up a lot of stray dogs. I never had enough dogs in my life, did you? We ought to have more dogs."

At the very end of her life, her dogs were Dorothy Parker's only companions. Troisième (Troy), Misty, and finally the dog her closest friend, Beatrice Ames Stewart, rushed round to rescue from the apartment when she heard of Dorothy's death. She knew that the last thing Mrs. Parker would have wished was for her pal to end up in the pound.

The dog's name was C'est Tout.

CHAPTER

9

Writer at Work

Remember what I tell you when you're choosing
a career:
"Take in laundry work; cart off dust;
Drive a moving van if you must;
Shovel off the pavement when the snow lies white;
But think of your family, and please don't write."

—"Grandfather Said It"

Dear God, please make me stop writing like a woman.
For Jesus Christ's sake, Amen.

—Dorothy Parker

I haven't got a visual mind. I hear things.

—Dorothy Parker

ZABEL: *Precision is the basis of style.*

—*The Ice Age*

I want so much to write well, though I know I don't, and that I didn't make it. But during and at the end of my life, I will adore those who have.

—Dorothy Parker

DOROTHY PARKER was as ambivalent about her writing as she was about her men. If she had done it, it couldn't—despite all the acclaim—be any good.

"The trick about her writing is the trick about Ernest Hemingway's writing," wrote Ogden Nash. "It isn't a trick."

"The purpose of the writer," Parker felt, "is to say what he feels and sees." And what she felt and saw was the condition of women in an emerging feminist world where there were no longer any firm rules to guide them.

In her gallery of miniatures, she would etch the many aspects of feminine rage; the loneliness of the career woman; the emptiness of women who don't marry but wish to, of those who do marry who find themselves chained to unhappiness and end in divorce, of women with lovers who fail them, of those desperate for love from any source and at any price; and, of course, the men who fuel the flames because they don't *understand.*

In none of this did Dorothy Parker anticipate a happy ending. She simply wrote what she saw and brought to bear—as one critic expressed it—"a disciplined artistry within the framework of a tragic view of life."

Or, rather, a view of death—since it haunted the titles of all her books: *Enough Rope*, *Sunset Gun*, *Death and Taxes*, *Here Lies*, *Laments for the Living*, *Not So Deep As a Well*, and, had she ever completed it, her novel *Sonnets in Suicide.*

She was above all a woman of her time, and it's important to remember the greater part of a century later what that time was.

It was considered "fast" for a woman to drink, smoke, bob her hair, roll her stockings, sniff cocaine, dance the Charleston, be overtly promiscuous—and generally act as if anything went.

It was de rigueur to be bitter and cynical, sneer at the romantic, and use the "in lingo," such as "Yea, bo," "Oh, you kid!," "I'll tell the world," "How's the boy?," "Yes, indeedy," "You said a mouthful," and "It's a great life if you don't weaken."

And before we become overly smug, what will future generations make of our "Are you *serious*?," "I'm like . . . ," "*Tell* me about it," "Awesome, and "I mean, Pu-leese!"?

She would always claim that she disliked doing what she did so well—why should anyone "spoil a page with rhymes"?

"And what do you do, Mrs. Parker? Oh, I write. There's a hot job for a healthy woman." She claimed that she would prefer to clean out ferry boats, peddle fish, or be a Broadway chorus boy. Instead, she was—she said—"only a hardworking woman, who writes for a living and hates writing more than anything in the world. . . . I wish I didn't have to work at all. I was made for love, anyway."

She could say it all she wanted but she fooled few. Unlike many writers, she refused to pontificate about her "art," but the occasional unguarded remark would slip through—quite enough to prove that she took her craft very seriously indeed.

"If you are going to write, don't pretend to write it *down*. It's got to be the best you can do and it's the fact that it *is* the best you can do that kills you."

Many people were surprised at how actively she supported young writers. One impecunious young man found a check thrust into his hand with a muttered, "Never mention this to me again. I'm so much in debt myself that this small amount won't make any difference anyway."

"Those who write fantasies . . . are not artists."

"It's a terrible thing to say, but I can't think of good women writers. Of course, calling them women writers is their ruin; they begin to think of themselves that way."

Of an overrated writer, she said, "He's a writer for the ages—for the ages of four to eight."

And she could be very defensive about criticisms of her technical skills. One reviewer once questioned her grammar, which drew the reply, "Maybe it is only I, but conditions are such these days, that if you use studiously correct grammar, people suspect you of homosexual tendencies."

A journalist asked her, "Where is the best place to write?" "In your head."

Why did she write? "Need of money, dear. I'd like to have money. And I'd like to be a good writer. Those two can come together and I hope they will, but if that's too adorable, I'd rather have money. I hate almost all rich people, but I think I'd be darling at it."

"Money can't buy health, but I'd settle for a diamond-studded wheelchair. . . . The two most beautiful words in the English language are—'Check enclosed.'"

At an early age she "fell into writing . . . being one of those awful children who wrote verses." She would always refer to them as "my verses . . . I cannot say poems," and she refused to consider them "real literature." Nonetheless, she was meticulous

But I am writing little verse,
As little ladies do.

("Song of Perfect Propriety")

Let your rhymes be tinsel treasures,
Strung and seen and thrown aside

("For a Lady Who Must Write Verse")

Ah, could I tempt assorted gents
As sure as I can Providence,
A different story I'd rehearse,
And damned if I'd be writing verse!

("The Temptress")

about following the rules of whatever form she attempted—being careful to rhyme the first and third lines of quatrains, for instance.

Light verse was a popular form at the time, and many people who tried their hand at it were careless or ignorant of the rules, much to Dorothy's scorn.

"All you can say is, it didn't do any harm, and it was work that didn't roughen our hands or your mind, just as you can say of knitting."

Later she would come under the literary influence of the popular poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950). "Like everybody was then, I was following in the exquisite footsteps . . . unhappily in my own horrible sneakers." One of Miss Millay's poems had the much-quoted lines

My candle burns at both ends,
It will not last the night,
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends,
It gives a lovely light.

"That was the style of the day. We were all imitative. We all wandered in after Miss Millay. We were all being dashing and gallant, declaring that we weren't virgins, whether we were or not. Beautiful as she was, Miss Millay did a great deal of harm with her double-burning candles. She made poetry seem so easy that we could all do it. But, of course, we couldn't."

"Then something happened to the light verse writers—especially to the ladies among us. . . . We let it be known that our hearts broke much oftener than the classic once. . . . We sneered in numbers in loping rhythms at the straight and the sharp and the decent."

The theme of most of her work—both then and later—was that men were fickle and that love was a game everyone was destined to lose. Men were pathetic—but women needed them. It was a derivative one, but what she brought to it was a distinctive tone of grim gaiety, sweet sourness. Her words created a carapace around visible vulnerability.

I shall not see—and don't I know 'em?
A critic lovely as a poem.

("Song in the Worst Possible Taste")

Dark though the clouds, they are silver-lined;
(This is the stuff that they like to read.)
If Winter comes, Spring is right behind;
(This is the stuff that the people need.)
Smile, and the World will smile back at you;
Aim with a grin, and you cannot miss;
Laugh off your blues, and you won't feel blue.
(Poetry pays when it's done like this.)

("The Far-Sighted Muse")

These were essentially personal expressions, and the reader could take them or leave them. When in 1939 she was asked by the Congress of American Writers to talk on poetry, she titled her speech "Sophisticated Verse and the Hell with It!"

Although she continued to write verse intermittently until 1944—and although it remained her most transparently autobiographical form of expression—she concluded that it was not the answer.

"This is a fine thing to be doing, at my age, sitting here making up sissy verses about broken hearts and that tripe at a dollar a line"—when what she really wanted was to be paid for something "in chunks, not drips."

Show your quick, alarming skill in
Tidy mockeries of art;
Never, never dip your quill in
Ink that rushes from your heart.

("For a Lady Who Must Write Verse")

Even so, she remained fiercely protective of what she had achieved:

Say my love is easy had,
Say I'm bitten raw with pride,
Say I am too often sad—
Still behold me at your side.
Say I am neither brave nor young,
Say I woo and coddle care,
Say the devil touched my tongue—
Still you have my heart to wear.
But say my verses do not scan,
And I get me another man!

("Fighting Words")

"Never tell your dreams. Your poem is an owl that won't bear daylight."

Just before her death she lamented to a friend, "I used to be a poet!"

The short story became her form of choice, but it never came easily to a perfectionist who had found the rigors of meter and rhyme—not to mention the relatively short length—a positive discipline.

She found fiction a difficult and painful process.

"It takes me six months to do a story. I think it out and then write it sentence by sentence (in longhand). . . . I couldn't write five words but that I change seven." She started a writer's notebook, "but I could never remember where I put the damn thing."

She would then type the finished story (and often retype it several times), but even then the problems were not over. "I know so little about the typewriter, I once bought a new one because I couldn't change the ribbon on the one I had."

She was ever watchful—and often envious—of the habits of other writers. "Kathleen Norris said she never wrote a story unless it was fun to do it." At the other end of the literary spectrum, she

could easily empathize with "that poor sucker Flaubert rolling round on his floor for three days, looking for the right word."

Almost all her work is written about women—often from the woman's own perspective and, again, frequently autobiographical in content. She would freely admit that she always wrote about herself or people she knew and found herself unable to imagine characters or situations in the abstract. She would take the names of her characters from either the phone book or the obituary columns.

Before long, she had carved out a special niche in "stream-of-consciousness" narrative. You were inside the subject's head or sitting at the next table overhearing a couple in conversation but just too polite to turn around to see their faces. Instead, you could visualize them by what they said and particularly by the way they said it.

Few writers have ever mastered the duplicitous use of dialogue better than Dorothy Parker or the juxtaposition of the spoken word and the thought:

"Oh, yes, it's a waltz. Mind? Why, I'm simply thrilled. I'd love to waltz with you.

"I'd love to waltz with you . . . I'd love to have my tonsils out, I'd love to be in a midnight fire at sea. Well, it's too late now. We're getting under way. . . .

"No, of course it didn't hurt. . . . And it was all my fault. You see, that little step of yours—well, it's perfectly lovely, but it's just a tiny bit tricky to follow at first. Oh, did you work it up yourself? You really did? Well, aren't you amazing? Oh, now I think I've got it. . . .

"I've got several other things, too, including a split shin and a bitter heart. I hate this creature I'm chained to. I hated him the moment I saw his leering, bestial face."

In 1955, she was saying, "I'm not going to do those he said–she said things any more; they're over. . . . I want to do the story that can only be done in the narrative form, and though they're going to scream about the rent, I'm going to do it."

But she did it only once before reverting to the form she had made her own. It was a form she continued to wrestle with, never satisfied that she had mastered it. As late as 1963—when the game was effectively over—she said, "I want to be taken seriously as a short story writer and, by God, I hope to make it."

She made it.

"Write novels, write novels, write novels—that's all they can say. Oh, I do get so sick and tired sometimes."

Certainly her publishers—encouraged by the commercial success of her collections of verse and short stories—could see no reason why the prolific Mrs. Parker couldn't turn that scalpel mind to the longer and even more commercial form. But she could say, "I'm quite incapable of it." She was well aware that, like most of her Round Table friends and contemporaries, she was not a marathon runner but a sprinter. "I'm a short-distance writer."

The nearest she ever got was to participate in an unusual exercise attempted by *Collier's* magazine early in 1925, when nineteen different writers contributed a chapter each to a gangster story called *Bobbed Hair*. The trick was to leave your episode in the most difficult position for your successor to pick up. Dorothy's ended as follows:

"David leaped to his feet in the wildly rocking boat. 'McTish!' he roared across the angry water.

"As he called, the girl had sprung up on the seat beside him. Her arm came swiftly down; there was a curious dull sound, as the revolver butt met his head.

"Slowly and not ungracefully, Mr. David Lacey crumpled up in a heap in the bottom of the boat (*To Be Continued*)."

The summer of 1929 was spent in France, and it's possible she thought a change of ambiance might provide new inspiration. Certainly she weakened enough to promise her Viking publisher, Harold Guinzburg, that she would start on "the novel" to be included in their 1930 list—and take an advance for so doing.

How someone who could take six months on a story thought she could manage a full-length novel in such a short time is hard to imagine—and, of course, she couldn't.

She seems to have tried hard enough to begin with and wrote page after page of what she gave as her working title—*The Events Leading Up to the Tragedy* and then *Sonnets in Suicide; or The Life of John Knox.*

Then the social life closed in on her, and the effort petered out. Visiting Guinzburg—who happened to be in France—for a further advance, she showed him an impressive pile of typed manuscript, omitting to mention that she had padded it out with carbons of old articles and letters from her friends.

The more she persevered, the more painful it became for her to deal with elements of the story that were, by the very nature of the way she wrote, about herself. Realizing that she could never complete her obligation, she panicked and attempted suicide by drinking a bottle of shoe polish. It was not the first, and it would not be the last, of her "cries for help."

Guinzburg and Viking rapidly backed off and published another collection of her short pieces instead. It seemed safer to leave the fragments of *Sonnets in Suicide* in a drawer, where they could not turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The episode, though magnified, was typical of the Parker modus vivendi. Any diversion that took her away from the pain of work was enough. When asked—as she frequently was—why she didn't give up the empty social life and go away and find herself, she would reply, "I can't . . . I don't know how."

> CHARLES: Thought, dear Mary, has its seasons and mine is at its Springtime. The tender buds are nigh to burst into rich heavy blossoms.
>
> MARY: "Tender buds?" "Rich heavy blossoms?" Charles, what in God's name is all this botany? The excuses I've heard for no work; but "buds" and "blossoms" . . .
>
> (*The Coast of Illyria*)

The cast of *The Coast of Illyria*. Back row, left to right: Edwin Whitner (Coleridge), Clinton Anderson (William Hazlitt), Harold Webster (George Dyer), and Wilson Brooks (Charles Lamb). Front row: John Hudson (Thomas De Quincey), Dorothy Parker, Ross Evans (co-author), and Rebecca Robb (Mary Lamb).

Right to the end, she never ceased to respect her God-given talent and would admit to Beatrice Ames Stewart, "I'm betraying it; I'm drinking. I'm not working. I have the most horrendous guilt."

When asked to describe her talent, most people would say that Dorothy Parker was a humorist. She saw herself otherwise.

"I don't want to be classed as a humorist," she would say in the mid-1950s. "It makes me feel guilty. I've never read a good, tough, quotable female humorist, and I never was one myself. I

couldn't do it. . . . A 'smart-cracker' they called me and that makes me sick and unhappy. There's a hell of a distance between wisecracking and wit. . . . Wit has truth in it; wisecracking is simply calisthenics with words."

Satire was "another matter" entirely. "They're the big boys. If I'd been called a satirist, there'd be no living with me."

She began to tell everyone that she wished she had never written a humorous line. "Why, I'm not even an amateur humorist," she would protest as early as 1934. "I am very serious, and quite hurt when people laugh at some of my most earnest endeavors." Coming from Dorothy Parker, that sounded like a clever line in itself.

In a preface to a collection of pieces by her friend S. J. Perelman, she would speculate on the subject.

"It is a strange force that compels a writer to be a humorist. It is a strange force, if you care to go back farther, that compels anyone to be a writer at all. . . . The writer's way is rough and lonely, and who would choose it while there are vacancies in more gracious professions, such as, say, cleaning out ferry boats? In all understatement, the author's lot is a hard one, and yet there are those who, in their pride and their innocence, dedicate their careers to writing humorous pieces. Poor dears, the world is stacked against them from the start, for everybody in it has the right to look at their work and say, 'I don't think that's funny.'

"There are quantities of those who, no doubt, in filling out a questionnaire put 'Occupation, humorist.' But their pieces are thin and tidy and timid. They find a little formula and milk it until it moos with pain. They stay with the good old comic symbols so that you won't be upset—the tyrannical offspring, the illiterate business associate, the whooping, devil-may-care old spinster (always reliable), the pitiable inadequacies of a man trying to do a bit of carpentry, the victorious criticisms of the little wife. . . . You have seen those pieces, and they were dead before the sun went down on the day on which they were published.

"I had thought, on starting this composition, that I should define what humor means to me. However, every time I tried to,

I had to go and lie down with a cold wet cloth on my head. Still, here I go. . . . Humor to me, Heaven help me, takes in many things. There must be courage; there must be no awe. There must be criticism, for humor, to my mind, is encapsulated in criticism. There must be a disciplined eye and a wild mind. There must be a magnificent disregard of your reader, for if he cannot follow you, there is nothing you can do about it. There must be some lagniappe in the fact that the humorist has read something written before 1918."

By the mid-1950s—when she was beginning to think retrospectively about a lot of things—she would conclude, "There aren't any humorists any more, except for Perelman. There's no need for them. Perelman must be lonely. . . . It's a question of supply and demand. If we needed them, we'd have them. The new crop of would-be humorists doesn't count. They write about topical topics. Not like Mr. Thurber and Mr. Benchley. Those two were damn well read and, though I hate the word, they were cultured. What sets them apart is that they both had a point of view to express. That is important to all good writing. . . . The writer must be aware of life around him. . . . For most of my reading I go back to the old ones—for comfort. As you get older, you go much further back.

"Humor now is too carefully planned. There is nothing of the old madness Mr. Benchley and some of the others had in my time, no leaping of minds."

Before dismissing her own efforts, she would have done well to go back only as far as Mr. Thurber—her *New Yorker* colleague since 1927—who had written his own apologia in 1951: "I write humor the way a surgeon operates, because it is a livelihood, because I have a great urge to do it . . . and because I have the hope that it may do some good."

CHAPTER

10

"Hooray for Hollywood!"

Hooray for Hollywood!
That screwy bally hooey Hollywood . . .

—Johnny Mercer

Seventy-two suburbs in search of a city.

—Robert Benchley

The only -ism Hollywood believes in is plagiarism.

—Dorothy Parker

Hollywood is the land of yes-men and acqui-yes girls.

—Attributed

The difference between a writer and a Hollywood writer . . . in Hollywood the writer comes into his office, takes off his coat, sits at his typewriter, puts the

paper in, puts his fingers on the keys, and waits for the phone to ring.

—Dorothy Parker

I hate Movies;
They lower my vitality.

—"Movies: A Hymn of Hate"

He it was who made, they say,
Movies what they are today;
This the goal for which he's tried—
Lord, I hope he's satisfied!

"David Wark Griffith"

THE FIRST freelance job Dorothy Parker had after being fired from *Vanity Fair* was writing titles for a movie at a newly opened studio in Mamaroneck, New York. The film was D. W. Griffith's *Remodeling Her Husband*, which was being directed by Griffith's favorite actress, Lillian Gish.

The job lasted precisely one week. To explain a shot in which the hero is having his nails manicured, Dorothy borrowed from Hamlet's speech to Horatio and wrote, "The divinity that shapes our ends." It was not quite what Miss Gish had in mind.

To be fair, she had made her views on the current crop of films quite apparent in one of her "Hymns of Hate":

MOVIES: A HYMN OF HATE

I hate Movies;
They lower my vitality.

There is the Great Spectacle,
Its press-agent admits
That it is the most remarkable picture ever made.
The story is taken from history,

But the scenario writer smoothes things over a little,
And makes Cleopatra Antony's wife,
Or has Salomé marry John the Baptist,
So you can bring the kiddies

There is the High Art Production:
They charge three dollars a seat for it—
That's where they get the "high."
The photography is always tricky;
The actors seem to be enveloped in a dense fog,
And that goes for the plot, too.

Then there is the Picture with Sex Appeal;
The appeal is still unanswered.
The production goes to show
That bad taste, off the screen,
Is still in its infancy.

In 1918, she wrote further of her taste in film: "If I were a movie manager (producer), I would never, under any conceivable circumstance, produce a picture that contained any of the following atrocities: A scene in which a mob chases a fleeing comedian; a close up of the leading lady taken with any kitten, puppy, canary, horse, calf, goldfish, pigeon, deer, monkey or any other fauna whatever; a close up of the leading lady showing large, well-formed tears sliding smoothly down her cheeks; any close up of any leading man and the leading lady, with their backs to the camera and their arms around each others' waist, walking slowly away towards the glowing West; a 'dual role' played by the star who takes the part of two people, one unbelievably noble and the other unspeakably wicked; a comedian whose humor only consists of his avoirdupois; a Western drama in which the town bad man is completely reformed by a little child; any early English hunting scene, taken at the Inn at Forest Hills, Long Island; and lastly, any picture of Mr. Francis X. Bushman."

In the late 1920s, she would describe a movie theater as "an enlarged and magnificently-decorated lethal chamber to me," and what applied to the movies also went for that other intrusive and fashionable medium: radio. She firmly refused to buy a set, and "there is no force great enough to make me."

Her attitude toward the Dream Factory of Hollywood softened appreciably, however, when Mr. Benchley was wooed and went there to begin his celebrated series of short films—some of the earliest films using sustained sound. Much as she admired her friend's achievement, Mrs. Parker found the movie sound tracks crude and annoying. She said she felt like shouting at the screen, "Oh, for heaven's sake, shut up!"

Her own maiden venture, so to speak, was a twenty-five-minute short satire subject for Paramount that she made in 1925 in collaboration with George S. Kaufman, which was in itself surprising since the two were never close. Neither ever spoke about it subsequently, and it sank without trace.

But before she could say "Francis X. Bushman," she was to find herself there in 1929 where so many of the Algonks were already in residence.

"I first went out to Hollywood so long ago that the movie actresses looked flat-chested."

Money was the lure—for once in chunks instead of drips. MGM offered her a three-month screenwriting contract at three hundred dollars a week for what seemed to her to be easy money. Money. She was to be "always hampered by money. . . . It always takes more to live on than what you earn," but this would at least keep the wolf from the Parker door pro tem.

"Why, I could do that with one hand tied behind my back and the other on Irving Thalberg's pulse."

She may have later revised that to "throat" because when she met the studio head, he clearly had no idea who she was or why she was there—hardly surprising when the studio publicity department sent out a release in which she was "the internationally known author of *Too Much Rope*, the popular novel."

(*Enough Rope*, her first collection of verse, had been a critical and popular success just a few years earlier!)

She was given an office. "It was a lovely office but the air was oppressive, and even though I opened the windows and opened the doors, it was still depressing."

She had few visitors, and it was at this time that she felt like telling the man who came to paint her name on the door to letter "Gentlemen" instead. So desperate did things become that when she spotted tourists visiting the studio, she would lean out of her window and shout ,"Let me out. I'm as sane as you are!"

How sane that was might have been open to doubt. She was shown a photograph in a Hollywood newspaper in which three elephants were dressed up as if for a wedding. One wore a clerical collar, one a top hat, and the other a bridal veil. Mrs. Parker looked at it and gave her considered opinion: "I give it six months."

Screenwriting, she was to find, was not what it might appear.

"Nobody can do anything alone. You are given a script that eight people have written from a novel four people have written. You then . . . write dialogue—what a curious word! Well, you know, you can't write dialogue without changing scenes. While you are doing it, eight people back of you are writing beyond you. Nobody is allowed to do anything alone."

If you behaved yourself, occasionally one of the movie moguls might "throw you down a tablet from Mount Sinai."

"You don't need any talents. . . . You need two things—you need skill and you need a fine memory, so if you know what they did in that wild picture in 1938, you're in!"

Over the years, she was to work on many scripts, often uncredited. To the last, she never seems to have mastered the trick the older hands (and hacks) had perfected. You wait until the film is cast and about to start shooting before you involve yourself in the screenplay—that way, the producers can't take you off the credits.

None of her later experiences changed her fundamental conviction.

"I don't believe the films have anything to do with writing except in a crossword-puzzle kind of way. Writing a script is drawing together a lot of ends which can be worked into a moving picture.

"It was a terrible bore, it was a strenuous bore. You sat there and you sat there and you sat there. That's what it was."

Nonetheless, if you agreed to do it, you did it to the best of your ability.

"You aren't writing for the love of it or the art of it or the hell of it or whatever; you are doing a chore assigned to you by your employer and whether or not he might fire you if you did it slackly makes no matter. You've got yourself to face, and you have to live with yourself. You don't—or, at least only in highly exceptional cases—have to live with your producer."

And the experience taught her something else about herself—"one of those eternal, universal truths that serve to make you feel much worse than you did when you started. And that is that no writer, whether he writes from love or for money, can condescend to what he writes. You can't stoop to what you set down on paper. No matter what form it takes, and no matter what the result, and no matter how caustically comic you are about it afterwards, what you did was your best. And to do your best is always hard going."

And, to make matters worse, "Everyone there wrote. I never saw such a thing. The nice man at the gates would write. The producer would write—and that was much worse."

She contributed additional dialogue to a couple of routine films, only to have it rejected as being unsuitable for children. ("God, and how I hate children!") She then contracted to work with Cecil B. DeMille on a film called *Dynamite*.

She was asked to write a theme song for it, and when her submission "Dynamite Man, I Love You" was turned down, it seemed a sensible idea to ask someone to explain what the picture was about.

Getting to see DeMille was "like riding a camel through the eye of a needle," but finally she managed it. DeMille took her

through a convoluted plot, which involved the wrongly accused hero sitting in his prison cell with only his guitar for company—and, of course, he'd need a song to sing, which is where Dorothy's contribution was to come in.

At a comparative loss for words, she could only mutter how the details were "just staggering."

"Ah, yes," DeMille replied, "zebras in *The King of Kings*," as if that explained everything.

It was only on a subsequent visit that she had the temerity to ask him where the zebras came in. He explained that they were pulling the chariots of Mary Magdalene. Unfortunately, when they kicked, their legs were inclined to break.

"Of course," said the sympathetic Mrs. Parker, "I should have known that."

"After some weeks I ran away. I could not stand it any more. I just sat in a cell-like office and did nothing. The life was expensive and the thousands of people I met were impossible. They never seemed to behave naturally, as if all their money gave them a wonderful background they could never stop to marvel over. I would imagine the Klondike like that—a place where people rush for gold. . . . I didn't get there in time . . . when there wasn't a party that was any good unless there were two dead bodies on the lawn."

As she took the train back to New York, she would reflect on her experience. She had known she would hate Hollywood, if only because of the palm trees, "the ugliest vegetable God created," and as for MGM, "Metro-Goldwyn-Merde" would be a better name for that "shit heap. . . . I hoped the whole industry would collapse. . . . It looks, it all feels as if it had been invented by a Sixth Avenue peep-show man."

But, of course, the industry was to have the last laugh. As one executive explained, there were many expatriates who liked to use Mrs. Parker's favorite appellation for Hollywood when they arrived—then stayed to eat it.

MRS. LATHAM: How do you like California, Miss Wykoff?

STELLA: I hate oranges.

(*The Ice Age*)

Dorothy Parker was not one of those who stayed, but she did return. In 1934, she married Alan Campbell, who persuaded her that they could conquer Hollywood by offering themselves as a writing "team." Mrs. Parker-Campbell—undeterred by the studio executive's comment—was all for "filing the whole thing under Horseshit," but Campbell persisted and negotiated a dual contract for them with Paramount: two hundred and fifty dollars a week for him and a thousand for Dorothy. When they proved successful, the joint fee was raised considerably. Although she did not expect the work to be any more rewarding, at least it would help reduce their debt ("Dottie's dowry").

There were, however, aspects of the contract she found less than appealing: "I see . . . that I am to work for Mr. Lee Tracy, the gentleman who micturated over Mexico. He does that, it appears, when he is not amused. I am planning to wear a shower-curtain to work."

After a while she would admit, "It's all right. No art but you can make a little money and clear up that national debt. . . . We're up to 1912 now."

Perhaps it was marriage that helped her adjust better to her physical surroundings, at least this time around.

"Aside from the work, which I hate like holy water, I love it here. There are any number of poops about, of course, but so are there in New York—or, as we call it, The Coast—and the weather's better here. I love having a house, I love its being pretty wherever you look." (She had, presumably, learned to love the palms.) "You could have the most remarkable house. You could have a pool, if you wished. I don't swim. My goodness, you could have so many things, and you said to yourself while you were there—

'For heaven's sake, I might as well live as good as I can while I have to be here.'"

Settling in, though, was not without its problems. They found a house they wanted to rent, but then the real estate agent found out who and what they were. In a letter to Woollcott, she explained the outcome, which was pure Hollywood.

"'Writers,' he said, 'And connected with the movies, too. No, thank you. We can't have that kind of people in this house.' You see the place is the property of Miss Ruth Etting and her former husband, known as Colonel Moe the Gimp. It is the house in which the embittered Gimp had shot Miss Etting's boyfriend through the bowels when he sneaked in and caught the boyfriend and Miss E in what the newspapers call an embrace. To me the story was lifted into the upper brackets by the fact that also present in the room was the Gimp's daughter by a former marriage. She had apparently drawn up a chair to watch. When the Gimp entered, she was so incensed at the interruption, she ran out of the room and returned with a gun to shoot Daddy with. But Daddy got it away from her and—well, so there he was with a gun in his hand and there was the boyfriend, right there, so—

"Well, anyway, that's the house from which we're barred, because we're writers."

A few such incidents caused her to christen the place "Sodom-in-the Sun . . . Poughkeepsie with Palms," and one day a single image crystallized the whole thing for her.

"I was coming down a street in Beverly Hills and I saw a Cadillac about a block long, and out of the side window was a wonderfully slinky mink, and an arm, and at the end of the arm a hand in a white suede glove wrinkled at the wrist, and in the hand was a bagel with a bite out of it."

Her arrival was like a reunion of the Round Table. She was given an office at Paramount. "A bit of cardboard with my name inked on it was tacked on the door. A soirée started at once . . . and lasted for several days. Men of letters, bearing gin bottles, arrived. Bob Benchley, halooing with laughter, as if he had come from the land of Punch and Judy, was there, and the owlish-eyed

satirist, Donald Ogden Stewart, beaming as at a convention of March Hares. One night at a flossy party Don appeared on the dance floor in a long overcoat. 'That's silly and showing off to dance in an overcoat,' said the great lady of the films in his arms. 'Please take it off.' Don did. He had nothing on underneath."

As in New York, it was the social life that brought Mrs. Parker to life and sharpened her verbal reflexes. One night, the inevitable party was going on in her suite at the Chateau Marmont. In the room immediately overhead was her other Viking publisher, George Oppenheimer. Suddenly, there was a loud crash from above: "Pay no attention. It's only George dropping another name."

Their "collaboration" would amount to Alan blocking out a scene while Dorothy endlessly knitted. When he had finished, she would add amusing dialogue.

"Alan and I are working on a little opera which was originally named *Twenty-Four Hours by Air*, but it has been kicking around the studio for a long time, during which aerial transportation has made such progress that is now called *Eleven Hours by Air*. By the time we are done, the title is to be, I believe, *Stay Where You Are* (When the film finally appeared it was, in fact, called *One Hour Late*.)

"Before this, we were summoned to labor on a story of which we were told only, 'Now we don't know yet whether the male lead will be played by Tullio Carminati or Bing Crosby. So just sort of write it with both of them in mind.' Before that we were assigned the task of taking the sex out of *Sailor Beware*. . . . They read our script and went back to the original version. The catch for the movies, it seemed, was that hinge of the plot where the sailor bets he will make the girl. They said that was dirty. But would they accept our change, that triumph of ingenuity where the sailor just bets he will make another sailor? Oh, no! Sometimes I think they don't know *what* they want." By "they" she meant the producers—her opinion of them in general was not high.

Of MGM's Hunt Stromberg, "If a doctor should tap one of his knees, probing for a reflex, both his feet would fly into the air at once, knocking off his shoes." Of another, "He hasn't got enough sense to bore assholes in wooden hobbyhorses."

One who had perhaps more sense than was good for him was the young and newly independent David O. Selznick. Dorothy and Alan were contracted to him to work on the 1937 *A Star Is Born*, a film to be described by the *New York Times* as "the most accurate mirror ever held before the glittering, tinseled, trivial, generous, cruel and ecstatic world that is Hollywood."

Dorothy Parker described a typical Selznick meeting in a letter to Alexander Woollcott.

"So last week the board of directors of Selznick Pictures, Inc. had a conference. The four members of the board sat around a costly table in an enormously furnished room, and each was supplied with a pad of scratch paper and a pencil. After the conference was over, a healthily curious young employee (*sic*) of the company went to look at the scratch pads. He found:

"Mr. David Selznick had drawn a seven-pointed star, before that, a six-pointed star, and before that again, a row of vertical lines like a little picket fence.

"Mr. John Whitney's pad had nothing at all on it.

"Dr. Gianinni, the noted California banker, had written over and over, in a long neat column, the word 'tokas,' which is Yiddish for 'arse.'

"And Mr. Mervan (*sic*) Cooper, the American authority on Technicolor, had printed on the middle of his page RIN-TIN-TIN.

"The result of the conference was that hereafter the company would produce twelve pictures a year instead of six.

"I don't know, I just thought you might wish to be assured that Hollywood does not change."

Despite her skepticism, *A Star Is Born* was a considerable success, and she and Alan received an Oscar nomination for that year. She claimed that she never saw the finished film: "I went to see it all alone for a few minutes." Nonetheless, it surely strengthened her underlying conviction—rarely expressed—that "people, once given the chance, would be as partial to good pictures as they once were to bad ones."

Oh come, my love, and join with me
The oldest infant industry.
Come seek the bourne of palm and pearl,
The lovely land of Boy-Meets-Girl,
Come grace this lotus-laden shore,
This Isle of Do-What's-Done-Before,
Come, curb the new, and watch the old win,
Out where the streets are paved with Goldwyn.

("The Passionate Screen Writer to His Love")

Even more surrealistic than the encounter with Selznick was the relationship with legendary producer Samuel Goldwyn, who paid the couple $5,200 a week as opposed to their average $2,000.

In the days of the major studios, a relative handful of people like Goldwyn—usually first-generation Jewish émigrés from other, unrelated industries—dictated the taste of Hollywood movies and pitched it to the lowest common denominator for the "melting pot" society they were providing with "product."

"Out in Hollywood, where the streets are paved with Goldwyn, the word 'sophisticate' means, very simply, 'obscene.' A sophisticated story is a dirty story. Some of that meaning has wafted eastward and got itself mixed up in the present definition. So that a 'sophisticate' means: one who dwells in a tower made of a Dupont substitute for ivory and holds a glass of flat champagne in one hand and an album of dirty postcards in the other."

Dorothy and Alan were assigned to *You Can Be Beautiful*, an already well-thumbed property about an Elizabeth Arden kind of character. Surely Dorothy could come up with a twist. How about making her a perfectly happy plain girl who turns into a discontented beauty?

At this Goldwyn exploded. This was precisely why Dorothy Parker, despite her great talent, wasn't more commercially successful—she refused to give the public what they wanted.

"But, Mr. Goldwyn, people don't *know* what they want until you give it to them."

"Nonsense," the mogul replied, "people want a happy ending."

"I know this will come as a shock to you, Mr. Goldwyn, but in all history, which has held billions and billions of human beings, not a single one ever had a happy ending."

Exit Mrs. Parker.

Goldwyn threw up his hands in despair. "Does anybody know what the hell that woman was talking about?"

Later they were providing additional dialogue for Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*. In the middle of the night, she was awakened by a phone call from Goldwyn.

"I've seen the rushes and that picture's communistic. It's communism pure and simple, I tell you!"

"But Sam, the story's set in the early 1900s. There wasn't any Communism then."

"Thank God!"

But perhaps the relationship was best summed up by this exchange:

GOLDWYN: Do you really say all those things which the papers report you say?
PARKER: Do *you*?

At that time she told an interviewer, "I say hardly any of those clever things that are attributed to me. I wouldn't have time to earn a living if I said all those things."

She was to claim that of all the films she ever worked on, *The Little Foxes* was the only one that ever satisfied her—"aside from the check every week." And when Goldwyn didn't pick up their option, a million-dollar-plus nest egg rode off into the sunset.

Her reputation continued to haunt her in Hollywood. Newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst—"the world's greatest son of a bitch" and the model for Orson Welles's

1941 *Citizen Kane*—built an ostentatious bungalow for his mistress Marion Davies with a statue of the Madonna at the entrance. A verse appeared in a rival paper with which Mrs. Parker was credited:

> Upon my honor
> I saw a Madonna
> Standing in a niche
> Above the door
> Of a prominent whore
> Of a prominent son of a bitch.

She indignantly denied authorship—not on grounds of taste but because she would never stoop to rhyming "honor" with "Madonna." She also recalled that as an actress, Miss Davies had two expressions: "joy and indigestion."

Hollywood in the late 1930s and early 1940s seemed to be full of that other species of émigré, the expatriate British actor. Mrs. Parker found their overly precise pronunciation increasingly irritating. When Herbert Marshall—freshly returned from the United Kingdom—was consulting his diary and talking about his busy "shedyule," she looked up from her knitting long enough to remark, "If you don't mind my saying so, I think you're full of skit."

Her observations of people's personal appearance were predictably barbed. Basil Rathbone she considered to be nothing but "two profiles pasted together"; a well-known gay English actor "simply buggers description"; and when an ambitious young actor whose own profile was sadly out of kilter confided his hopes for stardom, she replied ingenuously and encouragingly, "Oh, they've been *searching* for a new Cary Grant!"

She even played a bit part in one of her own films before she left Hollywood. One of her better screenplays was undoubtedly Alfred Hitchcock's 1942 industrial espionage ("spies and lies") thriller *Saboteur*.

Hitchcock made it a point to make a token appearance in each of his films, and he and Parker may be seen as the couple

in a car driving past when the hero (Robert Cummings) is apparently manhandling the heroine (Priscilla Lane). Mrs. Parker gave herself the one line, but it is typical. Observing the struggling couple, she remarks, "Oh, they must be *very* much in love!"

As early as 1940, she was persuading Alan to begin to fold their Hollywood tents. She insisted on selling their house. When she told him that "there descends on the house in the later afternoon what I would call a suicide light," that was enough to persuade him.

But leaving the place for good wasn't as easy as all that. In 1947, they were back working for Universal-International on an original screenplay, *Smash Up: The Story of a Woman*, which won them their second Oscar nomination—though, again, they didn't win. It was also the year that Dorothy Parker divorced Alan Campbell.

But even divorce didn't work for her, and in 1950 they remarried, though for much of the next few years they lived apart.

This time it would be fine. Alan returned to Hollywood, and eventually Dorothy rejoined him there for what proved to be their last hurrah.

They lived not in some grand mansion high in the Hollywood Hills but in a small wooden house in the suburbs. The address was Norma Place, but Mrs. Parker immediately rechristened it "Peyton Place West."

They had neighbors of varying degrees of fame and, in her critical eyes, eccentricity. There was starlet Tuesday Weld ("Have you met Tuesday Weld's mother, Wednesday yet?"—not one of her better lines), the touchy gay neighbor ("There he goes, tossing his Shirley Temple curls"), and the aging actress Estelle Winwood, who had once been Alan's lover ("And she was creaking even then"). When told that Miss Winwood had been cast in the film of *Camelot*, Parker said, "Playing a battlement, no doubt?"

And there was the other male neighbor who invited them all in to admire the portrait of himself he had just commissioned. It showed him full frontal nude with his genitalia somewhat enhanced. After contemplating it for a while, Dorothy said

admiringly, "It's so real, you almost feel he could speak to you, don't you?"

And then, when Alan died in 1963, it was finally and irrevocably over. In fact, it had been over for some time. Her outspokenness on political matters from the 1930s on had caused her to be "blacklisted" in the neurotic atmosphere of the early 1950s. Dorothy Parker was never convicted and imprisoned—as a number of her colleagues were—but she was effectively unemployable.

And so she returned to New York for good. "I get up every morning and want to kiss the pavement."

She would frequently reflect on her "fifteen years on and off" Hollywood experience, despite the fact that "I can't talk about Hollywood. It was a horror to me when I was there and it's a horror to look back on. I can't imagine how I did it. When I got away from it, I couldn't even refer to the place by name. 'Out there,' I called it. . . .

"[It] smells like laundry. The beautiful vegetables taste as if they were raised in trunks, and at those wonderful supermarkets you find that the vegetables are all wax. The flowers out there smell like dirty, old dollar bills. Sure, you make money writing on the Coast and God knows you earn it, but that money is like so much compressed snow. It goes so fast it melts in your hand.

"I do not feel that I am participating in a soft racket (and what the hell, by the way, is a *hard* racket?) when I am writing for the screen. Nor do I want to be part of any racket, hard or soft or three-and-a-half minutes. I have never in my life been paid so much, either. . . . But I can look my God and my producer—whom I do not, as do many, confuse with each other—in the face, and say that I have earned every cent of it."

CHAPTER

11

"You Might as Well Live": Drink, Suicide, and Other Forms of Death and Destruction

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

—"Resumé"

There's little in taking or giving,
There's little in water or wine;
This living, this living, this living,
Was never a project of mine.

—"Coda"

Sorrow is tranquility remembered in emotion.

—Dorothy Parker

Dorothy Parker yearned her living.

—Alexander Woollcott

It costs me never a stab nor squirm
To tread by chance upon a worm.
"Aha, my little dear," I say
"Your clan will pay me back one day."

—"Thought for a Sunshiny Morning"

DEATH WAS to become a leitmotif in Dorothy Parker's life—so much so that it became almost a joke. And since it was a joke that most of her real friends did not appreciate, she enjoyed it even more. Only Mr. Benchley could strike the appropriate tone. Visiting her in hospital after a suicide attempt, he remonstrated, "Dottie, if you don't stop this sort of thing, you'll make yourself sick."

Whether the premature death of two "mothers" gave her a morbid fascination with the subject or whether this was something inherent in her nature is open to question. Certainly, she idealized her real mother and brooded over her death.

The cool of linen calms my bed,
And there at night I stretch my length
And envy no one but the dead.

("Story of Mrs. W—")

Drawing by Lynne Carey.

Twenty-five years later, she was still brooding. "The dead are all so good!" The "wistful dead" were also "pompous":

> The earth is cool across their eyes;
> They lie there quietly.
> But I am neither old nor wise,
> They do not welcome me.
>
> ("The White Lady")

It became an early preoccupation in her life to anticipate the end of it. At various times she would compose her own epitaph—"Pardon My Dust," "This Is on Me," and "If You Can Read This, You Are Standing Too Close."

"I want to be buried in a shroud made of unpaid bills from Valentina. . . . I had long ago made my design for what was to become of me when the Reaper had swung his scythe through my neck. . . . I was to be cremated after death—at least, I always trusted it would be after death. I even left instructions to this effect in my will, a document that might otherwise be written in a large, school-girl backhand on the head of a pin. . . . Now I want to be left as approximately is, so that I may be buried in a prominent place on a traveled thoroughfare through a wildly popular cemetery. Above me I want a big white stone. . . . I like to think of my shining tombstone. It gives me, as you might say, something to live for."

Although after writing her will, the least she could now do, she said, was to die.

The death of close friends—which came thick and fast in her later years—depressed her greatly. As early as 1945, when Benchley died suddenly of a brain tumor, she murmured, almost to herself, "Isn't it a bit presumptuous of us to be alive now that Mr. Benchley is dead?"

Her favorite perfume—which she had imported from Clyclax of London—was tuberose, a heavy scent used by undertakers to mask the smell of a corpse. In her case, she used it to hide the pervasive evidence of alcohol.

Drink was a preoccupation, amounting to an occupation, with the Algonks and a vast proportion of the 1920s socialites—not least because it was illegal. "Bootleg hooch," as it was affectionately called, rotted many an articulate liver during the years of Prohibition (1919–1933). Nor did three packs of Chesterfields a day help.

Mrs. Parker—in her true autobiographical fashion—documented her own alcoholic odyssey in her O. Henry prize-winning story, "Big Blonde":

"She commenced drinking alone, little short drinks all through the day. . . . Alone, it blurred sharp things for her. She lived in a haze of it. Her life took on a dream-like quality. Nothing was astonishing. . . . She was never noticeably drunk and seldom nearly sober. It required a large daily allowance to keep her misty-minded. Too little, and she was achingly melancholy."

When Parker was alone, she complained of "the howling horrors." Scotch was her drink of choice, and she would often define her own mood as "Scotch mist." When trying to cut down, she would switch to highballs, "awfully weak; just cambric Scotch." When things got out of hand, she would excuse it as "just the effects of that new Scotch of mine which, friends tell me, must have been specially made by the Borgias." "White Hearse" was her name for cheap generic Scotch. Gin, fortunately, made her sick.

Asked what she would like for breakfast—"Just something light and easy to fix. How about a dear little whiskey sour? Make it a double, while you're up." The phrase became so associated with her that it eventually turned up in an advertising campaign for Grant's Stand Fast—"While you're up, get me a Stand Fast."

There has yet to be evidence that heavy drinkers are any better than the amateurs at avoiding the dreaded hangover. Mrs. Parker would often suffer from one "so impressive it should be referred to as 'we' . . . it ought to be in the Smithsonian under glass." She called the extreme version of the condition "the rams."

"The rams, as I hope you need never find out for yourself, are much like the heebie-jeebies, except that they last longer, strike deeper, and are, in general, fancier. The illness was contracted on

Thursday night at an informal gathering, and I am convinced it may be directly traced to the fact that I got a stalk of bad celery at dinner. It must have been bad celery, because you can't tell me that two or three sidecars, some champagne at dinner, and a procession of mixed Benedictine-and-Brandies, taking seven hours to pass a given point, are going to leave a person in that state where she is afraid to turn around suddenly lest she see a Little Mean Man about eighteen inches tall, wearing a yellow slicker and roller-skates. Besides the continued presence of the Little Mean Man, there are such minor symptoms as loss of correct knee action, heartbreak, an inability to remain either seated or standing, and a constant sound in the ears as of far-off temple bells. These, together with a readiness to weep at any minute and a racking horror of being left alone, positively identify the disease as the rams. Bad celery will give you the rams quicker than anything else. You want to look out for it. There's a lot of it around."

"Every time I took my head off the pillow, it would roll under the bed. This isn't my head I've got on now. I think this is something that used to belong to Walt Whitman."

A brief pre-Hollywood sojourn in Denver with her then actor husband, Alan, proved tedious, but it did provide one alcoholic insight. "Drinking here is quite an interesting experiment, because of the altitude. Two cocktails, and you spin on your ass."

Parker's doctor warned her on one occasion that if she didn't stop drinking, she would be dead within a month. "Promises, promises!" On another he told her he didn't like her kidneys. "I don't like your nose."

Benchley persuaded her to consult Alcoholics Anonymous. She returned to report that she had been and found the whole organization perfectly wonderful. "So are you going to join?" Benchley asked. "Certainly not. They wanted me to stop *now*."

Age was another concern. Shakespeare might write as much as he liked about age not withering nor custom staling a woman's infinite variety, but Dorothy Parker wasn't buying it. When in 1944 she hit her fiftieth birthday, she knew he was full of her favorite word.

"This is it, you know, baby. This is the one that does it. You have said farewell to the thirties for the tenth and last time. Now you face it, baby. Now you take it smack in the teeth, baby. Quote, baby, unquote.

"A fine lot of good that ever did, trying to lie about your age. The most you could plausibly knock off was a couple of years, and what's a couple of sandspits to an archipelago? Perhaps if you had moved to a strange city and given it out that you had had a terribly tragic life, spent mostly in the tropics, you might have been able to subtract something worthwhile.

"Well, all right, Middle Age. You've been hanging around here for ten years. Take your foot out of the door and come on in. . . . No—please wait a minute. . . . Please, just another minute. . . . I can't quite. . . .

"It's the word 'middle.' Any phrase it touches becomes the label of the frump; middle of the road, middle class, middle age. If only you could leap those dreary decades and land up in the important numbers. There is chic to seventy, elegance to eighty.

"People ought to be one of two things, young or old. No; what's the good of fooling? People ought to be one of two things, young or dead.

Drink and dance and laugh and lie;
Love, the reeling midnight through,
For tomorrow we may die!
(But, alas, we never do.)

("The Flaw in Paganism")

If wild my breast and sore my pride,
I bask in dreams of suicide;
If cool my heart and high my head,
I think "How lucky are the dead!"

("Rhyme against Living")

"Oh, come in Middle Age, come in, come in! Come close to me, give me your hand, let me look in your face. . . . Oh. . . . Is that what you are really like? . . . Oh, God help me . . . help me."

There were at least half a dozen recorded attempts at suicide and probably several more. How serious they were is hard to tell.

The first was in January 1923 with her husband Eddie's razor. When told—presumably jokingly!—that she should have cut deeper, she responded with one of her Inept Eddie lines—"The trouble was Eddie hadn't even been able to sharpen his own razors."

Even so, she took care to order room service before doing so. On another occasion involving an overdose of sleeping pills, she threw the glass through the bedroom window, thereby ensuring the strong likelihood of someone coming to investigate the incident. Next to Scotch—and often with it—sleeping pills were an addiction with her. She took them, she said, "in a big bowl with sugar and cream."

Serious attempts—or cries for help? Only her psychiatrist would know for sure, and she would have run a mile rather than consult one and be told to do what she had no intention of doing.

Other people's suicides held no interest for her. When told that an ex-lover had blown his brains out in an airport, she is supposed to have said, "What else could he do?" And then to add—in a remark that would be echoed in the one she was to make after Alan's own sudden death—"There goes my whipping boy; I hope he left his whips behind."

Certainly, the theater of her *own* suicide put her center stage with her friends—until they eventually tired of the act.

When Benchley visited her in hospital the first time, he found her in an oxygen tent. "May I please have a flag for my tent?" she asked. He was not amused.

Hospital stays were a return to the womb. Someone was there to look after her—more or less. Woollcott once visited her in "Bedpan Alley," only to have her ring the bell for the nurse. Why had she done that? Was something wrong? It was, she explained, the only way to assure them of "forty-five minutes of absolute privacy."

The only problem with a hospital stay was the inevitable bill. The first was paid by a loan—which she eventually repaid—from silent screen star John Gilbert ("a dear but he never wants to go to bed"). Dorothy would frequently have to depend on the kindness of friends, if not strangers, being, she insisted, "poorer than poverty itself" because of her profligate lifestyle. This was something her friends completely failed to understand since she received generous advances and royalties from her publishers. What they did not realize until after her death was her habit of throwing her checks to the back of a drawer and forgetting all about them. When she died, some $20,000 worth of them was found there.

Her mind, she said, was "a little den of demons," and there is little doubt that had she been able and willing to consult a specialist today, he would have diagnosed her condition as manic depression and put her on a course of antidepressants. In the Age of Prozac, would we have experienced the tortured brilliance of the Age of Dorothy Parker, or would we have had to settle for the well-mannered "little verse" of a sedated little lady?

CHAPTER

12

Songs and Plays: An Intermission

"DOROTHY PARKER—SONGWRITER" and "Dorothy Parker—Playwright" are not concepts that spring readily to mind, though, in fact, she wrote a number of both over the years. She never regarded herself as being particularly musical and as a performer restricted herself to playing the triangle at the occasional ad hoc musical evenings at the apartment of painter Neysa McMein.

Playing music was one thing, but writing *lyrics*, as she confided to her *Vanity Fair* readers in a 1919 article, was something absolutely anyone could do "in your spare time, in the privacy of your own room," and was infinitely preferable to "selling used cars."

She was talking—she hastened to add—about songs for musical comedies, which were totally interchangeable. Beginners should avoid the "intimate" musicals, such as those currently being devised by Messrs. Wodehouse, Bolton, and Kern. Many of

their lyrics "have had words of three and four syllables, while several of them contained references to Caesar, Cleopatra, Galahad and like obscure characters." No, "your lyrics should appeal to the man of average intellect . . . and let it go at that. . . .

"It doesn't matter in the least about the plot of the comedy that your lyrics will adorn. Any set of lyrics will fit in any musical show—that's the trick of it. As they are all on such timely topics as love, moonlight, roses, Spring and you, you, you, they can be worked in any place and any time. . . .

"In case you don't happen to remember exactly the songs in the last dozen or so musical comedies, here are a few general rules to follow, if you want to be a successful lyricist.

"In the first place, never bother about the opening choruses. Let the assembled super-numeraries sing any words that they can think of. No one will pay any attention to them, anyway. During the first one, the ushers will be showing late theatre-parties to their seats, and explaining to the people already in those seats that their tickets were for the night before last. During the opening choruses of the following acts, all those gentlemen who just stepped out to find out the right time will be laboriously and apologetically climbing back into their mid-row places. All this will cause such a pleasant bustle among the audience that only experienced lip-readers could tell what those on the stage were singing. So you don't have to worry about that. Just so long as they all end together, very high, on something like 'Hurray!' or 'Be gay!'—or 'Some night!'—or anything in that spirit, all will be well.

"It is always advisable to get the big song hit in early, and then repeat it at fifteen minute intervals during the show. Have each member of the cast sing it at least once, let the orchestra play it between the acts and as an exit number, and have it frequently rendered on bells, secreted in different parts of the house. *Make* the audience like it.

"It will, of course, be about love. What else is there to write about? Always remember that it is unethical to use plain 'dove,' or ungarnished 'above,' as a rhyme for 'love'; 'dove' must only be used in 'cooing dove,' while 'above' may be employed in one of

two ways—either 'true as the skies above,' or 'I'll swear by the stars above.' In this song, as in every other, always strive to make rhymes more intricate than is absolutely essential. When in doubt about rhyming words, always take the more difficult way—that is the only rule you need remember.

"The song hit you will find, will develop somewhat along these lines:

I've traveled all around the world,
    In every sort of clime.
I've met most every kind of girl,
    And some I thought were fine.
But since I first loved you, I'd like
    To always settle down,
Because, from morn till late at night,
    Love makes the world go round.

Chorus:
For love is always love,
    Most everybody knows.
I'll be true as skies above,
    Like the sunshine is true to the rose.
Yes, love is always love—
    Just ask the cooing dove,
In all sorts of weather,
    Love lingers forever,
For love is always love.

"As a finale to your first act, you must work in a song in which the entire troupe is going somewhere. They must always be on the point of starting for some other place, as the first curtain falls—this is essential. It brings out that free unhampered spirit that people in musical comedies always have. . . .

"No, one of the principals just says, 'Let's go to Samoa—how about it, girls?' and the cast simply rushes out into the wings, gets its suitcases and troops back again, all ready to start.

"The going-away song is rendered by a lady in a traveling costume composed chiefly of field-glasses. The chorus goes rather like this:

I'm on my way to Samoa,
To sit on that beautiful shore.
Though everyone sighs,
I am saying goodbye.
For I'm sailing the sea o'er to Samoa.

"In the second act, always bring in a specialty song. It is a novel conceit to have the *ingénue* come out in pink rompers, and lisp a ballad of sweet innocent childhood. Remember that all children's songs must be about sex problems—this is their only accepted subject. Here's your chance to let yourself go on the lyrics:

I've a little baby brother,
We have had him most a year.
Both my father and my mother
Say the stork has brought him here.
But I know just where I'm at,
Though I've never been to school.
If they think I fall for that—
Gee, they must think I'm a fool!

Chorus:
I know a thing or two, you bet,
Though I don't make a splurge.
Though I am hardly seven yet,
I've felt the cosmic urge!
That stork stuff bores me most to tears,
It's simply too absurd—
Why, I've known for the last four years
That there ain't no such bird.

"In the last act, of course, there has to be a patriotic number. Something has to be done to use up all the uniforms,

American flags, and back drops showing the entire army in action. The managers bought up the entire market of these properties and then the war went and stopped on them. Those things must be used! A song like this will stop the show:

Now our boys are back once more,
For the conflict now is o'er.
To their homes once more they come
After vanquishing the Hun.
Over there, the fighting's over,
They are coming back to mother,
Guns no more upon their shoulders.
All are welcoming our soldiers!

Chorus:
They are back to the land of Liberty,
After saving the world for democracy.
They have sailed o'er the foam
And they're coming back home,
To the old Red, White and Blue.
While the brass band plays the "Marseillaise,"
We will welcome every man
Who has fought for Uncle Sam
For they saved the world for I and you.

And then she proceeded to take her own advice.

The first Parker lyric that can be verified was for an amateur revue put on by the Round Tablers on April 30, 1922. Inspired by the hit show *Chauve-Souris*, they devised *No, Sirree!* (The exclamation mark was obligatory for musical shows of the period.) It was billed as "An Anonymous Entertainment by the Vicious Circle of the Hotel Algonquin."

By all accounts, both the content and the performances were amateurish in the extreme—the only exception being Robert Benchley's monologue "The Treasurer's Report" (which was *meant* to sound so). On the strength of it, Irving Berlin (who had

conducted the orchestra) and his partner Sam Harris signed Benchley up for their own new *Music Box Revue* and started him off on what was to become his alternative and lucrative career as a performer.

Mrs. Parker's contribution was to write the lyrics of a song called "The Everlastin' Ingenue Blues," which was sung by Robert Sherwood and a chorus line that included Tallulah Bankhead and Helen Hayes. (Sherwood was to adapt the idea of the amateur hoofer for Alfred Lunt years later in his 1936 play *Idiot's Delight.*) It ran, in part,

GIRLS: We've got the blues,
We've got the blues—
We believe we said before—
We've got the blues . . .
We are little flappers, never growing up,
And we've all of us been flapping
Since Belasco was a pup . . .
1ST GIRL: I'm an ingénue and I've got the blues . . .
2ND GIRL: . . . as anyone can plainly see . . .
3RD GIRL: Because an ingénue
Must promise to . . .
4TH GIRL: . . . imprison her virginity.
1ST GIRL: I checked my maidenhead
In my producer's bed . . .
2ND GIRL: Oh gosh, I guess the joke's on me!

No, Sirree! was, fortunately, always intended as a one-performance phenomenon and pleased the participants, if no one else. It must also have given its occasional lyricist a taste for the form since we find her two years later contributing to another not-much-longer-lived show devised by Algonks George S. Kaufman and Herman Manckiewicz, *Round the Town*, with two songs—"It's Good for You to Exercise Your Mind" (music by Arthur Samuels) and "Romeo, Juliet, Johnny and Jane" (with music by the legendary Victor Herbert).

None of those lyrics appears to be extant, so the first *published* Parker lyric was the one she wrote for DeMille's 1929 film *Dynamite*. Having had her first, tongue in cheek (?) submission, "Dynamite Man, I Love You," turned down, she and composer Jack King came up with the following:

HOW AM I TO KNOW?
(Sung by Russ Columbo)

Delicate moon,
Over the silent lane,
Lighten the dark, show me the answer plain,
Here in my breast, wakens my heart,
When will it rest? Why does it start?
Delicate moon, what is this lovely pain,
For . . .
Oh,
How am I to know
If it's really love
That found its way here?
Oh,
How am I to know,
Will it linger on and leave me then?
I dare not guess at this strange happiness,
For . . .

Oh,
How am I to know,
Can it be that love
Has come to stay here,
Stay here?

Glittering star,
Low in the misty blue,
Brighten my dream, tell me at last it's true,
How shall I learn, but from above?

Where shall I turn, looking for love?
Glittering star, maybe I always knew,
But . . .

Oh,
How am I to know . . . etc

In 1934, she wrote a song with music by Ralph Rainger:

I WISHED ON THE MOON

Ev'ry night was long and gloomy,
Shadows gathered in the air.
No one ever listened to me.
No one wondered did I care.
None in all the world to love me,
None to count the stars that hung.
Then the moon came out above me
And I saw that it was young.

I wished on the moon
For something I never knew,
Wished on the moon
For more than I ever knew.
A sweeter rose,
A softer sky,
An April day
That would not dance
Away

I begged of a star
To throw me a beam or two,
Wished on a star
And asked for a dream or two.
I looked for ev'ry loveliness,
It all came true.
I wished on the moon for you.

Then a long silence until—in 1956—she became involved with a project that eventually sank under the weight of the collective talents involved in it.

Voltaire's satirical novel *Candide* (1759) was at the heart of it with a book by Lillian Hellman, score by Leonard Bernstein, and lyrics by poet Richard Wilbur, critic James Agee, lyricist John Latouche—and Dorothy Parker.

"I had only one lyric in it. It didn't work out very well. . . . Thank God I wasn't there while it was going on. There were too many geniuses involved, you know."

She was to blame Bernstein for the fact that the show didn't gel. The professional polymath had to have a hand in every aspect of it. "Lenny Bernstein has to do everything . . . and to do it better than anybody—which he does—except the lyrics. The idea was, I think, to keep Voltaire, but they didn't. But everyone ended up good friends except John Latouche, who died."

There were those who said that if Bernstein did too much, Parker did too little, and for that they were inclined to blame her perpetual partners—Haig and Haig—though Bernstein himself found her "very sweet, very drunk, very forthcoming."

In fact, she had *two* lyrics in the original production but one of them—"Two Hearts So True"—was cut on the road. The song that survived was a quartet:

THE VENICE GAVOTTE

(Quartet: The Old Lady, Candide, Cunegonde, Pangloss)

OLD LADY: I've got troubles, as I said:
Mother's dying, Father's dead.
All my uncles are in jail.
CANDIDE: It's a very moving tale.
OLD LADY: Though our name, I say again is
Quite the proudest name in Venice,
Our afflictions are so many,
And we haven't got a penny.

CANDIDE: Madam, I am desolate
At your fam'ly's tragic state.
Any help that I can give . . .
Please do tell me where they live.
I shall look them up tomorrow
And alleviate their sorrow
With a check made out to bearer.
In the meantime, *buona sera.*

CUNEGONDE: We've got troubles, as she said:
Mother is dying, Father's dead.
All her uncles are in jail . . .

CANDIDE: (*anxious to leave*)
It's a very moving tale.

CUNEGONDE: Although our name, I say again is,
Quite the proudest name in Venice,
All her uncles are in jail.
It is a very moving tale, a moving tale, a moving tale.

OLD LADY: Although our name, I say again is,
Quite the proudest name in Venice,
All our uncles are in jail,
It is a very moving tale, a moving tale, a moving tale.

CANDIDE: (*edging off*)
Ah, what a tale!
Ah, what a moving tale!

(*They exit together.* PANGLOSS *emerges through the crowd with a masked* PAQUETTE *on his arm and flanked by a chorus of ladies.*)

PANGLOSS: Millions of rubies and lire and francs
Broke the bank, broke the bank.
Broke the best of all possible banks.
Pieces of gold to the ladies I throw
Easy come, easy go.

Shining gold to the ladies I throw.
See them on their knees before me.
If they love me, can you blame them?
Little wonder they adore me.
Watch them woo me as I name them:
Lady Frilly,
Lady Silly,
Pretty Lady Willy-Nilly,
Lady Lightly,
Lady Brightly
Charming Lady Fly-By-Nightly.
My Lady Fortune found me.
What a joy to have around me
Lovely ladies, six or seven;
This is my idea of heaven.
Fortune, keep the wheel a-spinning, spinning,
They adore me while I'm winning.
Lady Frilly,
Lady Silly,
Pretty Lady Willy-Nilly,
Lady Lightly,
Lady Brightly,
Charming Lady Fly-by-Nightly.
Fools love only one or two
Ladies, I love all of you

(*Enter* CUNEGONDE, *the* OLD LADY, CANDIDE, *all still masked. They reprise their earlier songs in counterpoint. Screams of recognition when their masks are knocked off.*)

CUNEGONDE: Ah, Candide!

OLD LADY: Ah!

CANDIDE: Ah! Cunegonde!

PANGLOSS: Ah!
(*They exit*)

STELLA: Writing a play should be like robbing a bank.
Meticulously planned and worked on in secrecy.
(*The Ice Age*)

The show that should have made all concerned for their fortunes ran for only seventy-three performances. It was, she remembered, "so over-produced that you couldn't tell what was going on at all," and, indeed, there does seem to be a fatal flaw there somewhere since the two major attempts to revive the piece have fared no better than the original.

From her teens, she had been nursing "vaguely theatrical ambitions" of an unspecified nature, but there is no evidence that Dorothy Parker—Playwright took pen in hand until after she had been fired as Dorothy Parker—Critic.

That came in late 1922, when, oblivious to the reception of *No, Sirree!*, the Algonks decided to put on a full-scale revue called *The Forty-Niners*. Parker and Benchley concocted a sketch called "Nero," which contrived to include a solitaire-playing Cardinal Richelieu, Queen Victoria, the Generals Lee and Grant, and the New York Giants. It was seen just fifteen times—which was the length of the commercial run.

Two years later, she decided to write a full-length play. Once again, the raw material was drawn from her own life—or, rather, on her observation of Robert Benchley's. For the more than a quarter century they knew each other; he was her best friend and soul mate:

FOR R.C.B.

Life comes a-hurrying,
Or life lags slow;
But you've stopped worrying—
Let it go!

Some call it gloomy,
Some call it jake;
They're very little to me—
Let them eat cake!
Some find it fair,
Some think it hooey,
Many people care;
But we don't, do we?

When they both first became involved with the Round Table, Benchley was a militant teetotaler, but it was not long before he fell off the wagon and was leading the social parade. Despite this, he remained married to Gertrude, his wife of many years, and would maintain his home with her and their two sons.

In Mrs. Parker's eyes, this little piece of suburban domesticity was an utter sham, and she enshrined it in her first short story, "Such a Pretty Little Picture." She revisited the subject when she came to start her play *Soft Music* and found the material flowing from her typewriter instead of taking its usual constipated course.

She showed the first act to a producer friend, who advised her that it needed work and suggested he find her a seasoned collaborator. The man he came up with was Elmer Rice, often referred to at the time as "America's Ibsen." He had enjoyed a huge critical success with his expressionistic play about our mechanized society, *The Adding Machine*.

Frankly, Rice needed the money and readily agreed to work with the neophyte playwright. She was "so proud" to be working with him, and they soon developed a working method where she would do the writing and he would help with the all-important construction of the piece.

"I was just trembling all the time, because Elmer Rice had done so many good things, and here was I, a small cluck." How could they possibly fail?

One reason was a little thing called personal chemistry. Rice appears to have pursued his concept of collaboration way beyond the professional. Since he was not handsome or stupid, it was

presumably his ruthless pursuit that finally made her agree to go to bed with him a few times—when she found him to be, as she would say later, "without question the worst fuck I ever had."

The play was the story of a mild suburban husband, dominated by a saccharine shrew of a wife and a whining daughter, who discovers the spark of his manhood in the friendship of the ex-showgirl who lives next door. Convention and commitment are finally too strong to allow him to leave, but by the final curtain the worm has most definitely turned.

Since this was her first play, Mrs. Parker chose to follow its out-of-town tryout. She was not impressed with what she saw and declared the play "insipid." When at the dress rehearsal the director Arthur Hopkins began to worry about the unfettered and mobile bosom of the actress playing the showgirl, he asked Dorothy, "Don't you think she ought to wear a brassière in this scene?" "God, no. You've got to have *something* in the show that moves."

She characterized his laissez-faire attitude toward the actors as "the Arthur Hopkins honor system of direction." Nonetheless, she found the experience of watching her work come to life fascinating.

By the time the play opened in New York, its title had been changed to *Close Harmony*, and she was sufficiently encouraged by its reception to organize an opening-night party at The Algonquin. The critics were predictably kind. Who, after all, wished to incur the Parker wrath? The public, however, were less inclined. They withheld their praise and their presence.

The play's commercial chances were not helped by scheduling its first night to coincide with Fred and Adele Astaire's opening in the Gershwins' *Lady, Be Good.*

After a disastrous matinee in the third week, she sent Benchley a cable: "CLOSE HARMONY DID A COOL NINETY DOLLARS AT THE MATINEE. ASK THE BOYS IN THE BACK ROOM WHAT THEY WILL HAVE."

The play closed in New York after twenty-four performances. It then went on a lengthy tour (as *The Lady Next Door*) in which it

was just as successful as it had been pre-Broadway. But it was Broadway that mattered to Dorothy. In later years, she found it difficult to discuss what had happened, merely apologizing for the fact that "it was dull. . . . How do you know about your own? . . . You have my apologies."

Nevertheless, she would still maintain that she liked "to do a play more than anything. First night is the most exciting thing in the world. It's wonderful to hear your words spoken."

Mrs. Parker and Mr. Benchley once came close to writing a full-length play together—only a succession of highballs came in the way.

The year 1926 saw Benchley determined to settle down to some serious writing after what he saw as the diversion of his Broadway revue stint. He took a room in the Royalton Hotel, literally across 44th Street from The Algonquin—a geographical mistake in itself—and there he and Mrs. Parker settled down to write their play.

To begin with, they thought they had found an original shorthand way to construct it. Instead of names, their characters would initially have numbers—1, 2, 3, 4, and so on. They soon found that stage directions such as "1 moves upstage, while 2 shrinks against backdrop" had more in common with chess than theater.

Then—their play hardly begun—Benchley received the call to go to Hollywood. Mrs. Parker decided to keep the room and promised Mr. Benchley that she would "hold the fort—so long as I can drink with the Indians." The Indians proved so thirsty that she soon gave up the room.

She tried again in the early years of her marriage to Alan. The theatrical trade press in late 1939 spoke confidently of Guthrie McClintic's forthcoming production of *The Happiest Man*—their adaptation of Miklos Laszlo's original Hungarian play. It would star Ruth Gordon and Walter Huston . . . no, Burgess Meredith . . . no Paul Muni with Otto Preminger producing. In the event—no event.

It was 1947 in Hollywood before she would try again.

Once again—perhaps not surprisingly, all in all—the subject matter was not exactly upbeat. *The Coast of Illyria*—the reference being to the imaginary place where Shakespeare shipwrecks his characters in *Twelfth Night*—dealt with the life of the demented Mary Lamb and included a drugged-up DeQuincey, Coleridge, and, of course, brother Charles. Almost all the characters had at least one fatal flaw or antisocial habit connected to drink or drugs. It was an environment in which the author would, by this time, have felt completely at home. Reading it today, it also becomes clear that the main strand of the piece was drawn from her own destructive relationship with Alan Campbell. "I am Mary Lamb. Do you see that?" she said to the actress playing the part.

This time her collaborator was Rosser (Ross) Evans, who possessed all the other Parker qualifications. Sadly, he lacked any writing ability, but he *could* type—and he had one other thing to recommend him that she had observed on first meeting him; he was almost always drunker than she was. Naturally, they became lovers.

The play was put on in Dallas for a three-week run in April 1949, the critics paying it fulsome compliments and rating it even more favorably than Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke*, which had also premiered there.

Mrs. Parker was again overjoyed. There was talk of Broadway and a production at the Edinburgh Festival. The play was to be retitled *Strange Calamity* or perhaps *The Incomparable Sister*—no, it would be *Mary Is from Home*. And then—nothing.

The relationship with Evans ended unpleasantly a few months later, and she went back to Alan. Later she would conclude, "*Coast* was just plain silly. It was so full of atmosphere that there was nothing else in it. Nothing happened at all, nothing whatever."

Collaboration became something of a social gambit with Dorothy. Joseph Bryan III was a young southern aristocrat she met at a party. He had recently contributed an article to *The New*

> MARY: In spite of all our friends in the audience, the hisses drowned out the applause.
>
> CHARLES: Hisses always do. They come more deeply from the heart . . . I joined in the hissing. I was so damnably afraid of being taken for the author.
>
> (*The Coast of Illyria*)

Yorker and—since he was young and good-looking—"little Mrs. Parker" couldn't have been more impressed. Shooing the other guests away from her immediate vicinity, she sat Bryan down and looked at him soulfully.

"I've just met you, and here I am about to ask you a favor. It's not will you collaborate with me on a play, but how soon can you start?"

They arranged to meet at her apartment the following morning, but when the eager young collaborator arrived, it was clear that not only had she forgotten what they were to meet about—she didn't even remember meeting him.

Her last produced attempt was in every way her most successful, once again a collaboration (with playwright Arnaud d'Usseau): *The Ladies of the Corridor*. D'Usseau was an old friend and political colleague from Hollywood days. When they met again at a New York party in 1952, she asked him the obligatory question one writer asks another: What was he writing?

Jokingly, he replied that he was about to start working on a play with Dorothy Parker. "That's strange," she replied. "Only the other day I was discussing an idea for a play I'm planning to write with Arnaud d'Usseau."

She would claim that they started by working on a murder mystery, but "we dropped it when we found we liked the murderers too much."

In fact, she had been nurturing an idea inspired by her own stay in a residential hotel, the Volney. Changing the name of the hotel to the Marlowe, she and d'Usseau began to work.

It was to be about ladies in retirement. "[They] are not young. But they take excellent care of themselves, and may look forward to twenty good years, which will be spent . . . doing what they are doing in the present, which is nothing at all. . . . They should be better trained" [she added censoriously], "adjusted to live a life without a man." She saw it as a feminist play with the message that women should "stop sitting around and saying 'It's a man's world.'"

In her introduction to the text, she writes, "The theme of *The Ladies of the Corridor* is the wasted lives of these women who live alone in small residential hotels throughout the United States. They have plenty of money and more than plenty of time; their only occupation is to spend one and kill the other. . . . Mostly they are widows (there are over seven million widows in the United States), some less fortunate are divorced, and there's an infrequent nondescript who is only separated . . . [it] is told in a series of scenes, and though the subject is a sad one, the ladies themselves, some on purpose, provide an appreciable amount of humor."

The humor, however, is frequently painful and personal, and one does not need to stretch far to see the fifty-nine-year-old Dorothy Parker in more than one of the characters.

There is the separated Mildred Tynan.

"Mildred is perhaps thirty-five; she is small and delicately made and she must have been an extraordinarily pretty girl; now there's a strain and an apprehension about her, but she keeps a curiously touching charm that should have somebody to protect it."

Mildred's problem is alcohol. Drink "makes you a different person. You're not yourself for a little while, and that's velvet. . . . A couple of drinks and I've got some nerve. Otherwise I'm frightened all the time." With the self-pity, though, goes a self-deprecating black humor. "I'm giving up solitaire. I can't win

even when I cheat. . . . Maybe I could give music lessons to backward children? . . . I finally got so I could play "The Minute Waltz" in a minute and a half."

Then there is Connie Mercer, whose husband deserted her.

"He found somebody who was young for the first time. So then there was a succession of transients [for me]. . . . The one-night stands don't do any good. I found that out. There's got to be fondness and there's got to be hope."

Mildred would agree.

"I couldn't believe things could ever be rotten. . . . Well, I kept hoping, hoping. I'm the damnedest hoper you ever saw in your life . . . I can hope about anything."

The Ladies of the Corridor opened on Broadway in October 1953. Critic George Jean Nathan then hailed it as the best play of the year.

For Dorothy, there was one major disappointment. After the opening, the producer, Harold Clurman, insisted on changing the suicide ending she had written to give the play a final note of hope. "It wasn't right, you see . . . I had written a very bitter play, but true. . . . It was the only thing I have ever done in which I had great pride."

Clurman's decision may well have confirmed the play's fate, for it closed forty-five performances later. But maybe the fact that it *was* so palpably true was what also made it too painful to watch. Nathan called it "completely honest." To paraphrase George S. Kaufman on satire, "Honesty is what closes in six weeks."

The near success—as the authors saw it—encouraged them to have one more try. *The Ice Age* was a depressing story of a weak, handsome man dominated by his mother. He goes to work in an art gallery, where he is seduced by the sadistic gallery owner, whom he eventually kills.

In it—for those familiar with her life—were her feelings toward Alan's mother, Hortense, and her concerns over his (as she saw it) ambiguous sexuality. It was both too personal and

not sufficiently original for the Broadway of 1955. Producer Robert Whitehead took up an option, more out of kindness to Dorothy than through any real conviction in the play. In due course, he let the option quietly drop, and that was that.

The verdict on Dorothy Parker—Playwright must surely be that she was the victim of her own tragicomic vision, a vision that prevented her from writing either pure comedies or undiluted tragedies. She left her audiences in two minds—a state that would have been unmercifully lampooned by Dorothy Parker—Critic.

More successful than any of the plays Dorothy Parker wrote were the plays written *about* her. Actress Ruth Gordon (*Over 21*, 1930) and Mrs. Parker's publisher, George Oppenheimer (*Here Today*, 1932), both incorporated a Parkeresque character in their plays.

Asked whether she would ever contemplate writing an autobiographical play, Parker replied, "No chance. If I ever wrote a play about myself, George Oppenheimer and Ruth Gordon would sue me for plagiarism."

CHAPTER

13

"Rose-Colored Bifocals": Parker and Politics

I cannot tell you on what day what did what to me.

—Dorothy Parker

My heart and soul are with the cause of socialism.

—Dorothy Parker

They were progressive days [the 1930s]. We thought we were going to make the world better—I forget why *we thought it, but we did.*

—Dorothy Parker

Stop looking at the world through rose-coloured bi-focals.

—Dorothy Parker's advice to a young reactionary

These are not the days for little, selfish, timid things. . . . Oh, the years I have wasted being a party girl and smartcracker, when I could have been helping all the unfortunate people in the world.

—Dorothy Parker

ALTHOUGH SHE couldn't put a specific date to the moment when she felt the first stirrings of social conscience, 1927 would seem to be as good as any, for that was when she took her first positive action.

Women had won the vote in 1920, but so far Dorothy had not taken the trouble to vote herself. Politicians of both parties left her cold, and it was not until after Franklin Roosevelt was elected that she is known to have expressed a positive opinion on one.

"He was God; you didn't exactly feel you were slumming with him."

But perhaps his consort, Eleanor, made the FDR ticket especially attractive to a woman like Dorothy Parker.

"What a woman. . . . It's hard to believe, but when you met her, she was the most beautiful woman you ever saw."

The incident that triggered Parker's political activism was the long, drawn-out affair of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti—a fish peddler and a shoemaker by trade but self-styled "anarchists" by persuasion. They had been arrested seven years earlier and found guilty of two murders in Massachusetts. Now all the legal maneuverings were exhausted, the two men were on death row, and their execution date was fixed. To a lot of people—many of them famous—this was an appalling miscarriage of justice, and they were determined to stop it, even at the last minute.

Mrs. Parker made the train journey to Boston and insisted on marching in the parade of dissent. She was warned by the police and finally arrested but not before she had felt the ugliness of the crowd turned in her direction with shouts of "New York nut!" "Red scum!" and "Hang her!"

She found the experience of her first arrest a distinct anticlimax. No one even took her fingerprints. "But they left me a few of theirs, the big stiffs!" she said, showing the bruises on her arms where the policemen had frog-marched her to the jail. For the reporters, she managed a typical Dorothy Parker crack after she had been released on bail: "I thought prisoners who were set free got five dollars and a suit of clothes."

The execution was delayed but finally carried out. But there was one other consequence of the Boston trip. The federal authorities began to compile a dossier on Dorothy Parker.

Back in New York at the Round Table, things were never quite the same for her. Having had her own conscience disturbed, she found it hard to accept the way her colleagues seemed so unconcerned with the way the world was going.

"Those people at the Round Table didn't know a bloody thing. They thought we were fools to go up and demonstrate for Sacco and Vanzetti . . . they didn't know and they just didn't think about anything but the theatre."

All she knew was that injustice in any form made her "wild," and as the country lurched into depression, she saw plenty of it.

It was a time when many a liberal mind saw a great deal to admire in the Russian experience with communism, and the Parker toe was dipped into the political water—though there is no firm evidence that she ever joined the Communist Party.

Certainly, she attended a number of rallies in those succeeding years; but as a literate person, she found the speeches "much too long and much too muddy and with many—too many—sweeping allusions to the woiking class and the bawss class."

In Hollywood in the 1930s, she found a focus for her "wild" feelings. To begin with, there were many like-minded liberals. With her old Algonk colleague and now a successful screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart, Fredric March, and Oscar Hammerstein II, she helped found the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League in 1936—something that would come back to haunt her twenty years and a

whole world later. But at the time, "It is my pride that I can say that Donald Stewart and I and five others were the organizers. . . . From these seven it has grown in two years to a membership of four thousand . . . and it has done fine and brave work."

Despite all the disappointments and frustrations she was to encounter over the next decade, this aspect of her work released something within her and gave her genuine satisfaction. "[It] makes me proud to be a member of the human race, and particularly proud to belong to the women's division of it."

The other issue was even closer to home. She may have hated writing for the screen herself, but she was prepared to expend significantly more energy than went into her scripts to defend the rights of others to do the same. She helped set up the first trade union for screenwriters—the American Screenwriters Guild—and served on the board.

"I saw some of the stinkiest practices you'd ever want to see. People—honest, hard workers—were thrown out of their jobs, without warning, without justice. People were hired on what is called 'spec'—which means that they wrote without pay, with the understanding that if their work was accepted they would be paid. And then their work would be used, but they would be fired—still without pay. . . . Some claimed that every writer received for his trash $2,500 a week. . . . The average wage of a screenwriter was *forty* dollars a week . . . perfectly corking, except that there was a catch to it. The average term of employment was two weeks in a year."

She was realistic about the attitude of the studios and even the "Academy" (of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences). Expecting them to protect the rights of writers was "like trying to get laid in your mother's house. Somebody was always in the parlour, watching."

She was equally realistic about what was involved in selling such a revolutionary idea to her fellow writers.

"Now, look, baby, 'union' is spelled with *five* letters. It is *not* a four letter word. . . . The bravest, proudest word in all the dictionaries is 'organize.'" But even so, "if a screenwriter had his name across the Capital Theatre in red, white and blue letters fifty feet tall, he'd still be anonymous."

There were other lessons they had better learn right away, and one of them was to relate to the new reality of the world they were living in: "Writers could not find themselves until they find their fellow man. Moon, death, and heartbreak are personal matters, but the songs of my time are dead."

Hollywood also brought her face to face with racial discrimination—a subject that preoccupied her to the end of her life. In 1930s Hollywood, a black actor would almost always play a kindly comic servant with rolling eyes and shuffling gait.

When Mrs. Parker was asked to appear in a charity sketch with one of the better-known ones in which the stereotype would once again be employed, she steadfastly refused. "Black people have suffered too much ever to be funny to me."

She would bitterly lampoon the white attitude in her short story "An Arrangement in Black and White" as a well-meaning but insensitive southern lady explains her husband's "liberal" attitude: "But I must say for Burton, he's heaps broader-minded than lots of these Southerners. He's really awfully fond of colored people. Well, he says himself, he wouldn't have white servants."

Looking back in the early 1960s, she would summarize the range of her humanitarian views: "Acceptance is what hurts you in all forms. . . . You get soft and don't stand up on your hind legs. When the day comes that you can accept injustice, anywhere, you've got to kill yourself."

In November 1937, she made a pilgrimage in pursuit of her convictions. The Spanish Civil War was raging. Back home, it was chic to debate it and to take the Loyalist side. Many of her friends set off for Spain, but, as she was to witness in person, few got farther than the border. Dorothy, as an accredited correspondent for the left-wing publication *New Masses*, went considerably further and wrote, "I want to say first that I came to Spain without my axe to grind. . . . I am not a member of any political party. The only group I have ever been affiliated with is that not especially brave little band that hid its nakedness of heart and mind under the out-of-date garment of a sense of humor. I heard someone

say, and so I said it too, that ridicule is the most effective weapon. I don't suppose I ever believed it, but it was easy and comforting and so I said it. Well, now I know. I know that there are things that never have been funny, and never will be. And I know that ridicule may be a shield, but it is not a weapon. . . .

"I don't see how you can help being unhappy now. The humorist has never been happy, anyhow. Today he's whistling past worse graveyards to worse tunes. . . . There is nothing funny in the world any more. . . . If you had seen what I saw in Spain, you'd be serious, too. And you'd be trying to help these poor people."

And what she saw was that "the streets are crowded and the shops are open, and the people go about their daily living. It isn't tense and it isn't hysterical. What they have here is not morale, which is something created and bolstered and directed. It is the sure, steady spirit of those who know what the fight is about and who know that they must win. . . .

"But I, as an onlooker, am bewildered. . . . [In Madrid] in spite of all the evacuation, there were still nearly a million people here. Some of them—you may be like that yourself—won't leave their homes and their possessions, all the things they have gathered together through the years. They are not at all dramatic about it. It is simply that anything else than the life they have made for themselves is inconceivable to them. Yesterday I saw a woman who lives in the poorest quarter of Madrid. It had been bombed twice by the Fascists; her house is one of the few left standing. She has seven children. It has often been suggested to her that she and the children leave Madrid for a safer place. She dismisses such ideas easily and firmly. Every six weeks, she says, her husband has forty-eight hours leave from the front. Naturally he wants to come home and see the children. She, and each one of the seven, are calm and strong and smiling. It is a typical Madrid family."

But elsewhere, her emotions were put to the test. She visited children in refugee camps. "They don't cry. Only you see their eyes. While you're there and after you're back, you see their eyes. . . .

"While I was in Valencia the Fascists raided it four times. If you are going to be in an air raid at all, it is better for you if it

happens at night. Then it is unreal, it is almost beautiful, it is like a ballet with the scurrying figures and the great white shafts of the search-lights. But when a raid comes in the daytime, then you see the faces of the people, and it isn't unreal any longer. You see the terrible resignation on the faces of the old women, and you see little children wild with terror. . . .

"Last Sunday morning, a pretty, bright Sunday morning . . . there was a great pile of rubble, and on the top of it a broken doll and a dead kitten. It was a good job to get those. They were ruthless enemies to Fascism."

One story came out of her experiences in Spain. Almost documentary in style, "Soldiers of the Republic" tells of two women in a café who meet a group of Loyalist soldiers returning to the front. They chat and give the soldiers their cigarettes, and then the soldiers leave. When the women try to pay, they find the soldiers have already bought their drinks. It was an incident that actually happened to Dorothy Parker, and she never forgot it.

"It was darling of me to have shared my cigarettes with the men on their way back to the trenches. Little Lady Bountiful. The prize sow."

Of the Spanish people, she said, "They ask only as much as you have because they are people like you . . . they want to live in a democracy. And they will fight for it, and they will win."

That was what she hoped but didn't really expect to happen.

"You knew darn well it was going to happen, even when you were there." She took the Fascist victory badly. "I die hard."

Of those who died, she said, "Few of their names are told, and their numbers are not measured. They wear no clean and carven stones in death. But for them there is an eternal light that will burn with a flame far higher than any beside a tomb."

And at a public meeting on her return, she was still emotional: "I cannot talk about it in those days. All I know is that there I saw the finest people I ever saw, that there I knew the only possible thing for mankind is solidarity . . . their defense against the invasion of the Fascist has failed. But do you think that people like that can fail for long, do you think that they, banded together

in their simple demand for decency, can long go down? They threw off that monarchy, after those centuries; can men of ten years' tyranny defeat them now? I beg your pardon. I get excited.

"It is no longer the time for personal matters—thank God! Now the poet speaks not just for himself but for all of us—and so his voice is heard and so his song goes on."

By 1939, she could see that the enemy, as she defined it, was within the domestic gates. She told the Left Wing Congress of American Writers, "For heaven's sake, children, Fascism isn't coming—it's *here*! It's dreadful. Stop it!"

But it was only a matter of months before her own world fell in pieces. The nonaggression pact signed by Germany and Russia left her disillusioned with left-wing causes, and she resigned from all her affiliations on the spot. Her cause was still right, but her solution was clearly wrong, and surely everyone else would feel the same.

She was highly critical of those who refused to see the light as she did. For people like Walter Duranty, the Moscow correspondent for the *New York Times*, she had nothing but scorn: "When the train of history went around a sharp curve, he fell out of the dining car."

By this time, however, the damage was done. The FBI already had an extensive file on Dorothy Parker, and when she applied for a permit to be a war correspondent, it was refused. "Possible subversive" and "premature anti-Fascist" were two of the descriptions that she would never be allowed to see but that influenced that decision and others that would follow after the war.

The activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)—under the rabid direction of Senator Joseph McCarthy and Judge Parnell Thomas—constituted one of the most shabby episodes in immediate postwar American history. Its self-appointed mission was to root out communist influences in American life, and its principals decided that show business in general and Hollywood in particular would give them an immediate high public profile. And if it took a little exaggeration to make the point, then so be it.

Many talented people on both sides of the camera had their careers effectively ruined by maintaining their constitutional right to privacy. Some even went to prison. Had she been a man, Dorothy Parker would probably have been one of them, for her attitude toward the committee was contemptuous throughout.

When she received a subpoena in 1952, she referred to the committee members as "rats gnawing at empty holes"; and when they asked her about her activities in the 1930s, she replied, "I haven't the faintest idea about the politics of Hollywood in the 1930s, and you make me laugh when you speak of them. . . .

"Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party? I was and am many things, to myself and to my friends. But I am not a traitor and I will not be involved in this obscene inquisition." She did not, she said, "even understand what a Communist organization was."

But perhaps the most typical Parker response was to the FBI: "Look, I can't even get my dog to stay down. Do I look to you like someone who could overthrow the government?"

Time and again, she took the Fifth Amendment. Finally, the committee gave up and sent her home. "I was black listed. I couldn't get another job." All around her, she sensed fear like "the smell of the Black Plague."

"The infallible Sam Goldwyn said, 'How am I to do decent pictures when the good writers are gone to jail? Don't misunderstand . . . I think they ought to be hung.' "

She could no longer work in Hollywood, but who the hell wanted to, anyway? The only trouble was that the "seriousness" of her purpose had rubbed off on her prose since the late 1930s. She had begun to find that, politics apart, editors were rejecting her work unless it was humorous. It became her excuse for writing less and less.

"My work is dismissed, and on the strength of what seems to me a curious adjective—'unpleasant.' The last editor, who may as well be nameless because he has all the other qualities of a bastard, told me that if I changed my piece to make it in favor of Franco, he would publish it. 'God damn it,' he said, 'why can't you be funny again?'"

There was *almost* a different ending. In 1961—when a little sanity had been restored both to the nation and to the Parker household—she returned to live with Alan Campbell in Hollywood, having remarried him a decade earlier. For Alan, this was like the second professional coming. Assignments for which he would not normally be considered might open up, if they were a writing team again.

Their old friend Charles Brackett was currently the head of Twentieth Century Fox, and he wanted to develop a mildly successful play, *The Good Soup*, as a vehicle for the studio's major star, Marilyn Monroe. He decided to ignore the blacklist.

To their disappointment—though hardly to Mrs. Parker's surprise—it was Hollywood business as usual. "Everybody's a writer and has ideas. . . . We wrote a nice, little, innocent bawdy French farce . . . [the play was a translation from La Bonne Soupe] . . . and they took our script and hoked it up with dope pushers, two murders and, straight out of Fanny Hurst, the harlot with a heart of goo."

In the end, it scarcely mattered. Monroe was coming apart by the day. She had two films left to make on her Fox contract. In the summer of 1962, she was fired from the first, and a month later she was dead. So were the Parker/Campbells as screenwriters.

If I had a shiny gun
I could have a world of fun
Speeding bullets through the brains
Of the folk who give me pains;

But I have no lethal weapon—
Thus does Fate our pleasure step on!
So they still are quick and well
Who should be, by rights, in hell

("Frustration")

CHAPTER

14

"Did Ernest Really Like Me?"

Did Ernest really like me?

—Dorothy Parker to her friend
Beatrice Stewart Ames just before her death

Half across the world from me
Lie the lands I'll never see

—"Hearthside"

Paris was where the twentieth century was.

—Gertrude Stein

Even though it happened in France, it was all somehow an American experience.

—Gerald Murphy

Songs Just a Little Off Key

By

Dorothy Parker

Portrait of the Artist

OH, lead me to a quiet cell
Where never footfall rankles,
And bar the window passing well,
And gyve my wrists and ankles.

Oh, wrap my eyes with linen fair,
With hempen cord go bind me,
And, of your mercy, leave me there,
Nor tell them where to find me.

Oh, lock the portal as you go,
And see its bolts be double. . . .
Come back in half an hour or so,
And I will be in trouble.

Experience

SOME men break your heart in two,
Some men fawn and flatter,
Some men never look at you;
And that cleans up the matter.

Inscription for the Ceiling of a Bedroom

DAILY dawns another day;
I must up, to make my way.
Though I dress and drink and eat,
Move my fingers and my feet,
Learn a little, here and there,
Weep and laugh and sweat and swear,
Hear a song, or watch a stage,
Leave some words upon a page,
Claim a foe, or hail a friend—
Bed awaits me at the end.
Though I go in pride and strength,
I'll come back to bed at length.
Though I walk in blinded woe,
Back to bed I'm bound to go.
High my heart, or bowed my head,
All my days but lead to bed.
Up, and out, and on; and then
Ever back to bed again,
Summer, Winter, Spring, and Fall—
I'm a fool to rise at all!

Unfortunate Coincidence

BY the time you swear you're his,
Shivering and sighing,
And he vows his passion is
Infinite, undying—
Lady, make a note of this:
One of you is lying.

Philosophy

IF I should labor through daylight and dark,
Consecrate, valorous, serious, true,
Then on the world I may blazon my mark;
And what if I don't, and what if I do?

Autobiography

OH, both my shoes are shiny new,
And pristine is my hat;
My dress is 1922. . . .
My life is all like that.

DOROTHY PARKER did not leave the United States until the summer of 1926, when she was thirty-two. It was strange for someone of her surface sophistication and intellectual curiosity—especially when so many of her friends had been flocking there since the war. Europe—and France in particular—was considered exotic. The franc was cheap, the liquor flowed freely, and, besides, all one's friends were there.

Even so, it took eight years to winkle her out of the security of New York City, and she made sure she could take a good part of it with her—in her case, Mr. Benchley. She also took her current lover, Seward Collins ("I ran off to the Riviera with a Trotskyite").

The year 1926 was "the golden summer," "the summer of a thousand parties," Scott Fitzgerald called it. He and his wife, Zelda, were just two of the gliterati she would run into in Paris and on the Riviera, where the social life revolved around the "golden couple"—American expatriates Gerald and Sara Murphy—and their Villa America on Cap d'Antibes, where the parties were lavish and seemingly endless.

Americans of that time and type preferred to hunt in packs, and the unstated object of the overseas exercise was to colonize "abroad" and turn it into "home." The Riviera, for instance, they found to be "a darned good little dump."

Mrs. Parker would chronicle this aspect of it in her 1929 story "The Cradle of Civilization" as "two young New Yorkers sat on the cool terrace that rose sharp from the Mediterranean, and looked into deep gin fizzes":

"Their costumes seemed to have been assembled in compliment to the general region of their Summer visit, lest any one district feel slighted; they wore berets, striped fishing-shirts, wide-legged cotton trousers, and rope-soled *espadrilles*. Thus, a Frenchman, summering at an American resort, might have attired himself in a felt sombrero, planter's overalls, and rubber hip-boots. . . .

"[A local] kept screaming all this stuff about why did these Americans come over here, anyway. And there was Bill . . . yelling

right back at him, 'Yes, and if we hadn't come over, this would be Germany now.' I never laughed so much in my life. . . .

"[The French are] so damn dumb, they make me sick. Why, they don't even speak English at the post-office."

Dorothy Parker wrote little about her several trips to Europe in the 1920s and 1930s—perhaps because she did, indeed, feel that she was part of a touring company taking a New York show on the road and rehearsing the same predictable lines.

On that first trip, she had promised herself that she would use the new and untainted environment to settle down to some serious writing, but the temptations proved too great. Instead, she drank even more. When critic Edmund Wilson met her on her return, he found her "fat and bloated, puffy-eyed." ("Why dontcha ever come to see me, yuh damn fool?")

She found herself a minor character in a play with some larger-than-life characters. There were the Scott Fitzgeralds. She'd met Scott first. "He told me he was going to marry the

"I have friends who have traveled much in France. They tell me the people are French wherever you go. What an overwhelming effect that must have!"

(Charles Lamb in *The Coast of Illyria*).

We long to lay down for her all we have;
We love her, we love her, la belle, la brave!
We'd see given back to her all her due—
The grandeur, the glory that once she knew.
We'd have her triumphantly hung with flowers,
Acknowledged supremest of all the Powers,
Her dominance written in white and black . . .
But, boy, we'd be sore if the franc came back!

("Song of American Residents in France")

most beautiful girl in Alabama *and* Georgia." Mrs. Parker first met the two of them in a restaurant where the seats were lined up against the wall. "It looked like a touring production of The Last Supper." As a couple, they seemed to have "just stepped out of the sun, their youth was striking . . . they were the golden lad and the golden girl, if ever I saw them." Though when she knew them better, they seemed to be "both of them too ostentatious for words . . . their behavior was calculated to shock."

Nonetheless, she had to admit, "*Everyone* wanted to meet them. *This Side of Paradise* may not seem like much now (1964) but in 1929 it was considered an experimental novel; it cut new ground. . . .

"Zelda: I never found her very beautiful. She was very blonde with a candy box face and a little bow mouth, very much on a small scale and there was something petulant about her. If she didn't like something, she sulked; I didn't find that an attractive trait." Though what Parker initially saw as petulance might very well have been the early signs of the dementia that eroded so much of her later life. Being thrown so much into her company, the rest of her set had to learn to cope with her unpredictable behavior, which could often drift into the bizarre.

"She was living in the day of the shock technique. That wears off quickly, don't you think? Sitting at a dinner where nothing in particular was being said, she would turn to a neighbor—'Ah do think Al Jolson's a greater man than Jesus Christ, don't you?' She wanted to be thought of as 'fast'—A speed." Most of Zelda's later life was spent in one sanitarium or another with her husband struggling to pay bills that far exceeded the royalties from his novels and stories.

Scott himself fulfilled many of the Parker criteria for the acceptable male—and, inevitably, they had a token fling in the mid-1930s. But as many people found when they got past the Fitzgerald facade, there was a lot less there than met the eye.

"Scott was attractive and sweet and he wanted to be nice . . . but the damnedest thing about Scott, he didn't know what was funny. He could be funny in his books but not about life."

It was Fitzgerald, however, who definitively captured that fleeting moment for all time in his 1934 novel *Tender Is the Night*, in which all the principal characters are based on his friends from the south of France.

Over the years, Mrs. Parker and Fitzgerald drifted apart. Ironically, however, their lives and careers drifted in parallel since both of them turned up in Hollywood at the end of the 1930s, frittering away their talent and drinking heavily.

Fitzgerald died suddenly of a heart attack in December 1940, his talent and reputation reduced to a shadow. At the funeral parlor, Dorothy Parker came to pay her last respects. Leaning over the open coffin, she shocked the other mourners. "The poor son-of-a-bitch!" Only a few of them recognized that she was quoting the words of a mourner at the funeral of Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald's most famous character.

By this time, the gilt had long since worn off the golden girl and lad. "Ah, hell," Parker wrote in an unpublished letter, "if I were a God, I'd *be* a God."

"It wasn't the parties that made it such a gay time. There was such an affection between everybody. You loved your friends and wanted to see them every day, and usually you did see them every day. It was like a great fair, and everybody was so young" (Sara Murphy).

Dorothy Parker certainly loved the Murphys. None of her friends escaped the edge of her tongue at some point—except the Murphys.

Gerald was heir to the profitable Mark Cross leather goods empire, and Sara, his senior by several years, also came from money. An unlikely couple when they married in 1916, they became the still center of their many interlocking circles of friends, particularly in Europe, where they were one of the first couples to put down roots.

With Gerald's artistic eye—he was to develop into a highly regarded painter—and Sara's sense of esoteric good taste, the

Murphys set the unofficial standards for a new American-European style of living.

Over the years, Mrs. Parker grew close to them as a family—to the point where, when their elder son, Patrick, was suffering from tuberculosis in 1929, she accompanied the "Swiss Family Murphy," as she called them, to the live-in hotel/clinic in Montana-Vermala.

She positively hated Switzerland itself. It was "the home of horseshit," where everything was built "on the side of a God damn Alp." The Palace Hotel did little to make her feel better. To suit the needs of its patrons/patients, the temperature had to be kept "fresh." "What you wear for dinner is a tweed suit, a coat over it, a woolen muffler tied tight around your neck, a knitted cap, and galoshes. When you go outdoors, you take off either the coat or the muffler."

Nor was there much on offer by way of entertainment. She found herself fascinated, she wrote to Mr. Benchley, by a towel pinned over her washstand.

"It's a good thing to look at. You can go all round the edges very slowly, and then you can do a lot of counting the squares made by the ironed-out creases."

Because of her genuine affection for the Murphys, this atypical Good Samaritan stayed longer than anyone could have expected and was a positive help in her own disorganized way. But the pull of a polluted New York finally overcame the pure Swiss air, and, besides, it was time to earn some money. She was so overdrawn that her account looked "positively photographic." She declared that all she wanted to do was to "return to a vine-covered country cottage and spend the rest of my life raising checks."

"When the day comes that you have to tie a string around your finger to remind yourself of what it was you were forgetting, it is time for you to go back home."

She would remain close to the Murphys, though, for the rest of their lives. Years later, she was on her way to dinner

with them in the company of Lillian Hellman, who had met them in Paris in the late 1930s. It is the only recorded barb Mrs. Parker is known to have fired at either Murphy, and it was harmlessly blunt.

She bet Hellman that she could guess "who Gerald will have discovered this time—what writer, I mean." She made three guesses—Madame de Staël, Gerald Manley Hopkins, and "Philippe de Swartzberger . . . an Alsatian who moved to Tibet. Born 1837, died 1929, or so it's thought. A mystic, most of whose work has been lost, but two volumes remain in Lausanne under lock and key, and Gerald invented him this afternoon." After dinner, Gerald produced a slim volume and insisted on reading from it. It was by Hopkins.

There was one rather less cheerful encounter some years earlier. One evening when Murphy picked her up for dinner, he found her with a black eye and other evidences of her having recently been in the wars. As they drove off in the taxi, she explained that her current aristocratic stockbroker lover had beaten her up the previous night.

"How can you bear that man, Dottie? He's a very dirty cad!" Gerald properly complained.

A still drunk Mrs. Parker peered at him and said with great dignity, "I can't let you talk of him that way, Gerald," before opening the taxi door and falling out into the Park Avenue traffic. The man in question was the "whipping boy" who killed himself in the Martha's Vineyard airport some years later.

Apart from the Murphys, the person from those years and that context who influenced her the most was undoubtedly "Old Dr. Hemingstein"—Ernest Hemingway. She met him on that first 1926 visit and was in ambiguous personal and professional thrall to him ever after.

In 1929, she wrote a profile of him for *The New Yorker* in which she called him "far and away the first American artist . . . it is the devil's own task to find anything more complicated or necessary to say about him."

Nonetheless, over the years, she would continue to find things to say—things that defined her own ambitions and fears every bit as much as his.

"Hemingway has an unerring sense of selection. He discards detail with a magnificent lavishness, he keeps his words to their short path. He is, as any reader knows, a dangerous influence. The simple thing he does looks so easy to do. But look at the boys who try it. . . . He is clean . . . exciting."

To Robert Sherwood, she would confide, "We all need heroes, don't we?"

In the profile, she quoted one of Hemingway's own lines, "Scratch a writer and find a social climber," and compared him to other writers she could think of whose ambitions "beckoned toward the North Shore of Long Island." "Hemingway avoids New York, for he has the most valuable asset an artist can possess—the fear of what he knows is bad for him."

In fact, apart from necessary visits to his publishers, Hemingway avoided the United States altogether as much as possible. He would certainly not have been seen dead within a mile of the Round Table. New York writers he considered to be "all angle-worms in a bottle."

"Old Dr. Hemingstein" may have been a hero to Mrs. Parker, but the feeling was not reciprocated. At a Paris party some time after one of her suicide attempts—a party at which she was not present—he offered a toast to the absent lady: "Here's to Dorothy Parker. Her life will never become her so much as her almost leaving it." He appeared unable to understand why the other guests found his remark in poor taste.

Occasionally, Dorothy would force herself to face the truth about her excessively macho friend. Fitzgerald had wanted to be nice, but not Hemingway. "Ernest never wanted to be nice; he just wanted to be worshipped. He was a bore then and he remained so." By the time the Great White Hunter took his gun and blew his brains out in 1961, many people had come to the same conclusion.

Although she sometimes saw truth through her glass darkly, this was not a palatable one. One of the last things she said

before her death was to her lifelong friend Beatrice Ames—the divorced wife of Algonk writer Donald Ogden Stewart—who had witnessed the whole saga.

"I want you to tell me the truth. Did Ernest really like me?" she asked and was assured that he had.

The truth of the matter was that Hemingway had realized early in the game that his oversized ego would never allow him to like someone so able to provide him with the commodity he hated most: competition.

When Dorothy and her traveling companions were embarking at Cherbourg on the SS *Rotterdam* to return to New York at the end of that summer of 1926, Hemingway was one of the party seeing them off. Half jokingly, he shouted up to her. He had no typewriter—what was he to do?

Without hesitation, she threw her own brand-new portable down to him. Then, turning to her friends, she said, "Good God, I have just thrown away my only means of livelihood!"

At this remove, the symbolic incident is open to at least two distinct interpretations. She was either throwing a professional lifeline to a man she admired or telling a talented but obstreperous individual to shut up and write. Or possibly both.

Over the years, Dorothy Parker met most of the good, the bad, and the ugly the world considered famous. Some she began by admiring. Somerset Maugham was one of them.

At a dinner party, he asked her to compose one of her verses for him. She wrote,

> Higgledy piggledy, my white hen;
> She lays eggs for gentlemen.

"Ah, yes," said Maugham, he had always liked those lines. She then picked up her pen and added,

> You cannot persuade her with gun or lariat
> To come across for the proletariat.

She so intrigued Maugham that he invited her as a weekend guest. Much to her dismay after her initial excitement at the prospect, she found herself odd woman out in a gay enclave. When reporting on the visit, she declared, "That old lady is a crashing bore," adding for good measure, "Whenever I meet one of those Britishers, I feel as if I have a papoose on my back."

Parker legend has it that one of her favorite enemies was sometime-actress and full-time society beauty Clare Boothe Luce. ("'Clare-Boothe-Luce' sounds like the motto of a girls' school.")

When fellow socialite Ilka Chase tried to persuade Dorothy that her friend Clare was always kind to her inferiors, Parker asked, "And where does she find them?"

Their most famous exchange was probably apocryphal, but no matter. The two ladies supposedly arrived together at the swing doors of the Algonquin. Standing aside to give Mrs. Parker preference, Clare said, "Age before beauty," to which our heroine replied, "Pearls before swine." Clare Boothe Brokaw (as she was at the time of the "encounter") rather reluctantly denied the story in later years.

Her explanation that "the story probably was worked up as a suitable piece of dialogue for the two of us by some columnist" rings all too true, for the practice was prevalent. In any case, Woollcott had used the exchange earlier in a short story, and other versions of the encounter substitute Gypsy Rose Lee or an unnamed "chorus girl" for Luce. Still, as the saying goes, when the facts differ from the legend, print the legend.

Parker and Clare-Boothe-Brokaw-Luce don't appear to have been either particular enemies or friends, but someone who started out as a prickly antagonist and then turned into an unlikely friend was Lillian Hellman. ("The trouble with Lillian . . . is she thinks she's Dashiell Hammett—when she only looks like him.")

In the event, Hellman turned out to be the executor of the Parker estate, and the two women spent a great deal of time

together in Dorothy's last years, laughing at the foibles of their assorted friends and acquaintances.

Mrs. Parker was never quite comfortable, however, until she had achieved at least one put-down on even her nearest and dearest, and she achieved this one day when she was staying with Hellman. They took a walk to the lake on the Hellman property so that Lillian could inspect her snapping-turtle traps—a practice of which Mrs. Parker thoroughly disapproved. When they reached the spot, her hostess picked up a trap that had a young turtle in it. The tiny creature's penis was erect with fear.

"It must be pleasant to have sex appeal for turtles," said Mrs. Parker sweetly. "Shall I leave you alone together?"

CHAPTER

15

Coda: The Lady of the Corridor

This is my city, this is my town, why did I ever leave it?

—Dorothy Parker on returning to New York in 1963

But I shall stay the way I am,
Because I do not give a damn

—"Observation"

Promise me I'll never grow old.

—Dorothy Parker

If I had any decency, I'd be dead. Most of my friends are.

—Dorothy Parker on her seventieth birthday

CONNIE: Only don't let yourself get lonely. Loneliness makes ladies our age do the goddamnedest things. . . .
These women are dead and death is contagious.
LINSCOTT: Life certainly treats you fine.
CONNIE: No, Tom. Life and I go Dutch.

—The Ladies of the Corridor

IN 1963, Dorothy Parker returned to "her" town for the last time. It was, she declared, "a hell of a place. . . . A silver cord ties me right to my city."

Alan had died in their Hollywood home and, just before he did, had said something quite prophetic: "It's the end of the rainbow for both of us, I fear." He'd said it wryly rather than portentously, and, in any case, how could Dorothy argue, she who had been keenly anticipating the end from the very beginning? In turn, she had visualized him as "Betty Boop going down for the last time."

She settled herself back in the residential Volney Hotel, where she had stayed before in the 1950s—the inspiration for the Marlowe in her play *The Ladies of the Corridor*. She had kept her room there long after she had actually left New York to live in Los Angeles. She saw it as a sign of her independence. ("I'm a hobo and I mean to be forever.") But this time it was different. This time she wasn't just passing through. This time it was for real and for good.

It was, she told friends, "the kind of hotel where businessmen install their mothers and then run. . . . Do you know what they do when you die in this hotel? They used to take them down on the big elevator in the back, but it's not running, and they take them down in that front elevator, and you know how small it is. They have to stand you up."

In those last few years, her reputation finally and fittingly caught up with her, and the honors came thick and fast.

In 1958, the National Institute of Arts and Letters gave her their most prestigious award and later inducted her into the

institute itself. In recent years, she had become preoccupied with what she called "making it" as a writer, and her acceptance speech reflected it. It was terse, to say the least: "Never thought I'd make it." And she was gone.

Then, in 1963, she was appointed Distinguished Visiting Professor of English at California State College at Los Angeles, an experience she perversely enjoyed and in which she turned her "lectures" into a series of conversations.

Her room at the Volney was monastic in her usual "Hogarthian" style—just she and her dogs. Friends noticed that personal possessions were few. On the shelf were few books and only one of her own—her collected poems. Pride of place on a shelf of its own was a set of thirteen porcelain figurines of Napoleon and his generals that she and Alan had bought in a Santa Monica antique store. Why she valued them so particularly was never entirely clear.

She had run out of things to live for by now. "I'm seventy and feel ninety. If I had any decency, I'd be dead," she would tell people, "because anybody I ever cared about is dead." She said it matter-of-factly, and it never came out as self-pity, something she loathed in others. She remembered the dignity her friend Oscar Levant had displayed in sickness. "He never went around with a begging-bowl extended for the greasy coins of pity." And nor, she vowed, would she, though in the end she had to, for Good Samaritans were getting harder to find.

In her play of a decade earlier, she had recorded some of the experiences that she now witnessed daily being enacted by the players on her personal stage. There were the Lonely Ladies, left unequipped for the future they now faced:

LULU: I guess there's something lacking in a lot of women. . . . We were told you grew up, you got married and there you were. And so we did, and so there we were. But our husbands, they were busy. We weren't part of their lives; and

as we got older, we weren't part of anybody's lives; and yet we never learned how to be alone. . . .

You see, I've learned from looking around me that there is something worse than loneliness and that's the fear of it. . . .

MILDRED: Vegetables: . . . sitting there in their bins, waiting for the garbage collector to come and get them. I think in many cases they're contented women; they wouldn't change places with anyone, and if you possibly told any of them they were miserably unhappy, they'd think you were insane. But some of them don't know they're dead—that curious death in life with which they are content. . . . It's too pompous, I know . . . but I don't think tragedy is too big a word because the waste is unnecessary. . . .

PAUL: Promise me you'll never be seen carrying a lending library book; the book with the cellophane dust jacket. It's the badge of the unwanted woman. . . .

MRS. GORDON: A lady starts staying in her room, after while she gets so she never goes out of it. . . .

PAUL: People don't change, they just get more so.

There would be one last party. Her hosts were Gloria Vanderbilt ("Gloria the Vth") and her husband. Years earlier, Mrs. Parker had written a poem that contained these lines:

Where's the man could ease a heart
Like a satin gown?

Satin glows in candle-light—
Satin's for the proud!
They will say who watch at night,
"What a fine shroud!"

For the occasion, Ms. Vanderbilt provided her with a silk dress (size 3) of yellow brocade with gold trim, encrusted with tiny pearls. It was fully six inches too long, but Dorothy refused to have it shortened. "No, I want it long. Then I have to lift it. I want to have that haughty look." In the evening she wore it, and three months later she was buried in it.

Having been at war with herself and everyone around her all her life, she finally capitulated to a heart attack on June 7, 1967. She was almost seventy-five years old. Her mother had died on a rainy day, and the memory had stayed with her:

Oh, let it be a night of lyric rain
And singing breezes, when my bell is tolled.
I have so loved the rain, that I would hold
Last in my ears its friendly, dim refrain.

June 7 was a gloriously sunny day in the 80s. Now, wouldn't you just believe it!

CHAPTER
16

Envoi: "As Dorothy Parker Once Said . . ."

As Dorothy Parker once said . . .

—Cole Porter, "Just One of Those Things"

She had a quiet voice, and she said her words with every courtesy to each of them, as if she respected language.

—"Dusk Before Fireworks"

EVAN: *Please call me Evan.*
LESTER: *All this and Evan, too.*
LOUISE: *You're slipping, Lester. That was originally said by Dorothy Parker.*
LESTER: Everything *was originally said by Dorothy Parker.*

—Noël Coward, *Long Island Sound*

I shall come back without fanfaronade
Of wailing wind and graveyard panoply;
But, trembling, slip from cool Eternity—
A mild and most bewildered little shade.

—"I Shall Come Back"

Four be the things I am wiser to know:
Idleness, sorrow, a friend and a foe.

Four be the things I'd been better without:
Love, curiosity, freckles and doubt.

Three be the things I shall never attain:
Envy, Content, and sufficient champagne.

Three be the things I shall have till I die:
Laughter and hope and a sock in the eye.

—"Inventory"

THE CLUES to the question, "Who was Dorothy Parker?" are all there in her own verse and fiction, almost begging to be found. For much of her life, she was a public figure, and she was as ambivalent about her fame as she was about just about everything else.

"How would you like to walk into a party and have a dozen women look up and say with their eyes, 'So *you're* Dorothy Parker. I dare you to say something nasty.'" (Which begs the obvious question, Why *go* to the party?)

"I certainly must be cutting a wide swathe through this party. I'm making my personality felt. Creeping into every heart, that's what I'm doing. Oh, have you met Dorothy Parker? What's she like? Oh, she's terrible. God, she's poisonous. Sits in a corner and sulks all evening—never opens her yap. Dumbest woman you ever saw in your life. You know, they say she doesn't write a word of her stuff. They say she pays this poor little guy, that lives in some tenement on the lower Eastside, ten dollars a week to write it and she just signs her name to it. He has to do it, the poor devil, to help support a crippled mother and five brothers and sisters; he makes buttonholes in the daytime. Oh, she's terrible."

Wyatt Cooper titled his *Esquire* appreciation "Whatever You Think Dorothy Parker Was Like, She Wasn't." It was an appropriate premise because she certainly polarized people.

To those who suffered from her pen, her tongue, or her turned back, she was "a sour little girl who was always going around slashing her wrists." To those with the patience and insight to see past the self-defensive mannerisms, she was one of the defining literary talents of the first half of the twentieth century and—although she would have hated the thought—probably the most influential writer about what it was to be a woman in that changing time.

She played her own part in ensuring that confusion was worse confounded. The messages she sent out about her own life were mixed. Few people heard exactly the same story—and never twice. It was her way of keeping her personal life personal. One would be told that all her best friends called her "Dorothy"; another would hear "Dottie." At the time, she probably believed either or neither.

Perhaps the explanation was that she didn't see life as a continuum but as an unconnected series of piercing insights:

"It's life, I suppose. Poor little things, we dress, and we plan, and we hope—and for what? What is life, anyway? A death sentence. The longest distance between two points. The bunch of hay that's tied to the nose of a tired mule."

"I suppose that's the one dependable law of life—everything is always worse than you thought it was going to be."

"Melancholy is the act of remembering."

"They sicken of the calm, who knew the storm."

She claimed to live by simple axioms.

There were two things one should never trust—"a round garter and a Wall Street man"—and there were two things she could never comprehend—"how a zipper worked and the exact function of Bernard Baruch." (The latter frustration was shared by most people at the time.)

She was well aware of how people saw her. But, then, they didn't understand.

"Don't sit alone and dramatize yourself. Dramatize yourself! If it be drama to feel a steady—no, a *ceaseless* rain beating upon my heart, then I do dramatize myself."

Dramatize—and defend . . . against anybody and everybody. Just in case. She embraced Swift's credo that "I have ever hated all nations, professions and communities and all my love is towards individuals. . . . But principally I hate and detest that animal called man; although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth."

"I do it in defence, I suppose. . . . If I didn't say nasty things, I'd cry. I'm afraid to cry; it would take me so long to stop."

Barbed words were a defensive perimeter for Dorothy Parker, but she was perfectly well aware that they were not in and of themselves of any permanent significance. "Frankness, if you will forgive dogma, is no synonym for honesty." And, of course, you couldn't "teach an old dogma new tricks."

Didn't she enjoy *anything*? she was often asked. "Flowers, French fried potatoes and a good cry," she answered on one occasion—but the next time she probably said something quite different.

But through the cracks (of both kinds) and against a mountain of contrary evidence, one is inclined to believe that she meant it when she said, "I am the greatest little hoper that ever lived," even if she never quite knew what she hoped for and certainly expected to be disappointed with it if she ever got it.

"To say that Miss Parker writes well is as fatuous as saying that Cellini was clever with his hands," was Ogden Nash's verdict. Alexander Woollcott was predictably more orotund. Her writing was "so potent a distillation of nectar and wormwood, of ambrosia and deadly nightshade, as might suggest to the rest of us that we write far too much." André Maurois called her "the American Colette"—a considerable compliment in Gallic context—while her contemporary, critic Edmund Wilson, concluded, "Her wit is the wit of her particular time and place, but it is as often clearly economic at the same time as it is flatly brutal . . . it has its roots in contemporary reality."

> Travel, trouble, music, art,
> A kiss, a frock, a rhyme—
> I never said they feed my heart,
> But still they pass the time.
>
> ("Faute de Mieux")

True enough, but the roots continued to grow long after the "contemporary reality" died back. What Dorothy Parker saw and committed painfully to paper was a more timeless reality—or she would by now be no more than a dusty footnote to a brief episode in the social and literary culture of a single city.

We are fortunate that she lived at a moment when the Great Minority of Women was finding its feet and searching around for its feminist place in the brave new postwar world. All that choice—but what to choose? And apart from the battle of the sexes, what was happening to the *balance* of the sexes? All of this she saw while she was scrabbling around to find her own place to stand.

And perhaps her greatest accomplishment was that, while society grudgingly gave women a vote, Dorothy Parker gave them a voice. She showed American women that it was permissible to be self-assured, outspoken, bold, and witty—to be proud to have a mind and to speak it in whatever words came to it.

And it would be nice to think that at the end she realized that her deepest wish had been granted. Nobody any longer thought that she wrote "like a woman."

But I, despite expert advice,
Keep doing things I think are nice
And though to good I never come—
Inseparable my nose and thumb.

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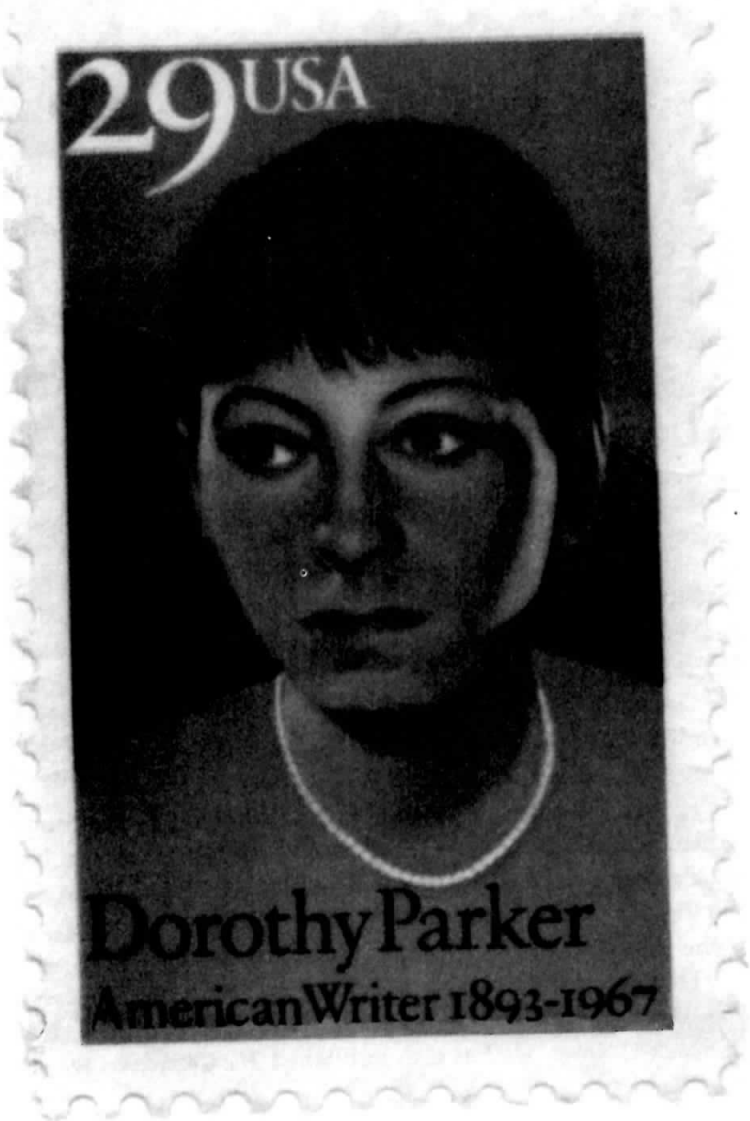
About the Author

BARRY DAY is the author or editor of numerous books, plays, and musicals. As longtime consultant to the Noël Coward Estate, he has written extensively on Coward, including editing *The Complete Lyrics*, *Theatrical Companion to Coward*, *Coward in His Own Words*, *Complete Sketches*, and *The Unknown Noël*. He is currently engaged in editing *The Noël Coward Letters*.

He is a director of the International Shakespeare Globe Centre and was one of the team that helped Sam Wanamaker rebuild that historic playhouse on London's Bankside. His book, *This Wooden 'O': Shakespeare's Globe Reborn*, is the official account of the project.

The series of "literary autobiographies" under the title *In His Own Words* also includes Oscar Wilde, P. G. Wodehouse, and Sherlock Holmes. He has also published *The Complete Lyrics of P. G. Wodehouse.*

Born in England and an Oxford M.A., Barry Day, his wife Lynne, and dog Sonny spend their time between New York, Westport, Connecticut, and Palm Beach, Florida.



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PLAYS:

Aspects of Oscar
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Noël Coward's After the Ball *(concert adaptation)*
Noël Coward's Pacific 1860 *(concert adaptation)*
Oh, Boy! *(concert adaptation)*
King's Rhapsody *(concert adaptation)*

Dorothy Parker

In Her Own Words

Edited by Barry Day

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