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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

My life is like a picture gallery,
With narrow aisles wherein the spectators may walk. . . .
My life is like a picture gallery,
With a few pictures turned discreetly to the wall.

—"The Picture Gallery"

Rather than write my life story I would cut my throat with a dull knife.

—Dorothy Parker to Quentin Reynold

LIKE MANY WRITERS whose specialty is the satirical observation of others, Dorothy Parker never wrote an autobiography. Perhaps the apparent incongruity of seeming to take themselves seriously after a lifetime of debunking has something to do with it.

At times she would say she was thinking about it. "I'd never be able to do it, but I wish to God I could; I'd like to write the

damned thing, just so I could call it *Mongrel.*" Then, late in life, she agreed to journalist Wyatt Cooper's suggestion that he would help her by having her talk into a tape recorder. "It would give me something to live for," she replied, with the caveat, "Let's make it gay; if it's not fun, there's no point in telling it."

Cooper was optimistic—until the tape started turning. Then the Dickensian anecdotes crowded in: "I apologize for introducing nobody but dreadful characters." And the irrelevance started pouring. The monologue was, as Wyatt put it, "replete with things that, in a more collected moment, she would never have said." He suppressed the tapes and gave up the task. In more ways than one, the moment for Dorothy Parker to tell her own story had passed.

In any case, she had already told it—carefully, covertly, and with sly, downcast eye—in and between the lines of her published writings. Somehow, there was a certain personal privacy within the rigorous discipline of a verse form—hadn't Shakespeare shown that with his sonnets? And the one-to-one asides with the readers of "Constant Reader" allowed you to throw a few biographical crumbs on the water and see if they were gobbled up before they sank. The printed page was her confessional.

In everything she wrote, she spoke with her own quiet wry voice, even when the things she said were patently outrageous. Always there was the invisible cloak of irony to protect her. "Can't you fellows take a joke? Where's your sense of humour?"

Humor, to her, was the sine qua non of a civilized society. "The possession of a sense of humour," she wrote in 1931, "entails the sense of selection, the civilized fear of going too far. . . . It keeps you, from your respect for the humor of others, from making a dull jackass of yourself. Humor, imagination and manners are pretty fairly interchangeably interwoven." And Dorothy Parker was never noticeably deficient in the first two—although the latter could have used a little attention from time to time.

Together they helped secure for her the reputation as being the greatest wit since Wilde. So much so that the lyric in a 1920s Broadway revue could include the lines

No matter who said it,
Dorothy Parker gets the credit.

Like Wilde, she may well have been at her best in conversation—but there the resemblance ended. Wilde would deliver his bons mots with mellifluous deliberation. Mrs. Parker would adopt a demure deadpan expression, then proceed in her quiet, cultured voice to mouth carefully articulated near-obscenities—usually in the form of a riposte. Coming from a woman, the effect was even more shocking.

People learned it was well to be wary of her. Tallulah Bankhead, who liked her despite many a putdown, called her "the mistress of the verbal hand grenade"; Robert Sherwood referred to her as a "stiletto made of sugar"; Mrs. Patrick Campbell spoke of "a pretty, pretty cobra" and Anita Loos of "a lone wolverine"; and Alexander Woollcott declared, "It is not so much the familiar phenomenon of a hand of steel in a velvet glove as a lacy sleeve with a bottle of vitriol concealed in its folds."

Her sardonic romanticism, the side-of-the-mouth "Hey, what can you expect?" cynicism, and her "urban voice" were certainly a typical product of the 1920s, but her work has never really dated—despite her assertion that it would—because the underlying *attitude* has proved to be a fundamental defense against personal and social angst. Today—even more than then—a primary concern is to be "cool," to have seen it all and risen above it.

Thus, there are lines in Dorothy Parker that continue to strike a chord for almost every beleaguered one of us. Next to Wilde, she must be one of the most quoted (and misquoted) of writers. What one misses, though, by picking up the individual jewels is the unique context in which they are set. Read her work in total, and a striking personal portrait emerges of a woman perpetually drawn to but disillusioned by love; highly suspicious of good news and the messengers who bring it; self-mocking, self-loathing, and deliberately underachieving; lonely and constantly contemplating death and the means of achieving it, her

eye perpetually peeled for the dark cloud that invariably accompanies any silver lining.

Barely below the surface, flippancy is as naked and disturbing a portrait of another human being as one is likely to see. But for all her apparent manic-depressive moods, the silver lining persisted in reappearing. "I am," she wrote, "the greatest little hoper that ever lived."

"She was part of nothing and nobody except herself," said her friend Lillian Hellman at her funeral. "It was this independence of mind and spirit that was her true distinction."

If she had an unconscious role model, it might well have been Becky Sharp from her beloved *Vanity Fair*—the beautiful but inherently bad girl who continues to fascinate all who meet her. Time and again, one is left with the feeling that Dorothy Parker feels the need to check herself to make sure that her claws have not lost their edge. If anyone should start to pigeonhole her as simply a sweet little lady who writes little verses, she'll show *them*. . . .

There was little about her that was simple. Her verbal potential, in particular, was virtually limitless. "By God, I *read* . . . !" she would say about her school days, and one can sense the eclectic nature of her reading in the passage from "The Little Hours" in which the insomniac heroine decides that it might help her to sleep if she were to "repeat to myself, slowly and soothingly, a list of quotations beautiful from minds profound; if I can remember any of the damn things. . . .

"Oh, yes, I know one. This above all, to thine own self be true and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man. Now they're off. And once they get started, they ought to come like hot cakes. Let's see. They also serve who only stand and wait. If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds. Silent upon a peak in Darien. Mrs. Porter and her daughter wash their feet in soda-water. And Agatha Arth is a hug-the-hearth, but my true love is false. Why did you die when lambs were cropping, you should

have died when apples were dropping. Shall be together, breathe and ride, so one day more am I deified, who knows but the world will end tonight. And he shall hear the stroke of eight and not the stroke of nine. They are not long, the weeping and the laughter; love and desire and hate I think will have no portion in us after we pass the gate. But none, I think, do there embrace. I think that I shall never see a poem lovelier than a tree. I think I will not hang myself today. Ay tank Ay go home now."

In that one passage, she embraces *Hamlet*, Walter Savage Landor, Milton, Shelley, Shakespeare's sonnets, Keats, Eliot, Dowson, Marvell, Alfred Joyce Kilmer (*who?*), and Chesterton. Along the way she also manages to touch on all the main themes of her work—before finally pulling the rug.

Dorothy Parker: In Her Own Words draws from her own published writings, her letters, and the memories of others—flawed or otherwise. It may not be her autobiography as she would have selectively written it, but it is hers the way she spoke it. And *Mongrel* would not have done her justice.

Barry Day
Connecticut 2004

CHAPTER

I

"A Little Jewish Girl Trying to Be Cute"

All those writers who talk about their childhood! Gentle God, if I ever wrote about mine, you wouldn't sit in the same room with me.

—Dorothy Parker

Boy, did I think I was smart! . . . I was just a little Jewish girl trying to be cute.

—Dorothy Parker

"IT WAS THE last time I was early for anything." Dorothy Parker speaking about her premature arrival into the world on August 22, 1893, two months before she was expected. Born Dorothy Rothschild—the second daughter of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother—she was always exercised by the racial mixture in her—to the point where she threatened to call her autobiography (should she ever write one)

Dorothy Parker in 1921.

Mongrel. And just in case anyone was thinking—"My God, no, dear! We'd never even *heard* of *those* Rothschilds."

It was not a name she cared for. When asked why she married her first husband, Edwin Pond Parker II, she was, for once, in total earnest when she replied, "I married him to change my name." Even after she had divorced him, she insisted on retaining his name. Why was she called "Mrs." Parker? "Well, you see, there *was* a Mr. Parker."

Her Jewish ancestry was something she rarely referred to, and it was certainly never the subject of her own humor. Most of her friends respected the fact—a rare exception being George S. Kaufman on one occasion at the Algonquin Round Table. Pretending to be offended at some anti-Semitic remark, Kaufman—a successful Jewish writer with whom Parker was never particularly friendly—rose to his feet and claimed that he was leaving. "And I'll expect Mrs. Parker to accompany me. Halfway."

Another bone of personal contention was that the woman who was to become the quintessential New Yorker was actually born in *New Jersey*, of all places—West End, New Jersey, to be precise.

"You see, I have always lived in New York," she would write in 1921. "I was cheated out of the distinction of being a native New Yorker, because I had to go and get born while the family was spending the Summer in New Jersey, but, honestly, we came back into town right after Labor Day, so I nearly made the grade. When I was a little girl—which was along about the time that practically nobody was safe from Indians—I was insular beyond belief. At Summer resorts, I would ask my new playmates, 'What street do you live on?' I never said, 'What town do you live in?'"

The New York family home was a substantial house on West 72nd Street. "It's still standing, I believe," she said in an early 1960s interview, adding, "They sell trusses there now." She had always loved the urban landscape, although, "if I go above 72nd Street, I get a nosebleed!"

She said of her home town: "There comes to me the sharp picture of New York at its best, on a shiny, blue-and-white Autumn day with its buildings cut diagonally in half of light and shadow,

with its straight, neat avenues colored with quick throngs, like confetti in the breeze. . . . I see New York at holiday time, always in the late afternoon, under a Maxfield Parrish sky, with the crowds even more quick and nervous but even more good-natured, the dark groups splashed with the white of Christmas packages, the lighted, holly-strung shops urging them in to buy more and more. I see it on a Spring morning, with the clothes of the women as soft and as hopeful as the pretty new leaves on a few, brave trees. I see it at night with the low skies red with the back-flung lights of Broadway, those lights of which Chesterton—or they told me it was Chesterton—said, 'What a marvelous sight for those who cannot read!' I see it in the rain, I smell the enchanting odor of wet asphalt, with the empty streets black and shining like wet olives. I see it—by this time, I become maudlin with nostalgia—even with its gray mounds of crusted snow, its little Appalachians of ice along the pavements. . . . I suppose that is the thing about New York. It is always a little more than you had hoped for."

The "family" consisted of her parents, two older brothers, and an older sister, Helen. "There were nine years between my sister and me . . . she was a real beauty; sweet, lovely, but silly." They were to remain close until Helen's death in 1944 at the age of fifty-seven.

It was a different story with her brothers.

"I remember my brother coming along the street once with a friend. The friend pointed at me. 'That your sister?' 'No,' my brother said. That helped. There was an enormous gap there, you see. You can't bridge that, ever." There is no evidence that in adult life she bothered to try.

In that very different late Victorian era—in which the New Jersey shore was considered a fashionable summer place for a middle-class family—one naturally had servants. The Rothschilds made a habit of employing exclusively Irish servants.

"My parents used to go down to Ellis Island and bring them, still bleeding, home to do the laundry. You know, that didn't encourage them to behave well. Honest, it didn't."

In July 1897, when Dorothy was nearly five, Eliza Rothschild "promptly went and died on me," and, as young children often do, Dorothy began to believe that somehow her mother's death was her fault. Within two years, Henry Rothschild had remarried. His second wife was a forty-something retired schoolteacher, Eleanor Lewis, a lady of somewhat rigid demeanor, by all accounts, who most definitely did not hit it off with the Rothschild children.

"She was hurt because the older ones called her 'Mrs. Rothschild.' What else? That was her name. I didn't call her anything. 'Hey, you' was about the best I could do.

"She was crazy with religion. I'd come in from school and she'd greet me with, 'Did you love Jesus today?' Now, how do you answer that?"

Her relationship with her father was ambivalent, especially after the hasty remarriage. She found the quality of his grief over her departed mother distinctly questionable.

"On Sundays he'd take us on an outing. Some outing. We'd go to the cemetery to visit my mother's grave. All of us, including the second wife. That was his idea of a treat. Whenever he'd hear a crunch of gravel that meant an audience approaching, out would come the biggest handkerchief you ever saw and, in a lachrymose voice that had remarkable carrying power, he'd start wailing, 'We're all here, Eliza! I'm here. Dottie's here. Mrs. Rothschild is here.'"

In 1903, the second Mrs. Rothschild dropped dead of a brain hemorrhage, and now the ten-year-old Dorothy had *two* "murders" on her conscience. It was small wonder that loving mothers did not feature in major roles in her subsequent fiction.

Her first school was a convent, the Blessed Sacrament Academy in New York City. "It was practically round the corner," and—the qualification that seemingly endeared it to Mr. Rothschild—"you didn't have to cross any avenues, whatever that means. Never mind you wouldn't learn anything.

"Convents do the same thing progressive schools do, only they don't know it. They don't teach you how to read, you have

to figure that out for yourself. At my convent we did have a textbook, one that devoted a page and a half to Adelaide Ann Proctor, but we couldn't read Dickens; he was vulgar, you know. But I read him and Thackeray, and I'm the one woman you'll know who's read every word of Charles Reade, the author of *The Cloister and the Hearth*. But as for helping in the outside world, the convent taught me only that if you spit on a pencil eraser it will erase ink."

And as for her fellow pupils, "They weren't exactly your starched crinoline set, you know. Dowdiest little bunch you ever saw.

"I remember little else about it, except the smell of the oilcloth, and the smell of the nuns' garb. All those writers who talk about their childhood! Gentle God, if I ever wrote about mine, you wouldn't sit in the same room with me."

And she never did. Nor did the episode end happily, for Mr. Rothschild was asked to remove his daughter forthwith from the consecrated ground.

"I was fired for a lot of things. . . . Well, how do you *expect* them to treat a kid who saw fit to refer to the Immaculate Conception as 'Spontaneous Combustion'? Boy, did I think I was smart! Still do."

She was sent to Miss Dana's Academy in Morristown, New Jersey—an accidentally symbolic return to roots? Her new schoolmates were, she found, "congenitally equipped with a restfully unenquiring mind." The Dana Girl "had a general air, no matter how glorious the weather, of being dressed in expectation of heavy rains."

At Miss Dana's, she was at least allowed to read, and "by God, I read." It was here she discovered Horace, Virgil, Catullus, Aristotle, Socrates, Martial, Goethe, Montaigne, and a recently deceased kindred spirit, Oscar Wilde. She also read Verlaine and presumably Rimbaud—since she was later to remark that the homosexual French poet "was always chasing Rimbauds." And it was also in these years that at least the *name* of La Rochefoucauld made its indelible mark on the Parker mind.

In her story "The Little Hours" (1933), the insomniac heroine's mind wanders through a random list of options. Would it help her to sleep if she were to *read*? But no.

"All the best minds have been off reading for years. Look at the swing La Rochefoucauld took at it. He said that if nobody learned to read, very few people would be in love. There was a man for you, and that's what *he* thought of it. Good for you, La Rochefoucauld; nice going, boy. I wish *I'd* never learned to read."

But later the repetitive memory of her hero begins to pall.

"Let them keep their La Rochefoucauld, and see if I care. I'll stick to La Fontaine. Only I'd be better company if I could quit thinking that La Fontaine married Alfred Lunt."

She also began to write herself—a fact that caused her to examine her own handwriting and remark optimistically in a 1906 letter to her father, "They say when your writing goes uphill, you have a hopeful disposition. Guess I have." There is no record of his reply. Most people who knew her in later life would almost certainly have disputed her interpretation, though she herself would continue to insist, "I'm the greatest little hoper that ever lived."

Insofar as she was capable, she seems to have been happy during her time at Miss Dana's, for there was at least some stability to her existence that her home life failed to provide. Allowing for the tongue in the Parker cheek, one can interpret a remark like "I, too, can remember those roseate days of happy girlhood when we used to skulk off to attend dramas, thinking that we were seeing life. Ah, youth, youth" as being a reasonably positive verdict.

She does not appear to have made close friends. Possibly her tongue kept likely candidates at a distance. Even then, she was able to close off an unwanted conversation with a pithy line delivered with quiet finality.

"Are you my best friend?" a classmate in the convent asked her. To which Miss Rothschild is supposed to have replied, "A girl's best friend is her mutter." To which there is no answer for a less articulate child.

Throughout her subsequent life, Dorothy Parker was prone to turn her own version of it into an effective anecdote or—particularly—a telling line. As a result, we probably need to take the saga of the unfeeling father, the heartless stepmother, and the caricature nuns with a pinch of proverbial salt.

What is certain is that her formal education ended in the fall of 1908 at the age of fourteen. After that, she stayed at home—a situation that was by no means uncommon for young ladies of the period. Five years later, her father died, too.

"After my father died, there wasn't any money. I had to work, you see."

CHAPTER

2

"Brevity Is the Soul of Lingerie"

Brevity Is the Soul of Lingerie

—*Vogue* caption

I hate the Office;
It cuts in on my social life.

—"Our Office—A Hate Song"

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

—"Inventory"

IN 1914, Dorothy Parker began to make a little money playing a piano ("single notes") at a dance school and even teaching dancing ("about which I knew nothing"). At least the experience taught her all the current song hits, which would

come in handy in later years when she tried her hand at composing them. She also published—and was paid for—her first piece of that verse in the prestigious Condé Nast magazine *Vanity Fair*.

Her savior was Frank Crowninshield, who ran both *Vanity Fair* and its sister magazine, *Vogue*.

"Mr. Crowninshield, God rest his soul, paid twelve dollars for a small verse of mine and gave me a job [at *Vogue*] at ten dollars a week. Well, I thought I was Edith Sitwell."

Years later, she was in the audience at a Sitwell reading, but the encounter did not turn out quite as she may have hoped all those years earlier. Recognizing the now famous other literary lady, Sitwell refers to her as "that great poetess, Dorothy Wadden" (her contorted pronunciation of "Warren," thus making it a *double* accidental insult). Although Dame Edith had intended praise, the Parker reaction was anything but pleased—"Why, that Goddam Limey!"

Her breakthrough piece of verse—published in September 1914—was called "Any Porch" and introduced the conversational style of much of her mature work, with the story being conveyed in dialogue. A group of middle-class ladies sit around chatting, and we are left to picture them individually from what they say:

> I don't want the vote for myself,
> But women with property, dear—
> I think the poor girl's on the shelf,
> She's talking about her "career"
>
> I really look thinner, you say?
> I've lost all my hips? Oh, you're *sweet*—
> Imagine the city today!
> Humidity's *much* worse than heat!

When she was offered the job at *Vogue* in 1913, she told Crowninshield ("a lovely man but puzzled") that she had been reading fashion magazines "since I was a woman of twelve," but, she added, "fashion would never become a religion" with her. And as for the temple of that fashion—the excessively art-directed *Vogue* offices—"Well, it looks just like the entrance to a house of ill-fame."

"Funny, they were plain women working at *Vogue*, not chic. They were decent, nice women—the nicest women I ever met—but they had no business on such a magazine. They wore funny little bonnets and in the pages of their magazine they virginized the models from tough babes into exquisite little loves."

Edna Chase, the editor of *Vogue* at the time, remembered Dorothy as "a small dark-haired pixie, treacle-sweet of tongue but vinegar witted"—a verdict that her work in print certainly confirmed. Friends said of her that she spoke quietly with "a little drawl that was very attractive, very upper class."

She was set to work to write captions for the fashion illustrations:

"From these foundations of the Autumn wardrobe, one may learn that brevity is the soul of lingerie—as the Petticoat said to the Chemise."

"This little pink dress will win you a beau."

"Right *Dress*! For Milady's motor jaunt."

"Women need not be suppressed in order to be Stayed."

"There was a little girl who had a little curl, right in the middle of her forehead. When she was good she was very, very good, and when she was bad she wore this divine nightdress of rose-colored *mousseline de soie*, trimmed with frothy Valenciennes lace."

Ten dollars a week didn't give a working girl much financial leeway, and Dorothy Parker found herself a room "in a boarding house at 103rd and Broadway, paying eight dollars a week for my room and two meals, breakfast and dinner."

A fellow lodger was another aspiring writer, Thorne Smith (who was to write the Topper series of comic novels in the 1920s but was currently employed as an advertising copywriter). The two of them had a brief affair, then settled down

to a lifelong friendship. "We were both as poor as church mice; the kind that eat little but squeak a lot. . . . We used to sit around in the evening and talk. There was no money but, Jesus, we had fun."

For some time, in addition to her work at *Vogue*, she had been contributing verse to "The Conning Tower," a prestigious daily column edited by Franklin P. Adams in the *New York Tribune*. So prestigious was it that FPA (as he was universally known) never felt the need to pay his contributors. Nor did he choose to name them, so it is now impossible to identify Dorothy's early verses. Nonetheless, she was duly grateful for the honor and the experience it represented and always claimed that Adams—whom she was later to know well as a fellow member of the Algonquin Round Table—"raised me from a couplet."

In late 1917, Crowninshield moved her to *Vanity Fair*. Presumably she was given a raise, but, as she said in a line she was to use more than once, "Salary is no object. I want only enough to keep body and soul apart."

Vanity Fair in those days was a general-interest "up-market" magazine that looked at life and society with a slightly quizzical but generally uncritical gaze—a fact that gave its new recruit a problem from the outset. "[It] was a magazine of no opinions but *I* had opinions."

Most of those opinions—when they came to be expressed in literary form—turned out to be decidedly critical. During the three years she worked there, she continued to write a series of vers libre poems she had started to contribute while still at *Vogue*. She called them "Songs of Hate."

Her "hates" included men ("They irritate me"), relatives ("They cramp my style"), Bohemians ("They shatter my morale"), parties ("They bring out the worst in me"), college boys ("They get under my feet"), the younger set ("They harden my arteries"), wives ("Too many people have them"), and husbands ("They narrow my scope").

WOMEN

I hate women;
They get on my nerves.
. . .
And then there are those who are always in Trouble.
Always.
Usually they have Husband-trouble.
They are Wronged.
They are the women whom nobody—understands.
They wear faint, wistful smiles.
And when spoken to, they start.
They begin by saying they must suffer in silence.
No one will ever know—
And then they go into details.

RELATIVES

Then there are in-laws,
The Necessary Evils of Matrimony
The only things they don't say about you
Are the ones they can't pronounce.

ACTRESSES

There are the Adventuresses,
The Ladies with Lavender Pasts.
They wear gowns that show all their emotions,
And they simply can't stop undulating.
. . .
There are the Wronged Ones;
The Girls Whose Mothers Never Told Them.
In the first act they wear pink gingham and sunbonnets
And believe implicitly in the stork.
In the third act they are clad in somber black
And know that there isn't any Santa Claus.
. . .

Then there are the child Actresses
Who should be unseen and not heard.
They go around telling people about Heaven
As if they were special correspondents.

BOHEMIANS

Genius is an infinite capacity for giving pains.

HUSBANDS

And whenever you go out to have a good time,
You always meet them.

Another institution she claimed to hate was the office:

OUR OFFICE

I hate the Office;
It cuts in on my social life.

There is the Boss;
The Great White Chief.
He made us what we are today—
I hope he's satisfied.
He has some bizarre ideas
About his employees getting to work
At about nine o'clock in the morning—
As if they were a lot of milkmen.
He has never been known to see you
When you arrive at 8:45,
But try to come in at a quarter past ten
And he will always go up in the elevator with you.

Even then there was a certain sourness in her humor. It was "the laughter of disdain."

In a 1916 *Vogue* piece, "Why I Haven't Married," she would satirize various types of men who fell short of her standards, including (prophetically) the heavy drinker in whose affections she feared she would rate third—"first and second, Haig and Haig."

She had praise for only one archetype—"an English Greek God, just masterful enough to be entertaining. Just wicked enough to be exciting, just clever enough to be a good audience." Unfortunately, he had inadvertently married "a blonde and rounded person whose walk in life was upon the runway at the Winter Garden."

In real life, however, she married her Greek god—and changed her name. On June 30, 1917, she became the wife of Edwin Pond Parker II, of Hartford, Connecticut, a Wall Street stockbroker and the descendant of a well-to-do congressional clergy family, thus further stirring the interdenominational bouillabaisse.

Although later in life she would insist that she had married Eddie Parker mainly because he had "a nice, clean name," there is every reason to believe that she loved him at the time. Unfortunately for both of them, time was a commodity in short supply. Within days of the wedding, Eddie had enlisted and gone off to war. She had been a bride, she said, "for about five minutes."

One way and another, she found it increasingly difficult to keep satire out of her work. An article, "Interior Decoration," for instance, was submitted as "Interior Desecration"—the "creative" variation not being spotted until the piece was in print, much to the horror of the straight-laced Miss Chase. Throughout her career, editors learned to be wary and to look long and hard for the subversive subtext Mrs. Parker might have secreted between the lines.

Robert Benchley was to dub the Parker style the "Elevated Eyebrow School of Journalism," and "Mr. Benchley"—as she would always deferentially refer to him—was to become her closest friend and arbiter for the rest of his life.

Robert Benchley.

When Benchley was appointed managing editor of *Vanity Fair* in June 1919—having been a regular contributor for some time—Dorothy Parker found in him her ideal soul mate. Four years older than her and of a similarly irreverent turn of mind, he, too, could see the farce behind life's facades. She found his self-deprecating humor "a leaping of the mind," and the two of them in combination added up to far more than the sum of the parts, particularly when it came to creating mayhem.

When they shared an office, "Both Mr. Benchley and I subscribed to two undertaking magazines: *The Casket* and *Sunnyside*. Steel yourself. *Sunnyside* had a joke column called 'From Grave to Gay.' I cut a picture from one of them, in color, of how and where to inject embalming fluid, and had it hung over my desk until Mr. Crowninshield asked if I could possibly take it down. . . . We behaved extremely badly."

Before long, the duo became a trio, as Crowninshield hired a new drama editor, the six-foot-seven-inch war veteran Robert Sherwood. Whereas Benchley and Parker chattered nonstop, Sherwood was distinctly laconic. Parker claimed that he was a "Conversation Stopper' and that trying to talk to him was "like riding on the Long Island Railroad—it gets you nowhere in particular." Nonetheless, his silence was a friendly one, and he did wear his straw hat in rakish fashion, which she considered "pretty fast."

The three of them took to lunching together every day, and, to begin with, Benchley and Parker's function was to protect the elongated Sherwood ("a walking pipe organ") from being "attacked by the midgets" they might encounter en route.

The *Vanity Fair* offices on West 44th Street were quite close to the Hippodrome vaudeville theater, where a troupe of midgets were currently playing. When the three colleagues walked past, the midgets took great delight in making a beeline for Sherwood. "They were always sneaking up behind him and asking him how the weather was up there. . . . Mr. Benchley and I would leave our jobs and guide him down the street. I can't tell you, we had more fun." It took all the handling skills of the other two to coax their thoroughbred colleague along and into the safe haven of the nearby Algonquin Hotel, their customary watering hole.

And there, when the midgets had left town, began another tale entirely.

CHAPTER

3

Inconstant Reviewer

"Ah," I said to myself, for I love a responsive audience,
"so it's one of those plays."

—*New Yorker* review

Scratch an actor . . . and you'll find an actress.

—Attributed

I hate Actors;
They ruin my evenings.

—"Actors: A Hymn of Hate"

I hate the Drama;
It cuts in on my sleep.

—"The Drama: A Hymn of Hate"

It grieves me deeply to find out how frequently and how violently wrong I can be—it doesn't seem reasonable, somehow.

—Dorothy Parker

IN APRIL 1918, *Vanity Fair*'s resident drama critic, P. G. Wodehouse, decided to take a European sabbatical, and Dorothy Parker was designated to be his temporary replacement. She was clearly conscious—to the point of being self-conscious—about the singularity of her position as the only woman in New York to hold such a position of influence and sought to make light of it, often signing her pieces "Hélène Rousseau." She was merely, she claimed ingenuously, "a tired business woman . . . seeking innocent diversion."

In practice she created a new genre of dramatic criticism. Instead of playing the traditional role of objective critic surveying the scene from Mount Olympus, she rolled up her designer sleeves and got down into the dust of the arena. Her critic was a character in the drama she was reviewing, her writing style personal and colloquial. Not for the first time—and certainly not for the last—she rejected the traditional concept of the "woman writer" and substituted for it the feisty persona that was to become her literary trademark and one that she would continue to refine.

More often than not, she clearly didn't much care for what she was required to see.

"Sometimes I think it can't be true . . . there couldn't be plays as bad as these. In the first place, no one would write them, and in the second place, no one would produce them . . . a long succession of thin evenings. . . . It may be that a life of toil has blunted my perception of the humorous."

In one case, she refused to name either the author or the cast of a particular play. She said she was "not going to tell on them."

Yes, occasionally she saw something that moved her.

"We bashfully admit that we wept, and lavishly; but on the other hand, it is but fair to admit that we are that way. All you have to do is drop a hat, and if we are in any kind of form we will break down and cry like a little tired child. . . . It is true that I paid it the tribute of tears, but that says nothing, for I am one who weeps at Victorian costumes. (I am also, for your files, one who cries at violincello renditions of 'Mighty Lak a Rose,' so you see.)"

The theatrical practitioners with whom she came in contact—both then and later—learned the hard way to beware of this demure-looking little woman with the quick tongue and the sharper pen. They should have been warned by her "Hate Songs," particularly those relating to the stage:

I hate Actresses;
They get on my nerves.

"In the first act the heroine is strangled by one of her admirers," she wrote in a *New Yorker* review. "For me, the murder came too late."

And many a famous actress came to grief in the limpid depths of her innocent gaze and sweet delivery when the two of them met in person.

Kitty Carlisle Hart (or in some versions Katharine Cornell) was once inveigled into telling Mrs. Parker of her early days behind the footlights. "And there I was in the Capitol theatre at 10:30 in the morning, walking out on a stage for the first

THE ACTRESS'S TOMBSTONE

Her name, cut clear upon this marble cross,
Shines, as it shone when she was still on earth;
While tenderly the mild agreeable moss
Obscures the figures of her date of birth.

("Tombstones in the Starlight")

time in my life to face thirty-six hundred people." To which her open-mouthed audience replied, "They made you do *that*? Oh, you poor *child*! That *huge* place, and all those people out front *staring* at you, waiting to *devour* you! Just to think of it makes my heart *ache*! You dear, brave *Baby*!" She got away with quite a lot of this before the object of her "sympathy" caught on that she was being spoon-fed molasses. This remark pales beside her notorious verdict on Katharine Hepburn's performance in *The Lake*, that "Miss Hepburn runs the gamut of emotion from A to B"—a verdict with which Miss Hepburn was subsequently inclined to agree. "I'm sure I gave a *foul* performance—chaotic."

Parker rubbed salt deeper into the wound by observing that Miss Hepburn took care to keep away from one of the supporting actresses, "in case she caught acting from her." In point of fact, Parker greatly admired Hepburn as an actress. When Garson Kanin asked her years later whether she had been misquoted, she replied, "Oh, I said it all right. You know how it is. A joke. When people expect you to say things, you say things. Isn't that the way it is?"

And that's almost certainly the way it was with many of her remarks. People did come to expect them from Dorothy Parker—and they were rarely disappointed.

The reviews for *Vanity Fair* helped her sharpen her pen and cut a few legends down to what she considered the appropriate size. In a revival of *Hedda Gabler*, it was "the shot that marked [Nazimova's] spectacular final exit" that caught her ear.

"Shots almost always do mark the final exit of Mr. Ibsen's heroines. I do wish that he had occasionally let the ladies take bichloride of mercury, or turn on the gas, or do something quiet and neat around the house. I invariably miss most of the lines in the last act of an Ibsen play; I always have my fingers in my ears, waiting for the loud report that means that the heroine has just Passed On."

Despite her reservations, she counted Ibsen—along with Chekhov and Shaw—as her favorite playwrights.

There was also the echo of live ammunition from the war in Europe—a subject that produced a plethora of "war plays." "I have had so much propaganda poured into me that I couldn't hold another drop. I have witnessed so many German spies that I have begun to distrust my own family."

Tolstoy's *Redemption* did little to lift her spirits.

"It isn't what you would call sunny. I went into the Plymouth Theatre a comparatively young woman, and I staggered out of it, three hours later, twenty years older, haggard and broken with suffering. . . .

"It is difficult to speak of 'atmosphere' and 'feeling' without sounding as if one wore sandals and lived below Fourteenth Street. . . .

"I do wish they would do something about those Russian names. Owing to the custom of calling each person sometimes by all of his names, sometimes only by his first three or four, and sometimes by a nickname which has nothing to do with any of the other names, it is difficult for someone with my congenital lowness of brow to gather exactly who they are talking about. I do wish that, as long as they are translating the thing, they would go right ahead, while they're at it, and translate Fedor Vasilyevich Protosov and Sergei Dmitrievich Abreskov and Ivan Petrovich Alexandrovic into Joe and Harry and Fred."

A particular bête noir was the tendency of contemporary middle-class playwrights to "write down" when dealing with the lower classes.

"The sentimental passages seemed to leave me cold. Because a young woman says 'H'aint' and 'you was' and admits that she 'don't know nothin' about art,' doesn't seem to me to be any particular reason for a man to clasp her passionately in his arms and tell her that she is a wild, sweet, fairy thing—a creature of the spring woods" (about *Tiger! Tiger!* by Edward Knoblock).

"To begin with, *Tillie* is a dialect play—and, so far as I am concerned, it's to end with too."

Occasionally the fare on offer would bring on a temporary hysteria of the pen—as with Sem Benelli's *The Jest.*

"Without wishing to infringe in any way on the Pollyanna copyright, there are times when one must say a few kind words for the general scheme of things. When things have sunk to their lowest depths, some really desirable event occurs. . . . When clouds are thickest, the sun is due to come out strong in a little while. In fact, the darkest hour is just before the dawn (No originality is claimed for that last one; it is just brought in for the heart interest and popular appeal)."

Of another play, she wrote: "The scene is laid in France, thus giving each member of the cast an opportunity to pronounce the word 'Monsieur' in a different way. . . .

"But then, as the optimistic woman who left the theatre just a little way in front of me, observed, 'Well, it's a clean show, anyway.'"

Dotty's first drama stint—as will be seen—ended rather abruptly in 1920, but in 1931 she was back in her aisle seat, filling in this time for Robert Benchley. As Alexander Woollcott put it, "It would be her idea of her duty to catch up the torch as it fell from his hand—and burn someone with it." Absence had not staled the infinite variety of her wit one whit.

In *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, she found Katharine Cornell "a completely lovely Elizabeth Barrett . . . [she] displays the beautiful, clean angle from the tip of her chin to the hollow of her throat to the audience. Her voice is more thrilling than ever, so that it is perhaps cavilling to say that, thrilling though the music may be, it would be nice, now and then, to distinguish some of the words. Perhaps cavilling it is, but here I am saying it.

"Now that you've got me right down to it, the only thing I didn't like about *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* was the play (Personal: Robert Benchley, please come home. Nothing is forgiven.)"

Things failed to improve with A. A. Milne's *Give Me Yesterday*: "Its hero is caused by a novel device to fall asleep and a-dream; and thus he is given yesterday. Me, I should have given him twenty years to life. . . .

"In a shifting, sliding world, it is something to know that Mr. A. A. ("Whimsy-the-Pooh") Milne stands steady. . . . If *Give Me Yesterday* is a fine play, I am Richard Brinsley Sheridan (Personal: Robert Benchley, please come home. Whimso is back again.)"

Mrs. Parker had a rooted aversion to Milne in all his pastel moods and a little history to go with it. In 1928 she had been required—in her capacity as "Constant Reader"—to review his latest offering, a book called *The House at Pooh Corner*, in which Piglet asks Pooh why he has added the phrase "Tiddely-pom" to a song, and Pooh answers, "To make it more hummy."

"And it is that word 'hummy,' my darlings, that marks the first place in *The House at Pooh Corner* at which Tonstant Weader fwowed up."

She even went so far as to pen some "Lines on discovering that you have been advertised as America's A. A. Milne." To her it was the ultimate insult:

WHEN WE WERE VERY SORE

Dotty had
Great Big
Visions of
Quietude.
Dotty saw an
Ad, and it
Left her
Flat.
Dotty had a
Great Big
Snifter of
Cyanide.
And that (said Dotty)
Is that.

No play or performer was safe.

She could not keep silent about 1931's *The Silent Witness*: "[Kay Strozzi] had the temerity to wear as truly horrible a gown as ever I have seen on the American stage. There was a flowing skirt of pale chiffon—you men don't have to listen—and a bodice of rose-coloured taffeta, the sleeves of which ended shortly below her shoulders. Then there was an expanse of naked arms, and then, around the wrists, taffeta frills such as are fastened about the unfortunate necks of beaten white poodle-dogs in animal acts. Had she not been strangled by a member of the cast while disporting this garment, I should have fought my way to the stage and done her in, myself."

According to Parker, the husband of French actress Jeanne Aubert, "if you can believe the papers, recently pled through the French courts that he be allowed to restrain his wife from appearing on the stage. Professional or not, the man is a dramatic critic."

Reviewing Channing Pollock's 1933 offering *The House Beautiful*: "*The House Beautiful* is the play lousy." Nor should the *audience* feel too secure. At a performance of (Pierre) Louÿs's *Aphrodite*: "There is even a brand-new drop-curtain for the occasion, painted with the mystic letters (ΑΦΡΟΔΙΤΗ) which most of the audience take to be the Greek word for 'asbestos.'"

But eventually, like all sentences, it was over, and on April 11, 1931, she could write, "This is a fairly solemn moment. Here I am, taking my formal leave of the New York theatre, before I go, free, white and eighty-one, out to battle with the larger and, I can but hope, the kindlier world.

"Goodbyes are best said briefest. So I thank you all so very much and, though I certainly had a rotten time, I hate to leave you."

It was not the first time she had taken her leave—simply the first she had taken voluntarily.

In January 1920, Crowninshield had fired her from *Vanity Fair* ("Since that time," she reported more than forty years later, "I've been freelancing"). "I fixed three plays . . . and as a result I was fired. . . . The plays closed and the producers, who were very big boys—Dillingham (*Apple Blossom*), Ziegfeld (*Caesar's Wife*) and Belasco (*The Son-Daughter*)—didn't like it, you know. . . . So I was fired."

The final nail in her critical coffin was her verdict on the performance of Billie Burke, the current Mrs. Ziegfeld: "In her desire to convey the girlishness of the character, she plays her lighter scenes as if she were giving an impersonation of Eva Tanguay." And since Miss Tanguay was a well-known burlesque performer and was most definitely *not* to be considered a serious actress, Miss Burke was not amused. Nor, when Ziegfeld had threatened to remove his considerable advertising, was Condé Nast.

Exit Dorothy Parker stage left.

On hearing the news, "Mr. Benchley and Mr. Sherwood resigned their jobs." Sherwood was a free agent, but Benchley's decision surprised her. "Mr. Benchley had a family—two children. It was the greatest act of friendship I'd known."

When they had cleared their desks, Mr. Benchley and Mrs. Parker rented a tiny office ("an over-sized broom closet") over the Metropolitan Opera House studios near Times Square for thirty dollars a month. "One cubic foot less of space," Benchley claimed, "and it would have constituted adultery."

But the legends at least grew. They applied for the cable address "Parkbench." They put up a sign that read, "The Utica Drop Forge and Tool Company. Benchley and Parker—Presidents." And after Benchley's departure for a job at *Life*, Mrs. Parker wrote "Men" on the door so as to see new faces.

None of these appear to have been true, though they made good and often-repeated stories, and Parker did write to a friend in her Hollywood days threatening to display that very same legend on her studio office door. She was then and was to remain a magnet for the iron filings of every memorable line or anecdote. "It got so bad that they began to laugh before I opened my mouth."

During their brief "partnership," they made desultory attempts at various literary ventures, including a play. But all of them evaporated in laughter and lunch.

By midyear, both of them were writing for *Life* with Parker contributing to a column called "The Far-Sighted Muse" as well as selling articles to the *Saturday Evening Post.* She gave up her Men's Room.

Since change was clearly in the air, she also moved to a new apartment. A real estate agent showed her one that was far removed from the modest dwelling she had in mind. "Oh, dear, that's *much* too big. All I need is room to lay a hat and a few friends." Another was "far enough East to plant tea." She finally found what she required on West 57th Street.

"I was making good money but as far as a 'few million' went. . . . I figure, by the way things are running now," she wrote, "I ought to have it piled up somewhere around the late spring of 2651."

She and Benchley were not proud; they wrote advertising copy for clients like Stetson hats.

"I don't say that I am one of those big business women that make anywhere between ten and twelve dollars a month, in their spare time, by reading character from the shape of the hair-cut or the relative positions of the mouth and the ear. In fact, if I were to sit down and tell you how often I have been fooled on some of the most popular facial characteristics, I'd be here all afternoon. All I say is, give me a good, honest look at a man's hat and the way he wears it, and I'll tell you what he is within five pounds, or give you your money back."

There had to be more to the life literary than this. And there was.

CHAPTER

4

Queen Dorothy and the Round Table

The greatest collection of unsaleable wit in America.

—Herman Manckiewicz

Damn it, it was the twenties and we had to be smarty. . . . I think the trouble with us was that we stayed too young.

—Dorothy Parker

It was no Mermaid Tavern, I can tell you. Just a bunch of loudmouths showing off. . . . The whole thing was made up by people who'd never been there. And may I say they're still making it up?

—Dorothy Parker recalling the Algonquin Round Table in the 1950s

A Vicious Circle by Natalie Ascensios, a mural in the dining room (The Round Table Room) at the Algonquin Hotel. *Back row:* Robert Benchley, The Algonquin Cat, Robert Sherwood, Harpo Marx, Alexander Woollcott, Marc Connelly, Edna Ferber. *Front row:* Dorothy Parker, Frank Case, Harold Ross, George S. Kaufman, Heywood Broun.

THE HOTEL LOBBY in which Benchley, Parker, and Sherwood sought refuge from the midgets had begun life in 1902 as a temperance hotel, appropriately named The Puritan. Fortunately, those days were long gone. It was now the Algonquin, and it would have been happy to serve liquor had not the Volstead Act of 1919 made that illegal. But Prohibition was just about the only prohibition. Frank Case—who managed it from the outset and later owned it—named it after that particular Indian tribe because, according to his research, they were the first and strongest people known to have lived in that neighborhood.

Funds being low as usual, the trio made their lunch from the substantial hors d'oeuvres on offer or scrambled eggs and coffee. Case had prudently decided that one quick way to raise the profile of his establishment was to attract a coterie of promising (if currently impecunious) literary folk from the many magazines and newspapers that had offices in the immediate vicinity—and the tactic appeared to be working.

Shrewdly, he caught the tide of a generation of young writers returning from the war and seeking to establish themselves—not to mention justify themselves and what they had contributed to the recent conflict. One such was Alexander Woollcott—a burly, soon-to-be-gargantuan journalist at the *New York Times*—who was given a dinner at the Algonquin in his honor on his return from the war. The occasion allowed him to tell endless stories which began, "When I was in the theatre of war . . ." Delighted with the evening, he is supposed to have suggested to the assembled guests, "Why don't we do this *every* day?," which the core group somehow drifted into doing.

Dorothy Parker saw this orgy of self-congratulation with a rather more jaundiced eye than most and wrote (in a 1919 *Vanity Fair* article under the pen name "Helen Wells") about "the numerous heroes who nobly accepted commissions in those branches of the services where the fountain pen is mightier than the sword." She referred to them as "the Fountain Pen Lancers" or the "Fireside Hussars" and was to lament "the fact that my

Alexander Woollcott as sketched by William Auerbach-Levy.

husband went to the front—it made him seem like such a slacker. And then to think that all this fuss has been made about the men in France, when the war was won right back home all the time."

It was not the first sign of her disillusionment she had expressed at the ballyhoo that had accompanied her country's belated commitment to the conflict. In *Vanity Fair* in 1918, she wrote:

"You know, there's something gravely wrong with me. I have just realized it lately. I never knew I was unpatriotic before—I'm the wife of one of Our Boys and I wasn't wild about the Germans long before this war ever started. But there is something seriously the matter—I simply cannot get all worked up at the sight of a company of chorus men clad in uniforms, even though they march up to the very footlights with a do-or-die expression in their eyes. If this be treason, make the most of it."

And then there were those patriotic women who insisted on entertaining the soldiers on leave with "songs of such cheerful sentiments as 'You May Be Gone For A Long, Long Time' and 'When You Come Back—If You Do Come Back.' They have also memorized scores of ballads in which soldier sons are perpetually bidding farewell to Mother—those songs in which the lyricist has the unparalleled opportunity of rhyming 'mother' with 'love her' and 'soldier' with 'shoulder.' "

When the lunches began to become a regular feature of the Algonquin's daily life—starting approximately in June 1919—Case put the group in the Pergola (now the Oak) Room and gave them a long table. They began to refer to themselves as the Luigi Board—after all, their dictatorial waiter was called Luigi, and the Ouija Board was in fashion. This soon became "The Board," and they launched their "Board meetings." By virtue of where the table was placed, the group faced a mirrored wall so that as their numbers increased, they actually multiplied. Case then moved them to the front of the main Rose Room and gave them a round table. Thus was the "Round Table" and the "Vicious Circle" born.

In later years, Dorothy Parker was highly ambivalent about the phenomenon she had helped create. There were times when she would actually deny having been there.

"Mr. Benchley and I weren't there for the simple reason that we couldn't afford it. It cost money and we weren't just poor, we were penniless."

All the evidence, of course, is otherwise, and in later years she was prone to exaggerate. Nonetheless, in retrospect, she was consistently critical. In a January 1959 television interview:

"People romanticize it. It was no Mermaid Tavern, I promise you. These weren't giants. Think of who was writing in those days—Lardner, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway. Those were the real giants. The Round Table was just a lot of people telling jokes and telling each other how good they were. Just a bunch of loudmouths showing off, saving their gags for days, waiting

for a chance to spring them. 'Did you hear about my remark?' 'Did I tell you what I said?' and everybody banging around saying, 'What'd he say?' It wasn't legendary. I don't mean that—but it wasn't all that good. There was no truth in anything they said. It was the terrible day of the wisecracks, so there didn't have to be any truth, you know. There's nothing memorable about them. About any of them. . . .

"At first, I was in awe of them because they were being published. But then I came to realize I wasn't hearing anything very stimulating. I remember hearing Woollcott say, 'Reading Proust is like lying in somebody else's dirty bath water.' And then he'd go into ecstasy about something called *Valiant is the Word for Carrie*, and I knew I'd had enough of the Round Table."

She would add unkindly and untruthfully, "Most of them hadn't read anything written before 1920. Most of them are dead now, but they weren't too alive then."

And what of the Ladies of the Round Table—actress Peggy Wood, writers Edna Ferber and Alice Duer Miller, journalists Jane Grant and Ruth Hale, Tallulah Bankhead ("Whistler's Mother"), and others?

"We were gallant, hard-riding and careless of life. We were little black ewes that had gone astray; we were a sort of Ladies' Auxiliary of the Legion of the Damned. And, boy, were we proud of our shame! When Gertrude Stein spoke of a 'Lost Generation,' we took it to ourselves and considered it the prettiest compliment we had."

As far as the group—and, indeed, their whole generation—was concerned, "The whole point of their lives was to have fun, to be clever, to know where the best bartenders were, to be knowledgeable about the city, to know all the latest catchwords, to be aware of the latest fads and fashions, to go to all the first nights, to be satirical and blasé and to do as little work as possible."

Anita Loos had the Round Tablers in mind when in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* she has her heroine, Lorelei Lee, observe that they were "so busy thinking up some cute remark to make that they never have time to do any listening."

Alexander Woollcott and Edna Ferber as sketched by James Montgomery Flagg.

Seen in retrospect, it was an almost inevitable reaction on the part of a generation that had survived the "war to end all wars" and found itself in a time of social and economic flux in which all previously accepted values were in doubt in a society they firmly believed to be rotten. It was not that Dorothy Parker and her set were in active revolt against that society—they merely felt superior to it and considered it irrelevant. They refused to be bound by its rules.

"Silly of me to blame it on dates," she told a 1958 interviewer, "but so it happened to be. Dammit, it was the Twenties and we *had* to be smart. I *wanted* to be cute. That's the terrible thing. I should have had more sense. I was the toast of two continents: Greenland and Australia."

But she would also dub the 1920s "The Dingy Decade."

Screenwriter Herman Manckiewicz (later to inspire Orson Welles to *Citizen Kane*), an occasional Round Tabler himself, was uncomfortably close to the mark when he dubbed his fellow lunchers as "the greatest collection of unsaleable wit in America."

Even so, most of them were published regularly, if only by each other. So FPA would describe the doings and sayings of Woollcott, Parker, Benchley, Kaufman, Heywood Broun, Ring Lardner, and others—then Woollcott and Broun would return the favor. "Logrolling" was the phrase used to describe the self-congratulatory and self-fulfilling process. The "Algonks" were early examples of the "celebrity"—well known for being famous and famous for being well known. They were an interesting but ill-assorted bunch.

There was the epicene Alexander Woollcott, drama critic, journalist, and the self-elected leader of the pack. He was basically

Harpo Marx would often turn up at the Round Table—and he was rarely silent!

afraid of Parker and her quick tongue, which made for a durable relationship between the two of them. On one occasion he was describing his latest book signing. "After all, what is so rare as a Woollcott first edition?" he asked rhetorically. "A *second* edition."

She liked him enough to think up a pet name for his new apartment on the East River. Having originally called it "Old Manse River," she finally settled on "Wit's End." He became, she would write, "as close to essential as one friend can be to another."

Nonetheless, she was well aware of his limitations and considered his literary pretensions "ridiculous." "He had a good heart, for whatever that was worth, and it wasn't much." He in his turn declared that she was "an odd blend of Little Nell and Lady Macbeth."

Another returned war correspondent to sit around the Table was the unlikely Harold Ross. Parker was initially dismissive of a man she found to be "almost illiterate, wild and rough . . . a monolith of unsophistication" who had "never read anything and didn't know anything." She was as surprised as anyone when in 1925 he actually did what he had long been *talking* of doing and founded a magazine—*The New Yorker*—which was to give legitimacy, not to mention employment, to the incessant talkers and occasional writers from the Algonquin.

As for the rest, in her view, "[H. L.] Mencken was impossible. . . . FPA was a lovely man, disagreeable and rude—but lovely. . . . George Kaufman was a mess . . . a worker in mosaics. . . . So much kudos for so little talent . . . I see nothing in that talent at all. . . . Oh, I suppose I do, but you know what I mean . . . [critic George Jean] Nathan is missed. None of the others are. . . . It's just that there was so much praise."

She was careful to exempt her old silent sparring partner, Robert Sherwood, who would go on to be one of his generation's leading playwrights (*Idiot's Delight*, *The Petrified Forest*, *Reunion in Vienna*). Having delivered him from the midgets, she would cable him when she felt he had absented himself too long from the Round Table: "We've turned down a vacant stepladder for you."

As a group, they found themselves locked in intellectual incest—"the game the whole family can play," as any one of them might have written—and became very sensitive when it seemed appropriate to each other's work.

"You might set fire to widows, deflower orphans, or filch the flag from soldier's graves and still be invited to all the literary teas; but if you admired in print, the traits and achievements of any member of your acquaintance, your jig was up. . . . The fear of becoming a log-roller was put into me during my formative years, and there was a good long stretch during which, in my endeavors to keep clean of the ugly charge, I said only the vilest of my nearest and dearest."

Indeed, there were moments—many of them—of literate gaiety. For instance, there was The Game. You had to take the multisyllabic word you were given and turn it into a pun within ten seconds. It was a pastime at which Dorothy Parker reigned supreme:

HORTICULTURE: "You can lead a horticulture but you can't make her think."
BURLESQUE: "I had soft burlesques for breakfast."
PENIS: "The penis mightier than the sword."

And it only got worse:

LAITY: "Laity of Spain, I adore you."
HIAWATHA: "Hiawatha nice girl till I met you."
"Do you know the celery song?" "Celery gather at the river?"
The Irish song? "Irish I was in Dixie."
The French song? "Je suis have no bananas."
The Spanish national anthem? "José, can you see?"
Paris was a "Paroxysmarvelous city."
GARTER: "Nearer my garter to thee."

"They were all living lives of extreme casualness," Dr. Alvan Baruch notes as early as 1924, when he had several of the

Algonks as his patients. "Nearly all of them had a terrible malicious streak." He sensed that most of them had a strong suspicion they were skating on perilously thin professional ice.

The Wall Street crash of 1929 brought the 1920s to an ignominious end in all sorts of ways, and it took the Round Table with it. Many of them lost heavily, though fortunately Dorothy Parker was not one of them. "I never had the sophistication to play the market."

In a late story, she caught the atmosphere of the time all too well:

"It was a year when there were many along the sidewalks mouthing soliloquies, and unless they talked loud and made gestures other pedestrians did not turn to look."

In 1933, Frank Case tried to revive the spirit of the Round Table by setting up an Algonquin Supper Club—but the moment had passed. By 1938, for him, it had faded into "a pleasant and mellow memory." The same year also saw the death of the first of the Algonks: Ring Lardner. One by one they went, leaving footprints of varying depths to show they had passed this way—Heywood Broun in 1939, Woollcott in 1943, Benchley in 1945, Ross in 1951, Sherwood in 1955, FPA in 1960, and Kaufman in 1961. ("So many of them died. My Lord, how people die!")

Ironically, Dorothy Parker, who had always toyed with death, outlived them all.

CHAPTER

5

Hi-Ho-Hum Society

As only New Yorkers know, if you can get through the twilight, you'll live through the night.

—"New York at 6:30 p.m."

At my birth the Devil touched my tongue.

—Dorothy Parker

I'm the greatest little runner-down there ever was.

—Dorothy Parker

The steps in social ascent may be gauged by the terms employed to describe a man's informal evening dress: the progression goes tuxedo, Tux, dinner jacket, Black Tie.

—"The Game"

ROBERT BENCHLEY once impressed—and depressed—Dorothy Parker by his gloomy prediction that each of us is doomed to become the thing we most fear. Parker feared two things—being considered a "woman writer" and turning into a "society lady." That fabrication she saw all too much of in both her personal and her professional life, which was replete with "over-eager portrait-painters, playwrights of dubious sexes, professional conversationalists, and society ladies not quite divorced." Collaboration with Crowninshield on a book called *High Society* during her *Vanity Fair* years merely confirmed her right to be concerned.

There were so many social traps for the unwary. Language was one of them:

INVICTUS

Farthest am I from perfection's heights,
Faulty am I as I well could be,
Still I insist on my share of rights.
When I am dead, think this of me:
Though I have uttered the words "Yea, bo."
Though I use "ain't" to get a laugh,
Though I am wont to exclaim "Let's go,"
Though I say "You don't know the half"—
Black though my record as darkest jet,
Give me, I beg, the devil's due;
Only remember I've never yet
Said, "How's the world been treating you?"

And it wasn't just *what* you said but how you *said* it:

"The sublimest thoughts in the English language can be reduced to utter idiocy by pronouncing them with Southern accent. Ah stray-ut lion is the shoat-ess distance between two points, d'ya heah?"

Her pronunciational prejudice was hardened by her exposure to the mother of Alan Campbell, her second husband, and

hence her temporary mother-in-law. "Mother Hortense . . . exudes that particular odour of Djer Kiss face powder and dried perspiration that characterizes the Southern gentlewoman. She is the only woman I know who pronounced the word 'egg' with three syllables."

Parker herself was pithy in any verbal medium. Like Noël Coward, she was a great believer in the terse vocabulary of the cablegram. When two of her friends who had been living together finally decided to marry, she wired her congratulations: "WHAT'S NEW?" And when Sherwood's wife, Mary, finally had a baby whose arrival she had talked about endlessly, Parker cabled, "DEAR MARY, WE ALL KNEW YOU HAD IT IN YOU."

BARTENDER: What are you having?

MRS. PARKER: Not much fun.

The Sherwood/Brandon wedding, October 1922. *Back row:* Robert Sherwood (*extreme left*); Robert Benchley (*second left*); Alexander Woollcott (*back turned*); Front row: Douglas Fairbanks (*extreme right*).

The social event was something that produced a permanent ambivalence. She couldn't bear *not* to go, yet she hated it when she was actually there. It's no accident that so many of her stories deal with social embarrassment of one kind or another.

By the time she joined the Round Table, Parker was already well known as a wit and someone whom party guests would pick out immediately. Invariably, many of them would seek to engage her in conversation so that they could take home some tidbit—"You'll never guess what she *said* . . ." only to discover that the encounter was not without risk.

Typical was the woman who simply asked, "Are you Dorothy Parker?" "Yes, do you mind?"

Yet this woman got off lightly compared with many others. There was the young man who took her to a party as his date. Trying to appear sophisticated, he looked at the revelry and affected to be bored by it. "I'm afraid I can't join in the merriment. I can't bear fools." "That's queer. Your mother could."

An aging lady seated near to her at dinner starts to ogle an Army colonel opposite. "It's his uniform. I just *love* soldiers," she unwisely confides to Parker. "Yes, you have in every war."

A female neighbor is agonizing about a small scratch she has received on her face—*not*, it should be added, from Mrs. Parker—"Oh, I *do* hope there won't be a scar." "As opposed to all those women who *like* looking as if they went to school in Heidelberg?"

Occasionally, the cracks could be almost benevolent, as when a man bent to retrieve her cigarette lighter and his knee joints cracked, "Ah, there's nothing like an open fire!"

But when you really had to worry was what the lady might say when you had to leave the group. When one man who was clearly ill at ease in the company excused himself to go to the men's room, Parker explained sweetly, "He *really* needs to telephone, but he's too embarrassed to say so."

Like everyone professional who deals in words—from the novelist to the stand-up comic—she was never averse to repeating a winning line, and at least once she used the routine to excuse herself.

Even a harmless parlor game was not necessarily safe. Playing Twenty Questions with some friends, she guessed that they were trying to identify a mutual acquaintance. "Would he be the kind of man who would put the wings back on flies?"

When she was on public show, she seemed to feel she must give her "public" their money's worth, and it brought out her more shocking one-liners. Was she enjoying the party? "*Enjoying* it? One more drink and I'll be under the host." Where do all these people come from? "When it's all over they crawl back into the woodwork."

In her last years, she mellowed to a degree, but the edge was still there. At the last formal dinner party she attended, her hostess, Gloria Vanderbilt, was expressing justifiable pride in her crystal wine glasses. "Oh, yes," Mrs. Parker politely agreed, "paper cups really wouldn't do."

But ironically, perhaps the truest accounts of her real feelings about such occasions are to be found in her fiction:

"Everyone else at the table had got up to dance, except him and me. There I was trapped. Trapped like a trap in a trap" ("The Waltz").

"I should have stayed at home for dinner. I could have had something on a tray. The head of John the Baptist, or something" ("But the One on the Right").

And should you have her as a weekend house guest, which many people did—at least once—you would always be wondering what she *really* thought behind that demure little smile and quiet little voice.

Woollcott recalled a weekend they were both guests at a friend's house and went to inspect the washing facilities. In the bathroom they were to share an ancient toothbrush had been left behind. "What do you suppose she does with it?" Woollcott asked her. "I think she rides it on Halloween."

On at least one occasion, though, her host did discover the truth. A house guest of *Saturday Evening Post* publisher George Lorrimer—a regular patron of the Parker output—she asked her host for permission to send a cable to Benchley. It read,

STELLA: You're strange people, if you are people. Strange and fascinating. You dismiss so much. . . . You sneer at the world, and yet you want to take it over. You slide over it like a film of ice. And where you've passed, nothing will grow.

(*The Ice Age*)

GORDON: You know, I would doubt if he is one.

DAISY: Look, there are people who think a man is that way if he speaks correct English.

(*The Ice Age*)

"PLEASE SEND ME A LOAF OF BREAD AND DON'T FORGET TO INCLUDE A SAW AND FILE."

Lorrimer happened to have the text read back to him for verification by the cable office, and she was never invited again, although he continued to publish her work.

Almost from the beginning, the gay community found an affinity for Dorothy Parker. As one of them said, they felt that they could "let their hair down" with her. She accepted the tribute, but her own feelings on the subject were mixed. When a number of them rallied around her after some particularly depressing love affair had ended, she explained to her Round Table colleagues that she needed "some good fairies to look after me."

For most of the time, though, they could expect to be treated precisely like everyone else—dismissively. When a young gay in a Greenwich Village bar asked her if she ever read fairy tales, she replied, "My dear, let us not talk shop."

And arriving at a party where she found herself surrounded by cross-dressing transsexuals and probably the only woman present, she leaned over the balcony and shouted to the assembled guests, "Come on up, anybody. I'm a *man*!"

"Our language is so dexterous, let us call them ambi-sexterous"

"A Musical Comedy Thought"

Not that her own sex escaped scot-free when they crossed the line. When a group of lesbians in Paris were debating the possibility of legal same-sex marriage, Parker said, "Of course you must have legal marriages. The children have to be considered."

Political correctness was not—and never would have been—a concept in the Parker canon. Her irreverence was totally asexual or possibly pansexual. When she was told that Christine Jorgenson—the first celebrity sex-change subject—was coming over to the United States to visit "her" mother, she enquired, "And what sex, may I ask, is the mother?"

And, of course, there was her notorious put-down of the young debutantes at the Yale prom, witnessed by Woollcott: "If all those sweet young things were laid end to end, I wouldn't be a bit surprised."

The Parker style was rarely the sculpted Wildean epigram, though she would no doubt have given much to have come up with some of his off-the-cuff replies:

If, with the literate, I am
Impelled to try an epigram,
I never seek to take the credit;
We all assume that Oscar said it.

ZABEL: After all, civilisation is the avoidance of disappointment, isn't it?

GORDON: Sounds like Oscar Wilde.

ZABEL: Oh, Wilde. Take the word nowadays away from Wilde and there would be very few epigrams left.

(*The Ice Age*)

She preferred to specialize in the verbal "counterpunch." When Arnold Gingrich, the publisher of *Esquire*, once remarked disingenuously at a party that he was just a simple country boy from Michigan, she was heard to add, "When convenient."

And when Mr. Benchley informed her that ex-President Coolidge had died, she asked innocently, "How could they tell?" (This is the commonly told version of the story, but Benchley's grandson Peter claims that he has his mother's word that Benchley then answered her, "He had an erection.")

When she said of a particular fellow guest, "You know, that woman speaks eighteen languages? And she can't say no in any of them," that may well have been a line waiting for its moment of delivery. But a great many of the best Parker ripostes had, by circumstance, to have been spontaneous.

Told by a friend that their hostess was outspoken—"By whom?" On an actress who had broken her leg in London—"Oh, how terrible. She must have done it sliding down a barrister." Or when she approached a taxi in the street only to be told, "I'm engaged"—"Then be happy."

She was clever but not publicly vulgar, so there are almost certainly lines attributed to her that she did *not* say. For example, Harold Ross, her editor on *The New Yorker*, is supposed to have phoned her when she was on her honeymoon with Alan Campbell, asking about a piece that was overdue. "Tell him I've been too fucking busy—or vice versa" seems a little obvious as a response for someone who was capable of saying at a Halloween party, when told that the guests were busy ducking for apples, "There, but for a typographical error, is the story of my life."

What she was perfectly capable of saying, though, was barbed enough. A certain lady was described as looking like "a two dollar whore who once commanded five," and when her attention was called to a woman wearing a cape trimmed with monkey fur—"Really? I thought they were beards." It was a process that her friend Lillian Hellman described as "embrace and denounce." To someone's face, she was all sweetness and light, but once they had departed . . .

When they entertained in Hollywood, she would stand beside Alan Campbell "reaching out my arms in my well-known gesture of welcome": . . . "Oh, how marvellous it is to see you again . . . do you want to meet any of the shits in here?" Of course, once you went in, you were, by definition, one of them.

A friend once asked Parker to stop running down a recently departed guest. She was a nice person who wouldn't hurt a fly. "Not if it was buttoned up," Parker couldn't help but reply.

She had—she claimed at one point—a friend "who is trying to make a lady of me, and the first step in the uphill climb has been the gaining of my promise to keep from employing certain words." The second step is unrecorded. The fact of the matter was that she could never suffer fools, gladly or otherwise—and her definition was a catholic one: "I cannot keep my face shut [but] as God hears me, I am perfectly justified."

Most of her stories dealt with the nuances of social behavior, quite often with "the gilt and brass of a certain type of American personality, the self-obsessed female snob." But she could skewer any member of her own sex with a verbal hat pin:

"She smiled heartily, waved her hand like a dear little baby shaking bye-bye, and schottisched across the floor to resume the burdens of hospitality."

"She is as deep as a dime, as profound as a work by Elinor Glyn, as receptive as a closed vault, as immediate as a topical song. She is, many people say, the perfect New York type."

"A streamline model lady (the wife of a prominent asphalt contractor) from the Palisade View Apartments in West 127th Street, sinking upon a heap of cushions and wondering if she really does look like Scheherezade, is indeed a sight to pluck at the heart-strings."

"Ladies with a genius for interpretive dancing have even gone to the trouble of bringing costumes. It is difficult to detect

any difference between their costumes and their everyday attire. The way to tell is by glancing, as if casually, at their toes. If their feet are bare—they are performing."

"Mrs. Ernest Weldon wandered about the orderly living-room, giving it some of those little feminine touches. She was not especially good as a touch-giver . . . touch giving was a wife's job, and Mrs. Weldon was not one to shirk the business she had entered."

"'Mr. Matson', she continued—she always spoke of her husband thus; it conveyed an aristocratic sense of aloofness, did away with any suggestion of carnal intimacy between them."

"For winter, she chose frocks of audible taffeta, frilled and frilled again, and jackets made of the skins of the less-sought-after lower animals . . . her locks had been so frequently and so drastically brightened and curled that to caress them, one felt, would be rather like running one's fingers through julienne potatoes."

"Her hair had the various hues of neglected brass."

And at the opposite end of the social spectrum from Mrs. Legion and her friends: "In general style and get-up the girls resemble a group of very clever female impersonators. They run to rather larger and more densely plumed hats that the fashion absolutely insists upon, and they don't go in for any of your dull depressing colours. Always heavily jeweled, they have an adroit way of mingling an occasional imitation bracelet or necklace with the genuine articles, happily confident that the public will be fooled. In the warm weather their dresses are of transparent material about the arms and shoulders, showing provocative glimpses of very pink ribbons and of lace that you could hardly tell from the real."

Pope had it that "the proper study of mankind is man." Dorothy Parker made hers a study of womankind that amounted to a dissection that no man would dare attempt if he valued his life. She was critical of so many affectations because

MRS. GORDON: How do you like my hair?

MRS. LAUTERBACH: Lovely. I can't wait for mine to go gray, so I can have it made blue.

(*The Ladies of the Corridor*)

"The lady at the employment agency was built in terraces. . . . She bit into each of her words and seemed to find it savoury, and she finished every sentence to the last crumb."

("Mrs. Hofstadter on Josephine Street")

"Mrs. Hazelton said: 'It's only I've always been told nothing ages a woman so much as being seen at the theater in the evening with just another woman.'"

("A Bolt behind the Blue")

"There is a persistent sweetness about Miss Oddie that will not be downed. . . . This determined saccharinity of Miss Oddie's is a phenomenon observable in many extremely unmarried women of—as the saying goes—a certain age; her unused affections have, as it were, turned to sugar; one might say that she has diabetes of the emotions."

("Our Tuesday Club")

she feared—as Mr. Benchley warned—that she suffered from many of them herself.

For all her criticism of New York society, she never ceased to be a part of it—for the simple reason that, whatever she found to be wrong with it, anywhere else was infinitely worse.

When her phone rang, she was in the habit of saying, "What fresh hell is this?" But she always picked up. The hell you probably knew was preferable to the alternative.

Her interest in it continued to her death. Who was sitting in her old place at "21"—Jack & Charlie's in the old speakeasy days? What were they talking about? Who was *writing* about today's Beautiful People?

"I love to read about them. . . . The women and the men that will write about them start out by being flippant. But they get so envious. They're like the little boy with his nose pressed against the bake shop window, you know, wanting to get in."

Once Dorothy Parker was "in," she never seriously tried to get out.

In the book *Living Authors*, published in 1932, when she was at the peak of her powers, was the following extract:

> At Mrs. Parker's apartment in the Algonquin Hotel a good portion of New York's smart literary set gathers daily at five. She is slightly over five feet in height, dark, and attractive, with somewhat weary eyes and a sad mouth. Her clothes come from Paris. Her favorite possession is Robinson, a dachshund. She is superstitious, pessimistic, and hates to be alone. Being extremely near-sighted, she wears glasses when writing, but has never been seen on the street with them. Flowers and a good cry are reported to be among her favorite diversions.

CHAPTER
6

The New Yorker and Its "Constant Reader"

I hate Books;
They tire my eyes.

—"Books: A Hymn of Hate"

It is our national joy to mistake for the first rate, the fecund rate.

—Reviewing Sinclair Lewis's *Dodsworth*

This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force.

—Reviewing a novel

I would liefer adopt the career of a blood donor.

—On being a book reviewer

Its general tenor will be of gaiety, wit and satire, but it will be more than a jester. It will not be what is commonly called radical or high brow. It will be what is commonly called sophisticated in that it will assume a reasonable degree of enlightenment on the part of its readers. It will hate bunk . . .

—*The New Yorker* mission statement

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.

—On being a reviewer

ON FEBRUARY 21, 1925, Harold Ross did what he had long been threatening to do. He brought out the first edition of his magazine, *The New Yorker*—a publication distinctly "not for the little old lady in Dubuque." Though why specifically "Dubuque" was never made entirely clear.

To begin with, the Algonks were little more than "advisory editors"—a title that Ross had given them without even asking their permission. A couple of years later, though, when it had become surprisingly successful, they had emigrated there en masse.

From its second issue, Dorothy Parker contributed verse and short stories as well as reviews. As with Crowninshield, she found her new boss a "lovely man," if a trifle eccentric.

"Ross like Heathcliffe, whom he in no other way resembled, went by just one name. There must, of course, have been those who called him Mr. Ross, though never to his back, and semi-occasionally some abraded contributor to the magazine would howl 'Harold!' at him. But in all other instances he was Ross. His improbabilities started with his looks. His long body seemed to be only basted together, his hair was quills upon the fretful porpentine, his teeth were Stone-henge, and his clothes looked as if they had been brought up by somebody else. Poker-faced he was not. Expressions, sometimes several at a time, would race across his countenance, and always, especially when he thought no one was looking, not the brow alone but the whole expanse would be corrugated by his worries, his worries over his bitch-mistress and his magazine. But what he did and what he caused to be done with *The New Yorker* left his mark and his memory upon his times.

"The dictionary says firmly that 'sophisticated' means 'adulterated' and Ross was probably the least adulterated human being that ever walked. Moreover, his ignorance was a very Empire State Building among ignorances: you had to admire it for its size. He was as void of knowledge of all matters cultural, scientific and sociological as a child in a parochial orphanage. Yet his ignorance was not, as it so often is in an adult, either exasperating or tiresome. There was an innocence to it—no airs, no pretenses; if he did not know a thing, he asked about it. Usually the answer delighted him, and always it astonished him. I think it was his perpetual astonishment that kept him from ever in his life being bored."

The Parker-Ross relationship was never an entirely easy one, considering their very different dispositions.

"He took me, once upon a time, to see Nazimova in *The Cherry Orchard*. At first he sat silent. Then he said, and over and over through the evening, in the all-but-voiceless voice of one who comes suddenly upon a trove of shining treasure, 'Say, this is quite a play—quite a play!' He had not seen it before. He had not heard of it.

"Once I used the word 'stigmata' in a piece. The proof came to me from Ross with no questions: only the exclamation 'no such word' in the margin. When friendship was restored, Ross conceded that maybe 'stigmata' had something to do with defective vision."

He also had the quaint idea that staff members should show up in the office on a reasonably regular basis. He once made the mistake of asking Parker why she hadn't come in to write

her regular piece. "Someone was using the pencil." He didn't ask twice.

Remembering those days at a distance of some thirty years, she concluded, "Only God or James Thurber could have invented Ross." And only God could have invented Thurber.

Working with him on *The New Yorker* in later years, Parker found a certain affinity for his cockeyed view of the battle of the sexes, in both line and print.

"These are strange people that Mr. Thurber has turned loose upon us. They seem to fall into three classes—the playful, the defeated and the ferocious. All of them have the outer semblance of unbaked cookies; the women are of a dowdiness so overwhelming that it becomes tremendous style. Once a heckler complained that the Thurber women have no sex appeal. 'They have for my men,' he said."

By that time, Ross was long dead, and the magazine—she felt—had seen its best days.

"I don't read [it] much these days. It always seems to be the same old story about somebody's childhood in Pakistan."

In 1927, she began her famous series of book reviews under the byline "Constant Reader." In all, she was to write forty-six pieces.

Stylistically she picked up where her *Vanity Fair* theater reviews had left off in 1920. They were a series of personal conversations with the reader for which the book she was reviewing provided a convenient—and not always relevant—peg.

"It is true that the book is occasionally overwritten, that certain points are hammered too heavily. But, as I was saying to the landlord only this morning, you can't have everything."

There would be the little stream-of-consciousness asides, such as "There I go being tender about things again; it's no wonder men forget me" and "I am the one who believes, when things are calm and peaceful, that there is a chance of their staying so. That is the way I have gone about all my life. I really must make a note on my desk calendar to have my head examined one day

next week. I am beginning to have more and more piercing doubts that my fontanel ever closed up properly."

There was Nan Britton's account of her affair with President Harding (and the resulting love child), which the Society for the Suppression of Vice—run by one John S. Sumner—wished to seize from the printers:

"I admit I drank down the whole book; but one swallow would make a Sumner. (That should have been better. I wish I had more time. Something might have been made of that.)"

There was the concern about style, both her own—"It seems to me that there are parts of it that don't come off; I feel, a little uncomfortably, that (X) has not yet found himself as a novelist. ["Do not come off" and "found himself" both in one sentence! Tie that for coining phrases, if you can.]"—and other people's—"One must hope that somewhere there is somebody who can tell him to watch his pen; because if he doesn't, one of these fine days he is going to simile himself to death."

Her lines of dismissal linger long after the book lies forgotten. Who can remember Lucius Beebe's *Shoot If You Must*? But her description of it is unforgettable—"This must be a gift book. That is to say, a book which you wouldn't take on any other terms" or a science tome that "was written without fear and without research."

In *The Coast of Illyria*, Charles Lamb wrote, "It's a filthy fashion, this rage for publishing one's degradations. Today a writer has a single collision with the normal world, and he makes a whole book of his personal damages."

Parker's judgment on literary trends was just as incisive. Take the short story. In the Parker scheme of things, there were six types that should be avoided like the plague. The opening line told you all you needed to know:

1. "'Ho, Félipe, my horse and pronto!' cried El Sol."
2. "Everybody in Our Village loved to go by Granny Wilkins' cottage."

3. "The train chugged off down the long stretch of track, leaving the little new school-mistress standing alone on the rickety boards that comprised the platform of Medicine Bend station."
4. "The country club was ahum, for the final match of the Fourth of July Golf Tournament was in full swing."
5. "'I dunno ez I ought to be settin' here, talkin', when there's vittles to git fer the men-folks.'"
6. "'For God's sake, don't do it, Kid!' whispered Annie the Wop, twining her slim arms round the Kid's bull-like neck."

"But with these half-dozen exceptions, I read all the other short stories that separated the Ivory Soap advertisements from the pages devoted to Campbell's Soups. I read about bored and pampered wives who were right on the verge of eloping with slender-fingered, quizzical-eyed artists, but did not. I read of young suburban couples, caught up in the fast set about them, driven to separation by their false, nervous life, and restored to each other by the opportune illness of their baby. I read tales proving that Polack servant-girls have their feelings, too. I read of young men who collected blue jade, and solved mysterious murders on the side. I read stories of transplanted Russians, of backstage life, of shop-girls' evening hours, of unwanted grandmothers, of heroic collies, of experiments in child-training, of golden-hearted cow-punchers with slow drawls, of the comicalities of adolescent love, of Cape Cod fisher-folk, of Creole belles and beaux, of Greenwich Village, of Michigan Boulevard, of the hard-drinking and easy-kissing younger generation, of baseball players, sideshow artists and professional mediums. I read, in short, more damn tripe than you ever saw in your life."

The tripe was by no means restricted to the short stories she read. A reviewer must, perforce, review whatever comes between hard covers.

There was Dr. Thew Wright's *Appendicitis* (illustrated), the good doctor's mission being to "bring an understanding of appendicitis to the laity. . . . And it really is terribly hard to keep from remarking, after studying the pictures, 'That was no laity; that's my wife.' It is hard, but I'll do it if it kills me."

There was Professor William Lyon Phelps's *Happiness* ("a very slim volume indeed"). "There is this to be said for a volume such as *Happiness*. It is second only to a rubber duck as the ideal bathtub companion. It may be held in the hand without causing muscular fatigue or nerve strain, it may be nearly balanced back of the faucets, and it may be read through before the water has cooled. And if it slips down the drain pipe, all right, it slips down the drain pipe."

The Art of Successful Bidding by George Reith "is, I have no moment's doubt, a fine textbook. But it is well over my head. I can't even jump for it."

Nor was she much more comfortable with Mlle. V. D. Gaudel's *The Ideal System for Acquiring a Practical Knowledge of French (Just the French One Wants to Know)*. "The future is veiled, perhaps

FRONT VIEW OF THE ABDOMINAL CAVITY

It is good, I admit; it has nice nuances, there is rhythm to the composition, and clever management is apparent in the shadows. But my feeling is that it is a bit sentimental, a little pretty-pretty, too obviously done with an eye towards popularity. It may well turn out to be another "Whistler's Mother" or a "Girl with Fan." My own choice is the impression of "Vertical Section of Peritoneum." It has strength, simplicity, delicacy, pity and irony. Perhaps, I grant you, my judgment is influenced by my sentiment for the subject. For who that has stood, bareheaded, and beheld the Peritoneum by moonlight can gaze unmoved upon its likeness?

mercifully, and so I cannot say that never, while I live, shall I have occasion to announce in French: 'It was to punish your foster-brother'; but I know which way I would bet. It may be that some day I shall be in such straits that I shall have to remark: 'The friend of my uncle who took the quill feather bought a round black rice-straw hat trimmed with two long ostrich feathers and a jet buckle.' Possibly circumstances will so weave themselves that it will be just the moment for me to put in: 'Mr. Fouchet would have received some eel.' It might occur that I must thunder: 'Obey, or I will not show you the beautiful gold chain.' But I will be damned if it is ever to be of any good to me to have at hand Mlle. Gaudel's masterpiece: 'I am afraid he will not arrive in time to accompany me on the harp.'"

At least *The Technique of the Love Affair* (by A Gentlewoman) rang a personal bell or two.

"If only it had been written and placed in my hands years ago, maybe I could have been successful, instead of just successive."

Occasionally, she would find a subject that genuinely engaged her sympathy and admiration, and when she did, the personal parallels were likely to shine through. One such was the late Katherine Mansfield, whose *Journals* she reviewed.

"She was not of the elite breed of the discontented; she was of the high few fated to be ever unsatisfied. Writing was the precious thing in life to her, but she was never truly pleased with anything she had written. With a sort of fierce austerity, she strove for the crystal clearness, the hard bright purity from which streams perfect truth. She never felt that she had attained them."

Another was dancer Isadora Duncan. In reviewing her autobiography, *My Life*, here was "a magnificent, generous, gallant, reckless, fated fool of a woman . . . a great woman . . . there was never a place for her in the ranks of the terrible, slow army of the cautious. She ran ahead, where there were no paths. . . . She was not a lucky lady." She might have been describing herself.

But anyone who liked a Katherine Mansfield was likely to loathe a Margot Asquith.

"That gifted entertainer, the Countess of Oxford and Asquith, author of *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith* (four volumes, neatly boxed, suitable for throwing purposes). . . . The affair between Margot Asquith and Margot Asquith will live as one of the prettiest love stories of all literature."

Milady pushed her luck by bringing out a second work and calling it *Lay Sermons*. Mrs. Parker found it to be "a book of essays with all the depth and glitter of a worn dime. A compilation of her sentiments, suitably engraved upon a nice, big calendar, would make an ideal Christmas gift for your pastor, your dentist, or Junior's music teacher. Through the pages walk the mighty. I don't say that Margot Asquith actually permits us to rub elbows with them ourselves, but she willingly shows us her own elbow, which has been, so to say, honed on the mighty."

The author expressed coy doubts about the suitability of the word "Sermons" to go with "Lay": "Happier, I think it would have been if, instead . . . she had selected the word 'Off.'"

Parker would claim that she usually turned to older writers "for comfort" and named *Vanity Fair* as her favorite novel. "I was a woman of eleven when I first read it," and she had since read it "about a dozen times a year."

Her beloved Dickens was another favorite—but most others had to fend for themselves.

CLASSICS

The Lives and Times of John Keats,
Percy Bysshe Shelley, and
George Gordon Noël, Lord Byron

Byron and Shelley and Keats
Were a trio of lyrical treats.
The forehead of Shelley was cluttered with curls,

And Keats never was a descendant of earls,
And Byron walked out with a number of girls,
But it didn't impair the poetical feats
Of Byron and Shelley,
Of Byron and Shelley.
Of Byron and Shelley and Keats.

Charles Dickens
Who call him spurious and shoddy
Shall do it o'er my lifeless body.
I heartily invite such birds
To come outside and say those words!

Walter Savage Landor
Upon the work of Walter Landor
I am unfit to write with candor.
If you can read it, well and good;
But as for me, I never could.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Should Heaven send me any son,
I hope he's not like Tennyson.
I'd rather have him play a fiddle
Than rise and bow and speak an idyll.

George Sand
What time the gifted lady took
Away from paper, pen, and book,
She spent in amorous dalliance
(They do those things so well in France)

("A Pig's Eye View of Literature")

In Paris, she would occasionally catch a glimpse of James Joyce scurrying along. She found him taciturn in the extreme. "I guess he's afraid he might drop a pearl."

Of the then-current crop of writers, the ladies perhaps had the most to fear from the Parker pen. Romantic novelist Elinor Glyn—the inventor of "It"—had a new offering. Her heroine was Ava, and Mrs. Parker introduces us to her.

"Ava was young and slender and proud. And she had it. It; hell; she had Those. . . . She was one who could not Give All unless she loved. Call it her hard luck, if you will, but that's how she was. . . . She could have made any All-American team in a moment, just on her dexterity at intercepting passes."

There was Kathleen Norris ("Who Believed in the Commercial Imperative").

"Remember, this is a book by Kathleen Norris . . . everything is going to turn out for the best, and there will never be a word that could possibly give pain to any of her readers and make sales fall off."

There was even controversial evangelist Aimée Semple McPherson, who dared risk *her* all with an autobiography.

"It may be that this autobiography is set down in sincerity, frankness, and simple effort. It may be, too, that the Statue of Liberty is situated in Lake Ontario.

"On the occasion that she drifts into longer and broader sentences, she writes as many other three-named authoresses have written before. Her manner takes on the thick bloom of rich red plush. The sun becomes 'that round orb of day' (as opposed, I expect, to those square orbs you see around so much lately). . . . It is difficult to say whether Mrs. McPherson is happier in her crackling exclamations or in her bead-curtain-and-chenille-fringe style. Presumably the lady is happy in both manners. That would make her two up on me."

Even a fellow Round Tabler like Edna Ferber ("surely America's most successful writeress. . . I'm told she whistles at her typewriter") had to learn to play the hand Dorothy Parker dealt. Years later, Parker said of her novel *Ice Palace*, "The book, which is going to be a movie, has the plot and characters of a book which is going to be a movie."

Nor did the menfolk fare any better. She felt that most of them were trading on hopelessly inflated reputations—reputations that were rapidly undermining whatever genuine talent they originally possessed.

In the late 1920s, Sinclair Lewis was generally considered to be America's preeminent "social" novelist—but not by Dorothy Parker. "Mr. Lewis is no longer the reporter; he has become the parodist." In fact, he became the synonym for the prolix in prose. Overhearing a group of gabby midwestern governors at a New York nightclub, she remarked, "Sounds like over-written Sinclair Lewis."

In reviewing his latest novel, *Dodsworth*, she summed up what, in her opinion, was wrong with current American literature. The most prolific writers were not necessarily the most professional.

"A list of our authors who have made themselves most beloved and, therefore, most comfortable financially, shows that it is our national joy to mistake for the first rate, the fecund rate."

Nor did the undeniable gravitas of Theodore Dreiser weigh too heavily on her.

Theodore Dreiser
Should ought to
write nicer.

"He is regarded, and I wish you could gainsay me, as one of our finest contemporary authors; it is the first job of a writer who demands rating among the great, or even among the good, to write well. If he fails that, as Mr. Dreiser, by any standard, so widely muffs it, he is, I think, unequipped to stand among the big. . . . To me Dreiser is a dull, pompous, dated and *darned near ridiculous writer*. All right. Go on and bring your lightning bolts."

So who *did* she like? Ernest Hemingway. So much so that her enthusiasm almost tripped her up. Reviewing his collection *Men Without Women,* she wrote, "He is, to me, the greatest living writer of short stories." At which several people pointed out that Rudyard Kipling and Max Beerbohm were not without their supporters. Mrs. Parker felt the need to express her mea culpa in print.

"'Oh, my God,' I said—I was brought up in a mining town, and the old phrases come back in moments of emotion. . . . Maybe this would do better . . . 'Ernest Hemingway is, to me, the greatest American short story writer who lives in Paris most of the time but goes to Switzerland to ski, served with the Italian Army during the World war, has been a prize-fighter and has fought bulls, is coming to New York in the spring, is in his early thirties, has a black moustache, and is still waiting for that two hundred francs I lost to him at bridge.' Or maybe, after all, the only thing to do is to play safe and whisper: 'Ernest Hemingway is, to me, a good writer.'"

Asked, "Does he talk like he writes?" she responded, "Yes, he does talk like he writes. In fact, liker."

Hemingway—she would enthuse—"could sell a six day bicycle race to a Mother Superior. . . . All that remains to be said is that he is . . . the lost Dauphin, that he was shot as a German spy and that he is actually a woman masquerading in a man's clothes."

From the early 1930s, there were many writers who began to write in Hemingway's pared-down style, but they got short shrift from "Constant Reader." One of them was Dashiell Hammett, generally considered the originator of the "private eye" novel.

"He has all the mannerism of Hemingway, with no inch of Hemingway's scope nor flicker of Hemingway's beauty. . . . It is true that he is so hard-boiled you could roll him on the White House lawn. And it is also true that he is a good, hell-bent, cold-hearted writer, with a clear eye for the ways of hard women and a fine ear for the words of hard men. . . . Dashiell Hammett is as American as a sawed-off shotgun."

It was, perhaps, small wonder that Hammett—who was to become the life companion of her friend Lillian Hellman—disliked Parker to the point where, when she came to visit, he would move out.

She much preferred the work of her fellow Algonk and sometime lover Ring Lardner, whose premature death robbed American literature of what might have been a significant body of work.

"His unparalleled ear and eye, his strange, bitter pity, his utter sureness of characterization, his unceasing investigation, his beautiful economy . . . his qualities are not to be listed but to be felt, as you read his work."

Dorothy Parker, book reviewer and vivisectionist, put aside her *New Yorker* pen in 1931 and thought she had done so for good. But a quarter century later, her circumstances had changed decidedly for the worse, and she needed the money her old friend Arnold Gingrich, editor of *Esquire*, was offering her to be *his* "Constant Reader."

Gingrich was prepared to pay her $750 a week at a time when her political views had made her unemployable and her drinking problems professionally unreliable. She began work in 1957, and by 1958 Gingrich could reflect ruefully that "it is a high-forceps delivery every time we manage to get a piece out of her." The review copies would pile up, and many a week she would miss her deadline, using her imagination in inventing excuses that would have been properly employed in writing the review. Sometimes, she admitted, she didn't even *read* the book—just the cover blurb. Nonetheless, the Gingrich check arrived without fail.

And what did she find in this brave new literary world? In many ways, more of the same. There was still a plethora of "lady novelists": "As artists they're rot, but as providers they're oil wells; they gush." A good example—in the great tradition of the three name novelist—being Katherine Anne Porter and her *Ship of Fools*.

"To those of us who, after filling a postcard, are obliged to lie down and have wet cloths applied to our brows, this is not a book. It's the Pyramid."

But there was good news among the bad news.

"In all reverence I say Heaven bless the Whodunit, the soothing balm on the wound, the cooling hand on the brow, the opiate of the people."

As for the contemporary crop of writers, Dreiser was gone, but James Gould Cozzens was bidding fair to take his place with

the interminable *By Love Possessed* (1957), which "seemed to me cold, distant, and exasperatingly patronizing." Fortunately, there was still William Faulkner, "a vulnerable country boy" but "the man I believe to be the greatest writer we have."

Of the rest, she admired Saul Bellow and John O'Hara ("a genius") and thought that James Baldwin "can write like hell." She found Peter De Vries boring and Mary McCarthy "really trying." She was "uninterested" in John Updike but had a good word

to say for his *The Poorhouse Fair*: "Perhaps this is a purely personal matter, but I am always drawn to reading a book about a poorhouse—after all, it is only normal curiosity to find out what it will be like in my future residence." But what still exercised her most was the apparent lack of attention paid to what a writer was put on earth to do, and the dismissive critical reception being accorded to the young Truman Capote brought it to a head.

"I am sick of those who skate fancily over the work of Mr. Capote. . . . They neglect to say one thing which is, to me, the most important; Truman Capote can *write*."

"I will say of the writers of today that some of them, thank God, have the sense to adapt to their times. Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* is a great book. And I thought William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* an extraordinary thing. The start of it took your heart and flung it over there. . . . I love Sherlock Holmes. My life is so untidy and he's so neat. But as for the living novelists, I suppose E. M. Forster is the best, not knowing what that is, but at least he's a semi-finalist, wouldn't you think?"

One significant difference she found in the fiction of the 1950s and 1960s was the prevalence of outspoken sex, which she found both unnecessary and distasteful. It had been bad enough in the old days, when she had been prompted to write, "After this week's course of reading, I'm good and through with the whole matter of sex. I say it's spinach, and I say the hell with it!"

But now, "Certainly nobody wants to complain about sex itself, but I think we all have a legitimate grievance in the fact that, as it is shown in present day novels, its practitioners are so unmercifully articulate about it. . . . There is no more cruel destroyer of excitement than painstaking detail. Who reads these play-by-play reports of passion responds with much the same thrill as he would experience in looking over the blueprints for some stranger's garage. . . .

"The nowadays ruling that no word is unprintable has, I think, done nothing whatever for beautiful letters. The short flat

terms used over and over, both in dialogue and narrative, add neither vigor nor clarity; the effect is not of shock, but of something far more dangerous—tedium.

"Obscenity is too valuable a commodity to chuck around all over the place; it should be taken out of the safe on special occasions only. . . . So I am growing old, a process that goes on at a gallop even as I sit here, for I find my heart turns tenderly to that yesterday when there were those two demure dashes between the first and fourth letters of the words used with telling frequency. . . . Can you remember, venerable subscriber, the days when there used to be rows of asterisks? How those little stars twinkled and gleamed, and how warmly they shone upon the imagination!

"I should like to issue a short, stiff statement, to be notarized if considered necessary, that I am through and done with novels containing scenes in which young ladies stand mother-naked before long mirrors, and evaluate, always favorably, their unveiled surfaces. Further, I will have no more of books in which various characters tell their dreams; tell, with prodigious extension of memory and ruthless courtesy to details, dreams which, unlike yours and mine, have to do with the plot of the piece. And finally and forever, I am come to the parting of the ways from works where Nature lore invades the telling of the tale. When the author gives me a scene of wild young passion, then I can no longer slog through the immediate follow-up of a tender description of the bendings of wheat in the breeze, nor yet of a report on the intricate delicacies of fern fronds, nor again of the fact that the wild jonquils are thicker than ever this year. . . . I realize that all this will cut down my reading drastically, nevertheless—There!"

CHAPTER
7

The Sexes

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,
A medley of extemporanea;
And love is a thing that can never go wrong,
And I am Marie of Roumania.

. . . Princes, never I'd give offense,
Won't you think of me tenderly?
Here's my strength and my weakness, gents—
I loved them until they loved me

—"Ballade at Thirty-Five"

The sun's gone dim, and
The moon's turned black;
For I loved him, and
He didn't love back.

—"Two Volume Novel"

Scratch a lover, and find a foe!

—"Ballade of a Great Weariness"

And if you do not like me so,
To hell, my love, with you.

—"Indian Summer"

IT WAS NOËL COWARD who defined love as "that age old devastating disease," but Dorothy Parker would have agreed with him—and then some. With her, it was never an illness; it was an epidemic.

In many ways, she was one of the first of the feminists. And yet—perhaps because of the times in which she lived and had her subversive being—she never glossed over the realities in the see-saw of the sexes, however unpalatable and personally inconvenient they might be.

"Men don't like nobility in women. Not any man. I suppose it is because men like to have the copyrights on nobility—if there is going to be anything like that in a relationship. . . .

"A man defending husbands versus wives, or men versus women, has got about as much chance as a traffic policeman trying to stop mad dogs by blowing two whistles."

"Most good women are hidden treasures who are only safe because nobody looks for them. . . .

Woman lives but in her Lord
Count to ten and man is bored.

"General Review of the Sex Situation"

"Woman's life must be wrapped up in a man."

"Women and elephants never forget."

"Ballade of Unfortunate Mammals"

"Wives are people who think that when the telephone rings it is against the law to answer it. . . .

"Wives are people whose watch is always a quarter-of-an-hour off . . . but they would have no idea what time it is, anyway, as daylight saving gets them all balled up. . . .

"Wives are people who get invited out somewhere and the husband asks if he ought to shave and they say, 'No, you look all right.' And when they get to wherever they are going, they ask everybody to 'Please forgive Luke as he didn't have time to shave.'"

A wife is also the woman who was foolish enough to tell Dorothy Parker proudly that she had kept her husband for seven years. "Don't worry, if you keep him long enough he'll come back in style."

Falling in love was easy. *Staying* in love was the hard part.

"She tried to remember what they used to talk about before they were married. . . . It seemed to her that they never had had much to say to each other. . . . She had always heard that true love was inarticulate. Then, besides, there had always been kissing and things, to take up your mind. But it had turned out that true marriage was apparently equally dumb. And you can't depend on kisses and all the rest of it to while away the evenings, after seven years."

"I'll be the way I was when he first met me. Then maybe he'll like me again. I was always sweet, at first. Oh, it's so easy to be sweet to people before you love them. . . . They don't like you to tell them they've made you cry. They don't like you to tell them you're unhappy because of them. If you do, they think you're possessive and exacting. And then they hate you. They hate you when you say anything you really think. You always have to keep playing little games. Oh, I thought we didn't have to; I thought this was so big I could say whatever I meant. I guess you can't, ever. I guess there isn't ever anything big enough for that."

Almost certainly the observation most associated with Dorothy Parker is the couplet "News Item":

Men seldom make passes
At girls who wear glasses.

Next to *Macbeth*'s "Lead on, MacDuff" (which should, of course, read, "Lay on, MacDuff"), it must be the most misquoted of popular quotations. Nine people out of ten will tell you that "men *never* make passes," and it used to drive Parker wild, not simply because they got it wrong but because it was the only line of hers they knew. ("It's a terrible thing to have made a serious attempt to write verse and then be remembered for two lines like those. I must, even by accident, have said other things worth repeating, if the lazy sons-of-bitches bothered to find out.") It was also an observation with a highly personal relevance. She herself wore glasses when she was working but was seen to remove them rapidly when others were around, especially if the "other" was male.

New Yorker writer E. B. White wrote that "a writer should take care to be memorable . . . I can't remember *Moby Dick* but I can remember "men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses," which should place Mistress Parker ahead of Melville but probably doesn't."

Insult was finally added to injury during her stint in Hollywood when producer Samuel Goldwyn told her, "You're a great poet. 'Men never make a pass at girls wearing eyeglasses.' That's a great poem and you wrote it."

The eye with which she observed her own sex was beady and unclouded.

"Emmy Lineham had always been described as a cute little trick, and she was therefore obliged to be rosy and to twitter."

"No living eye, of human being or caged wild beast or dear, domestic animal, had beheld Mrs. Lanier when she was not being wistful. She was dedicated to wistfulness, as lesser artists to words and paint and marble. . . . It is safe to assume that Mrs. Lanier was wistful in her bathroom, and slumbered soft in wistfulness

through the dark and secret night."

"Mrs. Ewing was a short woman who accepted the obligation borne by so many short women to make up in vivacity what they lack in number of inches from the ground. She was a creature of little pats and prods, little crinklings of the eyes and wrinklings of the nose, little runs and ripples of speech and movement, little spirals of laughter."

"Mrs. Bain cried a little in pauses in the conversation. She had always cried easily and often. Yet, in spite of her years of practice, she did not do it well. Her eyelids grew pink and sticky, and her nose gave her no little trouble, necessitating almost constant sniffling. She sniffled loudly and conscientiously, and frequently removed her pince-nez to wipe her eyes with a crumpled handkerchief, gray with damp."

"Mrs. Martindale's breasts were admirable, delicate yet firm, pointing one to the right, one to the left, 'angry at each other,' as the Russians have it. . . . She was tall, and her body streamed like a sonnet. Her face was formed all of triangles, as a cat's is. . . . Mrs. Martindale lingered in her fragrant forties. Has not afternoon been adjudged the fairest time of the day?"

Female affectation in all its forms affected Parker. It might, in essence, be harmless, but she felt it undermined her sex, which—God knew—needed all the help it could get. The casual

Like blossom on its stem is poised your head,
Wrapped closely round with fragrant bands.
As roses' passionate heart, your mouth is red;
Like lilies in the wind, your long white hands.
Brighter the glance of you than summer star;
But, lady fair, how awful thick you are!

("Sonnet—1")

dropping of French phrases particularly enraged her. She once heard a social acquaintance say "*Tant pis*!" and from that moment on she never refrained from asking, "How's old *tant pis* these days? Still full of it?"

Virtually all the Parker dispatches in the Battle of the Sexes are from the front line—the observations of a woman obsessed with life, love, and the pursuit of unhappiness. She had little to say about the pleasures of home, hearth, and the pitter-patter of tiny feet. And what she did say was not exactly comforting.

"The best way to keep children home is to make the home atmosphere pleasant—and let the air out of the tires."

"I require only three things of a man. He must be handsome, ruthless and stupid." In that, Dorothy Parker defined both the requirements and the problem that would haunt her emotional life. Even allowing for the fact that—like so many of her statements—it was said to be remembered, it provides a field day for the psychologist. Here was a woman asking for superficiality and trouble from someone who would never challenge her intellectually. She was to find it repeatedly with "my little, easy loves."

In today's popular parlance, the psychologist would undoubtedly go on to say that the lady suffered from "low self-esteem" and cite her verse in particular as symptomatic:

> Here's my strength and weakness, gents—
> I loved them until they loved me.
> . . .
> For I loved him, and
> He didn't love me.
> . . .
> Some men break your heart in two,
> Some men fawn and flatter,
> Some men never look at you;
> And that cleans up the matter.
>
> ("Experience")

> Oh, is it, then, Utopian
> To hope that I may meet a man
> Who'll not relate, in accents suave,
> The tales of girls he used to have?
>
> ("De Profundis")

Never a suggestion that the course of true love would not contain some natural disaster—or, indeed, that there was any such thing:

> And love is a thing that can never go wrong.
> And I am Marie of Roumania.

In one of her stories, the heroine defines her "Vanished Dream" man—in a paraphrase of Parker's own words—as "an English-tailored Greek God, just masterful enough to be entertaining, just wicked enough to be exciting, just clever enough to be a good audience."

Her own Greek god, when he came along, was a Connecticut boy—Edwin Pond Parker II, age twenty-three, a stockbroker.

"He was beautiful but not very smart. He was supposed to be in Wall Street but that didn't mean anything."

He was "a handsome Gentile" and he had "a nice clean name." She married him in June 1917 to acquire that name. "That was all there was to it."

Well, perhaps not quite all. She seemed to enjoy the novelty of being a bride, but the war cut that short.

"We were married for about five minutes, then he went off to war. He didn't want to kill anybody, so he drove an ambulance. Unfortunately, they had dope in the ambulance. Morphine. You know, that's not good for you. Well, [after the war] it was one sanitorium after another."

And if it wasn't entirely true, it made a good story for lunch at the Algonquin. Eddie became the regular butt of the Parker jokes. "Did I tell you what Eddie did today?" When, a confirmed

alcoholic, he finally returned from the front, he would hang around the Round Table with nothing much to contribute, except to light his wife's cigarettes and listen to her latest exaggeration and laugh on cue. She was the court jester and he the court jest.

Unable to hold a job, he soon returned to the family home in Connecticut, and it was there that Mrs. Parker eventually divorced him, in a state "where you can get it for roller skating." But that was not until March 31, 1928, and even then she hung on to her favorite possession from the marriage—her name.

In the meantime, there were lovers aplenty. But sadly,

Every love's the love before
In a duller dress.
That's the measure of my love—
Here's my bitterness:
Would I knew a little more,
Or very much less.

("Summary")

They hail you as their morning star
Because you are the way you are.
If you return the sentiment,
They'll try to make you different.

("Men")

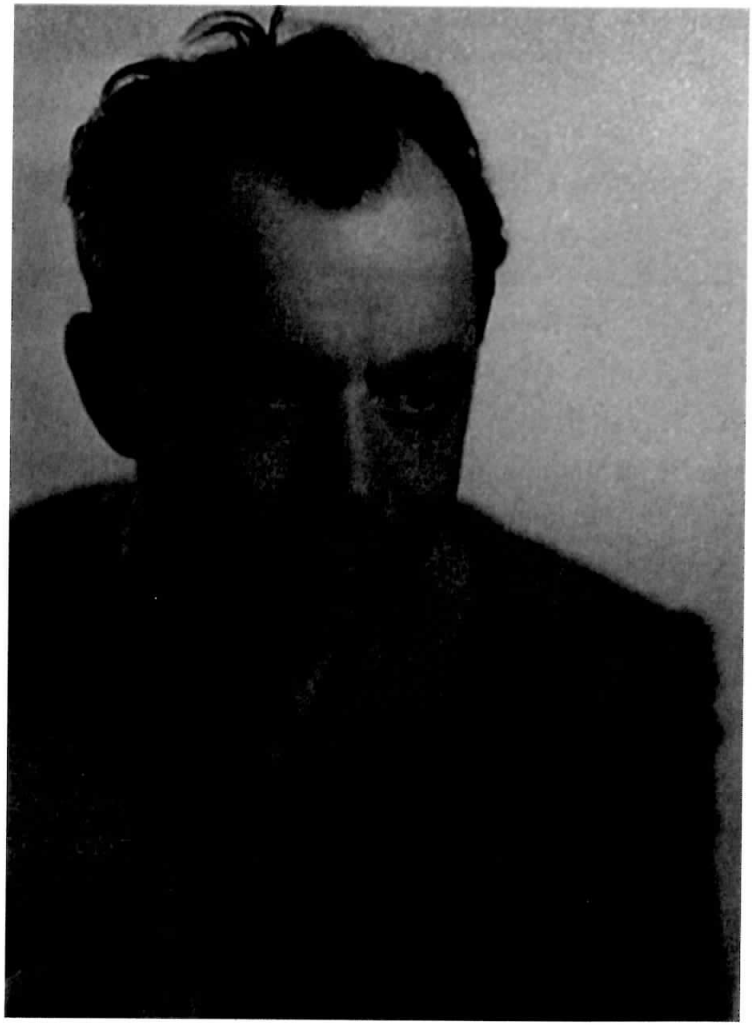
Oh, gallant was the first love, and glittering and fine;
The second love was water, in a clear white cup;
The third love was his, and the fourth was mine;
And after that, I always get them all mixed up.

("Pictures in the Smoke")

Though she's a fool who seeks to capture
The twenty-first fine, careless rapture.

("A Fairly Sad Fale")

"Lips that taste of tears, they say, are the best for kissing,"



Charles MacArthur.

and young playwright Charles MacArthur certainly caused her plenty of tears in their brief and very public affair. Never again would Dorothy Parker willingly allow the Algonks to see her with her heart on her sleeve ("like a wet red stain").

MacArthur didn't just make her unhappy; he made her pregnant for the first time. ("It's not the tragedies that kill us. It's the messes. I can't stand messes.") Since they were both already married, there was no question of marriage, so Dorothy Parker experienced her first abortion. ("Serves me right for putting all my eggs in one bastard.") MacArthur contributed just thirty dollars to the cost of it ("like Judas making a refund").

After that she would act tougher, though she would never be any less vulnerable. She continued to walk around "with my head flung up" and carrying "between my ribs . . . a gleaming pain."

There was John Garrett, a "very good-looking young man indeed . . . a graceful young man ever carefully dropping references to his long, unfinished list of easy conquests." Garrett was typical of a whole subspecies of young men who were now drawn in shoals to the celebrity and wit of Dorothy Parker—who happened at that time to be extremely beautiful, too.

John McClain took things one stage further—as well as taking everything he could from Mrs. Parker. He didn't merely *talk* about his other women—he actively pursued them.

At a weekend party, Dorothy's friends were shocked to hear

I am not sick, I am not well.
My quondam dreams are shot to hell.
My soul is crushed, my spirit sore;
I do not like me any more.
I cavil, quarrel, grumble, grouse.
I ponder on the narrow house.
I shudder at the thought of men . . .
I'm due to fall in love again.

("Symptom Recital")

Harpo Marx (*standing*), Charles MacArthur, Dorothy, and Alexander Woollcott.

McClain on the phone making a date in front of her with a well-known society lady. When he had left, she turned to them with a shrug: "I have no squash courts. What can I do?" On a similar occasion, when he had gone off to join another socialite for a weekend, "He'll be back as soon as he has licked all the gilt off her ass."

But the most embarrassing public moment was when McClain picked a drunken fight with her in the lobby of the Algonquin—where she happened to be living at the time—in

front of Benchley and Adams.

"And what's more, you're a lousy lay!" he shouted at her before he stormed off. In the ensuing silence, she said, "I'm afraid his body went to his head."

On one occasion during her prolonged—and largely unpaid-for—stay in the hotel, manager Frank Case is supposed to have knocked on her door and enquired, "Do you have a gentleman in your room?" "Just a minute—I'll ask him."

" 'A lover who pursues'—oh, think what that sounds like to one whose eyes have so often rested on the ugliest modern gesture: that of a man looking at his wristwatch!"

"I have sought, by study, to better my form and make myself Society's Darling. You see, I had been fed, in my youth, a lot of old wives' tales about the way men would instantly forsake a beautiful woman to flock around a brilliant one. It is but fair to say that, after getting out in the world, I had never seen this happen, but I thought that maybe I might be the girl to start the vogue. I would become brilliant. I would sparkle. I would hold whole dinner tables spellbound. I would have throngs fighting to come within hearing distance of me while the weakest, elbowed mercilessly to the outskirts, would cry, 'What did she say?' or 'Oh, please ask her to tell it again.' That's what I would do."

And, in large measure, that's what she did do. But the brilliant little lady they were all looking at in the heady 1920s and 1930s was also looking out from beneath her trademark bangs for one more handsome, ruthless, stupid male face:

Into love and out again.
Thus I went and thus I go.

"'I'm sorry, darling.' . . . He smiled at her. She felt her heart go liquid, but she did her best to be harder won."

"He gave her a look you could have poured on a waffle. . . .

"He was a very good-looking young man indeed, shaped to

be annoyed. His voice was intimate as the rustle of sheets, and he kissed easily. There was no tallying the gifts of Charvet handkerchieves, *art moderne* ashtrays, monogrammed dressing-gowns, gold key-chains of thin wood, inlaid with views of Paris comfort stations, that were sent to him by ladies too quickly confident, and were paid for with the money of unwitting husbands, which is acceptable any place in the world."

The affairs became more and more perfunctory. She began to treat men as—she firmly believed—men routinely treated women. "I am cheap—you know that," she told Edmund Wilson.

There was the alcoholic interlude in 1929 with Laddie Sandford, the heir to a carpeting fortune: "We wouldn't even know each other, even if we ever did see each other again. And I don't even feel embarrassed about it, because I can't tell you how little sex means to me now . . . and polo players wouldn't count, anyway."

In later years, there was play collaborator Ross Evans, who had "the hue of availability." On another drink-induced occasion, she made love to him on a sofa with friends present. The next day, she apologized perfunctorily: "We must have been awfully picturesque."

"When the affair was over, she put sex carefully away on the highest cupboard shelf, in a box marked 'Winter Hats—1916.'"

Authors and actors and artists and such
Never know nothing, and never know much.
Sculptors and singers and those of their kidney
Tell their affairs from Seattle to Sydney.
Playwrights and poets and such horse's necks
Start off from anywhere, end up at sex.
Diarists, critics and similar roe
Never say nothing and never say no.
People Who Do Things exceed my endurance;
God, for a man that solicits insurance!

Had she ever met one, he would have told her she was a bad risk.

As Mrs. Parker got older, the men grew younger. In "Dusk before Fireworks," she comments on aging:

"'She says she has something she wants to tell me.'

'It can't be her age,' she said.

He smiled without joy. 'She says it's too hard to say over the wire,' he said.

'Then it may be her age,' she said. 'She's afraid it may sound like her telephone number.'"

One of her more disturbing stories, to my mind, is "Advice to the Little Peyton Girl" with its autobiographical and hopeless good advice.

"'You see, Sylvie,' Miss Marion said, 'men dislike dismal prophecies. I know Bunny Barclay is only twenty, but all men are the same age. And they all hate the same things. . . . Men hate straightening out unpleasantness. They detest talking things over. Let the past die, my child, and go easily on from its unmarked grave. . . . Love is like quicksilver in the hand. . . . Leave the fingers open and it stays in the palm. Clutch it, and it darts away.'"

As soon as Sylvie Peyton has left, Miss Marion is on the phone, harassing the (presumably married) man who refuses to take her calls.

In Dorothy Parker's observation of life's threadbare pageant, with age came indignity. On one occasion, she read aloud an extract from a book to Lillian Hellman in which a determined woman was pursuing a man who had said he didn't want to see her again. "That night she tried to climb in through the transom of his hotel room and got stuck at the hips." Closing the book, she

Should they whisper false of you
Never trouble to deny;
Should the things they say be true,
Weep and storm and swear they lie.

("Superfluous Advice")

turned to look at Hellman and said with straight face, "I've never got stuck at the hips, Lilly, and I want you to remember that."

"God, aren't all words connected with marriage horrible? Connubial, nuptial, spouse" (Paul in *The Ladies of the Corridor*).

In 1934, Mrs. Parker became Mrs. Alan Campbell—without ever ceasing to be "Mrs. Parker." Campbell was, naturally, handsome though not particularly stupid. He was also twenty-nine to Dorothy's forty. She declared herself to be "in a sort of coma of happiness." Life with Alan was "fun, a bundle of fun . . . lovelier than I ever knew anything could be."

"I love being a juvenile's bride and living in a bungalow—which she christened "Repent-at-Leisure"—"and pinching dead leaves off the rose bushes. I will be God damned!"

Even so, there was a worrying imbalance from the outset. "We have been down here without any servants," she wrote to Woollcott, "and life is housework and no other thing. Alan cooks and I clean, and who is then the gentleman? It isn't so much that I mind bed-making and sweeping and dish-washing as that I am undone by my incompetence. It takes me every minute of every day, and the results are such as would cause me to be fired without reference anywhere. This contributes generously to a low, brooding inferiority nagged along by the silent question, 'Well, for Christ's sake, what *are* you good for, anyway?'"

Nonetheless, age was becoming more and more of a factor, and she referred to it constantly: "I'm thinking of sending him to military school when he's old enough."

Nor was it long before the bloom was off the rose bushes. At first, the kidding was fairly kind—as it had been with Mr. Parker—and Campbell took it in good part when Dorothy referred to his early acting career. Alan, she would say, had been "one of those people who come in during the second act of a play, carrying a tennis racket with rhinestone strings, and ask the assembled company—'Who's for tennis?' . . . It was like watching a perfor-

Alan Campbell and Parker.

mance that Vassar girls would do, only *nicer* . . . all dressed as men, and you'd expect their hair to fall down any minute."

Two things prolonged the shelf life of their marriage. Alan was also ambitious to be a writer, and he persuaded Hollywood studios to hire them as a team on the strength of the Parker name—and they decided to play at building a real home and start a family.

In fact, there was a third thing. Alan Campbell genuinely loved Dorothy Parker.

The surrealistic experience of Hollywood—far more fictional than New York—determined her of one thing. "We've just got to have roots," she told Alan. All she wanted to do was "get out of the city, live in the country in a little white cottage with green shutters and fill my life with flowers, puppies and babies." A number of their friends had bought country homes in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, so that's where the Campbells went, too. But they never did find the "little white cottage with green shutters." Instead they bought a farm, Fox House, in over a hundred acres of land—which they proceeded to modernize in somewhat questionable taste.

"We caused talk. We even caused hard feelings. . . . There are no folk so jealous of countryside tradition as those who never before have lived below the twelfth floor of a New York building. They moved into their beautiful Pennsylvania stone house, and they kept their magazines in antique cradles, and they rested their cocktail glasses on cobblers' benches. . . . Their walls were hung with representations of hydrocephalic little girls with scalloped pantalets and idiotic lambs, and their floors were spread with carpets that some farmer's wife, fifty years ago, must have hated the sight of, and saved her egg money to replace. Now, they can't *really* think such things are a delight to live with. Can they? They found us vandals. . . . Now only the natives speak to us. We feel all right." She referred to her *New Yorker* critics as "Fifty-second Street Thoreaus."

Dorothy, to her joy, became pregnant, but—perhaps because of the abortions or because bearing a first child at the age of

forty-three was predictably a chancy business—she lost the baby, at which point the fun went out of the whole project. Domesticity was clearly not in her destiny.

The gardening that had been such fun became a chore: "I'm awfully lazy about it—and the weeds are so much quicker than I am." And then there were those goddam *seasons* to contend with, particularly spring.

As early as 1928 a review had her complaining, "Oh, I feel terrible. Rotten, I feel. I've got Spring Misery. I've got a mean attack of Crocus Urge. I bet you I'm running a temperature right at this moment—running it ragged.

"I'm always this way in the Spring. Sunk in Springtime: or Take Away Those Violets. I hate the filthy season. Summer makes me drowsy. Autumn makes me sing. Winter's pretty lousy, but I hate Spring. They know what Spring makes out of me. Just a Thing That Was Once a Woman, that's all I am in the Springtime. But do they do anything about it? Oh, no. Not they. Every year back Spring comes, with the nasty little birds yapping their fool heads off, and the ground all mucked up with arbutus. Year after year after year."

When asked by an interviewer to describe her home in two words, she replied, "Want it?"

The relationship with Alan deteriorated rapidly. She accused him of being homosexual—"Have you met my friend, the wickedest woman in Paris?" In reality, he was probably bisexual.

"What am I doing in Hollywood at my age and married to a fairy? (It's the curved lips of those boys that's got him so interested)."

She was increasingly rude to him in public, much to the embarrassment of their friends: "I don't know why he should get so angry just because I called him a fawn's ass."

On one occasion, she had to absent herself from guests to finish a film script. "Do forgive me, but I have to go to that fucking thing upstairs," she said, referring to the script. Then, unable to resist adding the topper, "and I don't mean Alan Campbell."

Why is it no one ever sent me yet
One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
Ah, no, it's always just my luck to get
One perfect rose.

("One Perfect Rose")

Occasionally, one of her friends, who should have known better, would remonstrate with her: "You're married to a charming man who loves you. What more do you want?" "Presents," she replied petulantly.

In World War II, history repeated itself. Although overage for the draft by this time, in September 1942, Private Alan Campbell enlisted and was sent abroad, just as Edwin Parker had been before him.

Dorothy accompanied him to his enlistment in Philadelphia and was greatly moved by what she saw. She wrote to Woollcott, "Most of [the men] look poor—I mean by that, they haven't got coats on, they have soiled shirts and stained pants, their working clothes. The Lord God knows, those men who have made up their minds don't look poor in any other way and aren't poor! The majority of them are very young—'heart-breakingly young,' I read in a piece by a lady who watched the troops go by and threw them roses, which were their immediate need. They are not in the least heart-breaking, and I think if you were to call them that, they would turn out to be neck-breaking. They are young, certainly—several even had women standing beside them in line, their mommas, come to give consent to a minor's enlistment—but they're all right. . . . There were numerous Negroes. And nobody avoided them, as they stood in line with the whites, nobody shied away from them or stood in silence. They all talked with one another. . . . They all have their bags, and the only time I busted was at the sight of a tall, thin young

Negro . . . carrying a six-inch square of muslin in which were his personal effects. . . . And then I realized I was rotten to be tear-sprinkled. He wasn't sad. He felt fine. . . . I was ashamed of myself. And yet, dear Alec, I defy you to have looked at that and kept an arid eye. That, of course, has nothing to do with war. Except, of course, that a man who had no more than that was going to fight for it."

The induction ceremony gave rise to another less inspiring incident that was to haunt her ever after.

"So, while we were standing there, there came up to me a fat, ill-favored, dark little woman, who said to me—'Parn me, but aren't you Dorothy Parker? Well, I've no doubt you've heard of me, I'm Mrs. Sig Greesbaum, Edith Greesbaum, you'd probably know me better as. I'm the head of our local chapter of the Better Living Club, and we'd like to have you come talk to us. Of course, I'm still a little angry at you for writing that thing about men not making advances at girls who wear glasses, because I've worn glasses for years, and Sig, that's my husband, but I still call him my sweetheart, he says it doesn't matter a bit, well, he wears glasses himself. And I want you to talk to our club, of course, we can't pay you any money, but it will do you a lot of good, we've had all sorts of wonderful people, Ethel Grimsby Loe that writes all the greetings cards, and the editor of the *Doylestown Intelligencer*, and Mrs. Mercer, that told us all about Italy when she used to live there after the last war, and the photographs she showed us of her cypresses and all, and it would really be a wonderful thing for you to meet us, and now when can I put you down to come talk to us?'

"So I said I was terribly sorry, but if she didn't mind, I was busy at the moment. So she looked around at the rows of men—she hadn't seen them before, apparently; all they did was take up half the station—and she giggled heartily and said, 'Oh, what are those? More poor suckers caught in the draft?'

"And an almighty wrath came upon me, and I said, 'Those are American patriots who have volunteered to fight for your liberty, you sheeny bitch!' And I walked away, already horrified—as I am now—at what I had said. Not at the gist, which I will stick

to and should, but the use of the word 'sheeny,' which, I give you my word, I have not heard for forty years and have never used before. The horror lies in the ease with which it came to me. And worse horror lies in the knowledge that, if she had been black, I would have said, 'You nigger bitch!' Dear God. The things I have fought against all my life. And that's what I did."

This time a more worldly war wife could offer advice to others. In 1944, she wrote a piece for *Vogue* called "Who Is That Man?"

"You say goodnight to your friends, and know that tomorrow you will meet them again, sound and safe as you will be. It is not like that where your husband is. There are the comrades, closer in friendship to him than you can ever be, whom he has seen comic or wild or thoughtful; and then broken or dead. There are some who have gone out with a wave of the hand and a gay obscenity, and have never come back. We do not know such things; prefer, and wisely, to close our minds against them. . . .

"I have been trying to say that women have the easier part in war. But when the war is over—then we must take up. The truth is that women's work begins when the war ends, begins on the day their men come home to them. For who is that man who will come back to you? You know him as he was; you have only to close your eyes to see him sharp and clear. You can hear his voice whenever there is silence. But what will he be, this stranger that comes back? How are you to throw a bridge across the gap that has separated you—and that is not the little gap of months and miles? He has seen the world aflame; he comes back to your new red dress. He has known glory and horror and filth and dignity; he will listen to you tell of the success of the canteen dance, the upholsterer who disappointed, the arthritis of your aunt. What have you to offer this man? . . . There have been people you never knew with whom he has had jokes you would not comprehend and talks that would be foreign to your ear. There are pictures hanging in his memory that he can never show to you. Of this great part of his life, you have no share . . . things forever out of your reach, far too many and too big for jealousy. That is

where you start and from there you go on to make a friend out of that stranger from across a world."

The advice was sound, but she could not follow it herself.

On May 27, 1947, she divorced Campbell. Fox House had been sold two years earlier for a loss of $80,000. There were to be no more cottages with roses around the door. Countless puppies, yes, but no babies. All of that was over.

But, as it turned out, not *quite* over. The Campbells were a couple who couldn't live with each other, but they couldn't live without each other, either. In 1950, the couple remarried, slightly to their own surprise. "Who in life," Dorothy asked rhetorically, "gets a second chance?" Recounting the wedding day: "People who haven't talked to each other in years are on speaking terms again today—including the bride and groom."

To say that it was a happy ending would be to stretch the truth into fiction. For as long as it lasted, it was an armed truce, a mutual dependence they both needed as their lives—both jointly and separately—began to unravel.

On June 14, 1963, Dorothy woke to find Alan in bed beside her, dead of a drug overdose taken while he was drunk. Even though the coroner gave it the benefit of a verdict of accidental death, it was generally supposed to have been suicide. He was fifty-nine and Dorothy seventy-one.

At the funeral, a neighbor, Mrs. Jones, asked the widow if there was anything she could do for her. "Get me a new husband." Appalled, Mrs. Jones replied, "I think that is the most callous and disgusting remark I ever heard in my life."

"So sorry. Then run down to the corner and get me ham and cheese on rye and tell them to hold the mayo."

"Woman's life must be wrapped up in a man, and the cleverest woman on earth is the biggest fool with a man."

"The fucking you get isn't worth the fucking you get."

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Dorothy Parker

In Her Own Words

Edited by Barry Day

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For Lynne . . .
(My Own FLB)