
Dorothy Parker Mysteries
Agata Stanford
Chasing the Devil
CAMELS

Chasing the Devil

Chasing the Devil

Agata Stanford

A Jenevacris Press Publication

Chasing the Devil
A Dorothy Parker Mystery / November 2010

Published by
Jenevacris Press
New York

Edited by Shelley Flannery
Typesetting & Cover Design by Eric Conover

ISBN 978-0-9827542-3-8

Printed in the United States of America

www.dorothyparkermysteries.com

for Mary Rose

Also by Agata Stanford

The Dorothy Parker Mystery Series:
The Broadway Murders

Acknowledgments

Some writers say that their profession is a lonely one. But I've been lucky to have the companionship of an assemblage of fascinating real-life characters with me at all times, including the emotional support and encouragement of my family and friends, the artistic skills of Eric Conover, without whose design talents my books would not look nearly so good, and the editing expertise of Shelley Flannery, copyeditor and historian, who shows me the errors of my ways.

Contents

Who's Who in the Cast of Dorothy Parker Mysteries

The Algonquin Round Table was the famous assemblage of writers, artists, actors, musicians, newspaper and magazine reporters, columnists, and critics who met for luncheon at 1:00 P.M. most days, for a period of about ten years, starting in 1919, in the Rose Room of the Algonquin Hotel on West 44th Street in Manhattan. The unwritten test for membership was wit, brilliance, and likeability. It was an informal gathering ranging from ten to fifteen regulars, although many peripheral characters who arrived for lunch only once might later claim they were part of the "Vicious Circle," broadening the number to thirty, forty, and more. Once taken into the fold, one was expected to indulge in witty repartee and humorous observations during the meal, and then follow along to the Theatre, or a speakeasy, or Harlem for a night of jazz. Gertrude Stein dubbed the Round Tablers "The Lost Generation." The joyous, if sardonic, reply that rose with a laugh from Dorothy Parker was, "*Wheeee!* We're lost!"

Dorothy Parker set the style and attitude for modern women of America to emulate during the 1920s and 1930s. Through her pointed poetry, cutting

theatrical reviews, brilliant commentary, bittersweet short stories, and much-quoted rejoinders, Mrs. Parker was the embodiment of the soulful pathos of the "Ain't We Got Fun" generation of the Roaring Twenties.

Robert Benchley: Writer, humorist, boulevardier, and bon vivant, editor of *Vanity Fair* and *Life Magazine,* and drama critic of *The New Yorker,* he may accidentally have been the very first standup comedian. His original and skewered sense of humor made him a star on Broadway, and later, in the movies. What man didn't want to *be* Bob Benchley?

Alexander Woollcott was the most famous man in America—or so he said. As drama critic for the *New York Times,* he was the star-maker, discovering and promoting the careers of Helen Hayes, Katherine Cornell, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, and the Marx Brothers, to name but a few. Larger than life and possessing a rapier wit, he was a force to be reckoned with. When someone asked a friend of his to describe Woollcott, the answer was, "Improbable."

Frank Pierce Adams (FPA) was a self-proclaimed modern-day Samuel Pepys, whose newspaper column, "The Conning Tower," was a widely read

daily diary of how, where, and with whom he spent his days while gallivanting about New York City. Thanks to him, every witty retort, clever comment, and one-liner uttered by the Round Tablers at luncheon was in print the next day for millions of readers to chuckle over at the breakfast table.

Harold Ross wrote for *Stars and Stripes* during the War, where he first met fellow newspapermen Woollcott and Adams. The rumpled, "clipped woodchuck" (as described by Edna Ferber) was one of the most brilliant editors of his time. His magazine, *The New Yorker,* which he started in 1925, has enriched the lives of everyone who has ever had a subscription. His hypochondria was legendary, and his the-world-is-out-to-get-me outlook was often comical.

Jane Grant married Harold Ross but kept her maiden name, cut her hair shorter than her husband's, and viewed domesticity with disdain. A society columnist for the *New York Times*, Jane was the very chic model of modernity during the 1920s. Having worked hard for women's suffrage, Jane continued in her cause while serving meals and emptying ashtrays during all-night sessions of the Thanatopsis Literary and Inside Straight Club.

Heywood Broun began his career at numerous newspapers throughout the country before landing a spot on the *World.* Sportswriter and Harlem Renaissance jazz fiend, he was to become the social conscience of America during the 1920s and beyond through his column, "As I See It." His insight and commentary made him a champion of the labor movement, as did his fight for justice during and after the seven years of the Sacco and Vanzetti trials and execution.

Edmund "Bunny" Wilson: Writer, editor, and critic of American literature, he first came to work at *Vanity Fair* after Mrs. Parker pulled his short story out from under the slush-pile and found it interesting.

Robert E. Sherwood came to work on the editorial staff at *Vanity Fair* alongside Parker and Benchley. The six-foot-six Sherwood was often tormented by the dwarfs performing—whatever it was they did—at the Hippodrome on his way to and from work at the magazine's 44th Street offices, but that didn't stop him from becoming one of the twentieth-century Theatre's greatest playwrights.

Marc Connelly began his career as a reporter but found his true calling as a playwright. Short and bald, he co-authored his first hit play with the tall and pompadoured ***George S. Kaufman***.

Edna Ferber racked up Pulitzer Prizes by writing bestselling potboilers set against America's sweeping vistas, most notably, *So Big, Showboat, Cimarron,* and *Giant*. She, too, collaborated with George S. on several successful Broadway shows. A spinster, she was a formidable personality and wit and a much-coveted member of the Algonquin Round Table.

John Barrymore was a member of the Royal Family of the American Stage, which included ***John Drew*** and ***Ethel*** and ***Lionel Barrymore***. John Barrymore was famous not only for his stage portrayals, but for his majestic profile, which was captured in all its splendor on celluloid.

The Marx Brothers: First there were five, then there were four, then there were three Marx Brothers— *awww, heck,* if you don't know who these crazy, zany men are, it's time to hit the video store or tune into Turner Classic Movies!

Also mentioned: ***Neysa McMein,*** artist and illustrator, whose studio door was open all hours of the day and night for anyone who wished to pay a call; ***Grace Moore***, Broadway and opera star, and later a movie star; Broadway and radio star ***Fanny Brice***—think Streisand in *Funny Girl*; ***Noel Coward,*** English star and playwright who took

America by storm with his classy comedies and bright musical offerings; ***Condé Nast,*** publisher of numerous magazines including *Vogue, Vanity Fair,* and *House and Garden;* ***Florenz Zeigfeld***—of "*Follies*" fame—big-time producer of the extravaganza stage revue; ***The Lunts***, husband-and-wife stars of the London and Broadway stages, individually known as Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne; ***Tallulah Bankhead***—irreverent, though beautiful, southern-born actress with the foghorn drawl, who later made a successful transition from the stage to film—the life of any party, she often perked up the waning festivities performing cartwheels sans bloomers; ***Irving Berlin, George Gershwin,*** and ***Jascha Heifetz***—famous for "God Bless America" and hundreds more hit songs; composer of *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Porgy and Bess* and many more great works; and the violin virtuoso, respectively.

Chasing the Devil

Chapter One

"I'mfreezzenmabalsov, frkrissake!" spat out Ross. "'Sfknkoloutere," he continued, a scowl furrowing his brow. The bristle-brush head was jammed tightly inside a brown woolen stocking cap. As his bulbous nose and hooded eyes retreated into his upturned collar, he looked not unlike a critter receding into the underbrush.

"Your language is simply atrocious, Ross," said his wife, Jane Grant. "Children can hear you."

We stood among the masses of New Yorkers lining the sidewalks of Seventh Avenue near Herald Square in the icy morning sunshine. It was Thanksgiving Day, and all New York had come to watch the spectacle.

For weeks, Herbert Straus, president of R.H. Macy's department store on Herald Square and 34th Street, had been advertising in all the dailies the "promise of a surprise New York will never forget." Four hundred employees of the store,

mostly immigrants missing the Christmas holiday celebrations of their homelands, asked Straus if he would sponsor a special event marking the beginning of the Christmas season. Given the go-ahead, they devised floats depicting their national customs, hired bands, acquired animals from the Central Park Zoo, and appealed to Broadway celebrities to march in the parade along with hundreds of clowns and circus acts. And bringing up the rear, a float carrying Santa Claus.

The R.H. Macy's Christmas Parade started uptown on 145th Street and Convent Avenue, made its way across 110th Street at Central Park's northernmost border, and marched down Broadway to Seventh Avenue, culminating at the department store. Thousands of families turned out, and the fanfare and laughter and excitement of the children warmed even the chilliest of hearts, except, perhaps, that of my friend Harold Ross, who hated crowds and lived in constant fear of contracting the germ that would kill him.

And here they were, runny-nosed little monsters in abundance, bundled-up in hats with earflaps, leggings, woolen coats, and mittens, and lifted upon the shoulders of fathers to better see the floats and zoo animals, the marching bands, and the big balloons.

The Felix the Cat balloon loomed huge in the distance, tethered to walkers along the parade route. Squeals of laughter floated up like bubbles

in the air with the youngsters' delight at seeing their cartoon hero in giant form. The black rubber cat, as tall as the buildings along the parade corridor, moved with the cumbersome drag of a sloth; the band's horn section pounded out "Alexander's Ragtime Band" with an insistent drumbeat and the repeated prodding crash of cymbals.

"What fun!" I said to Woodrow Wilson, my Boston terrier, whom I had dressed in his new red-plush coat to fend off the cold from his short-haired little black-and-white body. He shivered in my arms, so I nuzzled him closer against the fur of my collar as I stood perched upon a footstool. At my diminutive stature, the extra six inches raised us up just high enough to peek between the bobbing heads of average spectators.

"Crakinzak!" mumbled Ross, who stood between me and Jane, bobbing from one foot to the other, more in a show of impatience than in any effort to ward off the cold.

I turned in the direction of an exasperated *"hurrumph"* to face a gaping-mouthed fellow, a child hoisted upon his shoulder. His expression of distaste at Ross's rather colorful, if not terribly original, exclamations, prompted me to say, "Do forgive his unfortunate choice of words. He cannot help himself. It is a medical condition."

"Tourettes?" he asked, lifting his scarf to meet his fedora against the chill wind from off the Hudson.

"Oh, no, thank you, I've quit," I replied.

"Sonovbitch, can'feelmetos!, 'M goin' 'ome."

"Too bad his lips aren't frozen," I said to Jane.

"You can't go home," said Jane. "We're going to Edna's. Go stand in that doorway, out of the wind, and try to behave yourself." Jane turned her pretty face toward me. "What are you laughing about, Dottie?"

"Your husband," I said, shaking my head.

"You mean my petulant six-year-old!"

She threw a mean glance toward the man huddled in the doorway, watching as he unscrewed the cap of a flask, a cigarette dangling from his chapped lips. Ross could be easily mistaken for a Skid-Row-bum-come-uptown.

Our friend, writer Edna Ferber, upon first meeting Ross at a fancy dinner party several years ago, mistook the sullen fellow as a vagrant brought home by the hostess as a practical joke on her well-shod dinner guests. That hostess was my good friend, Jane Grant, society and women's columnist at the *New York Times*, suffragette, and fierce opponent of housekeeping, marriage, and childbearing. The "vagrant" was my friend Harold Ross, newspaper reporter, Round Table member, and now publisher of a new magazine, *The New Yorker*, which debuted this past February of 1925.

When Jane married Harold (who was best described by Edna Ferber as "a clipped woodchuck" because of his bristly head of hair, overbite, and beady eyes), she retained her maiden name and violently cut off her hair, combing what was left into a dashing "man's cut." The effect was delightful, as Jane attained a modern, sleek look, which was accentuated by an exceptionally fine, slim figure and smashing wardrobe. As much as I liked Ross, who was a notorious paranoid hypochondriac, I wondered how long this marriage would last. Jane was beginning to view all the troubles through the ages that sat upon the soft shoulders of her sex as having been Ross's fault. Where Jane usually viewed the world as a glass half full, Ross's world was a vessel that had been drained dry by all those who were out to get him.

"I thought you said Aleck was going to meet us on this corner," I said, a shiver warbling my voice. "What's the holdup, I wonder?"

"He had to go uptown this morning," said Jane. "He's probably stuck in traffic."

"Ah, there're the boys," I said, when the band broke into the intro of "Yes, We Have No Bananas!," calling our attention up the street where Harpo, Zeppo, Chico, and Groucho, dressed in costumes as the Four Musketeers, waved to the crowd while skipping and frolicking down Broadway. Their new Broadway show, *The Cocoanuts*, was set to open in a couple of weeks.

The Marx Brothers had become quite famous this past year, thanks to Alexander Woollcott, who discovered them when he reviewed their show, *I'll Say She Is*, last season. Aleck was the only first-string critic of a major newspaper to see the show when it opened, as all of the other newspaper reviewers believed the Brothers' show to be just another Vaudeville act unworthy of their papers' reviews. The opening night of the play Aleck was set to review that fateful evening was canceled, so, already dressed in evening clothes and his famous opera cape and scarf, he decided to make an evening of it anyway by seeing the show that no one else wanted to review. Alexander Woollcott's reputation was that of a star maker: Helen Hayes; Katherine Cornell; the husband-and-wife acting team, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, are only a few of his many discoveries. In his review of the Brothers' show he raved about the hilarity and inventiveness of the four comedians, and literally overnight *I'll Say She Is* became the hottest ticket on Broadway.

As the boys continued their antics toward the newly expanded Macy's department store, I turned at the sound of the Devil himself. Aleck stood beside me, and for once, thanks to my stepstool, we stood eye-to-eye.

"You have on very high heels or very short stilts, Dottie, dear."

I smiled at the pudgy, triple-chinned, bespectacled face of the man I loved so dearly. "Such *élan*," I thought, as I looked him over. His wavy brown hair was covered by a wide-brimmed, black felt hat; a long, red cashmere scarf circled his lower two chins, and an oversized otter-lined black great-coat tented his impressive body. As he leaned on his favorite ivory-headed walking stick, I thought that only Alexander Woollcott could carry off so flamboyant a costume that teetered just at the edge of where Style met the Ridiculous. But, of course, Aleck was flamboyant, he was stylish, and he was, at times, ridiculous.

"You're late, missed most of the parade. What have you been up to?"

"Had to do a favor for a friend."

"Oh, yeah? Who'd you have to bail out of jail? Your bootlegger?"

"That'd be the day!" he chuckled. "No, my dear Dorothy, my friend is actually the fellow one calls when one needs bailing. Now, tell me why, Dottie, dearest, why do they call this a Christmas Parade, that's what I want to know?"

"Because of Santa Claus, I suppose."

"But today is Thanksgiving Day. Christmas is a month away."

"How the hell do I know why it's called the Christmas Parade!"

"I'll have to send a wire to Straus and tell him he needs to change the name of the parade

if he plans on doing it again next year. Christmas is Christmas and Thanksgiving is Thanksgiving, don't you agree?" said Aleck, as if there could be no argument.

"Shit, yes! The man's an ass, what can I say?"

The man in the fedora caught my eye. The child on his shoulder giggled.

"You're almost as bad as Ross over there, Dottie," chided Jane.

"Well, I've been badly influenced. I keep bad company. Perhaps I should go stand in the doorway corner with him," I said, stepping down from my stool. My feet were freezing and my kid-leather gloves were of little use against the cold. I lifted the silver fox collar of my coat to better shield my face, and buried my nose in Woodrow Wilson's warm body. "I could use a drink to warm up," I said. "Maybe I will join Ross. He's got the hooch."

"Shall we stop in at Freddy O'Malley's for a shot? Or do you want to wait to see Santa?" asked Aleck.

"Hell, no! Santa's not coming to my place this year!" I said testily. I'm Jewish and, anyway, I've been a naughty girl."

"Then come along, my naughty little yenta."

Aleck folded in the legs of the stepstool and popped it into the old carpetbag Woodrow Wilson

likes to sleep in. I told Jane we'd be at Freddy's on 38th Street if she and Ross wanted to stop in for fortification before heading up to Edna Ferber's apartment and the Thanksgiving feast.

We had started on our way when there was a sudden roar from the crowd, and I turned to follow Aleck's gaze up into the sky. The huge elephant balloon had been released and was rising up quickly over the buildings along Herald Square. Children were pointing and waving and laughing at the sight of the gigantic flying elephant.

We watched, transfixed, and after a few moments the Toy Soldier was released to the stratosphere. As the brightly colored figure began its rapid ascent into the blue, so, too, rose the sound of chattering children, not unlike the hysterical cawing of thousands of blackbirds descending upon crops of dogwood berries in Central Park this time of year. Soon cheers and whistles burst forth from thousands of onlookers. Just as Aleck and I were about to make our way from the crowd-lined street, a procession of midgets, from the current show at the Hippodrome and dressed as Santa's Elves, guided Santa's sleigh with the accompanying jingle of sleigh bells. Another roar of delight sprang from the spectators as a rotund, jovial, cherry-cheeked Santa came into view, *Ho-Ho-Ho*-ing as he waved to his little fans.

The noise proved too much for the Central Park Zoo's lion, immediately preceding Santa's

float, nervously pacing in its cage. It answered the roar of the crowd with a startling one of its own, sending the children closest to the street into screaming fits of terror! And as if that wasn't enough to put an end to the morning's festivities, the giant gas-filled elephant exploded to smithereens above our heads, the horror of which was only compounded when the Toy Soldier, so grotesquely human, followed suit!

It was too late for Felix, I'm afraid, because moments before the elephant defied the laws of gravity and the toy soldier-boy waved his deathly farewell while soaring "over the top," the big cat, too, had been sent on his final journey. The sudden realization of the fate awaiting Felix struck every last soul on the street, and there fell a sudden hush upon the onlookers; Santa's waving hand froze in position, the jingle bells stopped jingling, and even the lion's roar was reduced to a shameful growl as all held their collective breaths for the dreaded, but imminent explosion.

It was not a pretty sight when it happened; the children, who'd whined and whimpered as their parents tried to shield their innocent young eyes and ears from the inevitable, let loose blood-curdling, ear-shattering screams when the blast rang out.

Black-and-white rubber rained down from the sky to land like flattened carrion on the street.

"I'll have to mention the slaughter, too, in my letter to Straus," said Aleck, as we shuffled past the pathetic, mourning families, coping with loss and the death of fantasy.

The crowds seemed to press closer as we edged our way toward the side street off Seventh Avenue. I held Woodrow Wilson close to my chest as Aleck guided us toward an opening in the crowd.

There was pressure at my back and I began to stumble forward, but a grasp at the shoulder righted my balance. Aleck no longer had hold of my hand, and for a moment I panicked when hands gripped my shoulders. I was literally pivoted around to come face-to-face with a startling figure.

Light, almost white hair, wildly swept atop a pale head, a beard of several days' growth, speckled with spittle, and eyes! What eyes! A lizard's eyes! The strange ice-blue orbs bore into mine with an expression so crazed that I was struck motionless where I stood. Had Woodrow Wilson not whimpered in fear, I'd have thought I was overreacting, but my dog's whine only confirmed my own sense of peril.

As quickly as I'd been seized, I was released.

I was recovering, trying to pull myself together, both figuratively as well as literally, for my hat was askew and my scarf yanked from inside

my coat in the shuffle, when I looked around for Aleck, and called out his name.

A few feet ahead a commotion: I glimpsed Aleck's familiar ivory-headed cane as it rose in the air. The crowd pressed in closer, alarmingly, but I forced my way through toward my friend.

With the flash of sunlight on steel, I glimpsed the blade of a dagger.

I screamed.

Voices raised up all around me. A scuffle further along sent people staggering and shouting. I pushed through the crush, searching frantically for Aleck. But by now people were in a panic, rushing, pushing toward me, away from danger, and it was all I could do to move onward in my search. I glimpsed the wild shock of light hair as the man with the startling face pressed forward in escape.

Finding my friend at last, I was relieved to see that he was unharmed. But in his hand he held a bloodied dagger, and another man lay prone at his feet!

Police whistles sounded along the street.

Aleck dropped the dagger and kneeled to assess the victim's injuries. He loosened the man's scarf and there, revealed, was a clerical collar. His overcoat was unbuttoned; blood oozed from his chest. Aleck was speaking frantically to the wounded man.

"Stop him!" I heard the man say with a

fervent hiss. Aleck moved in closer to better hear.

"Who?" asked Aleck. "Stop whom?"

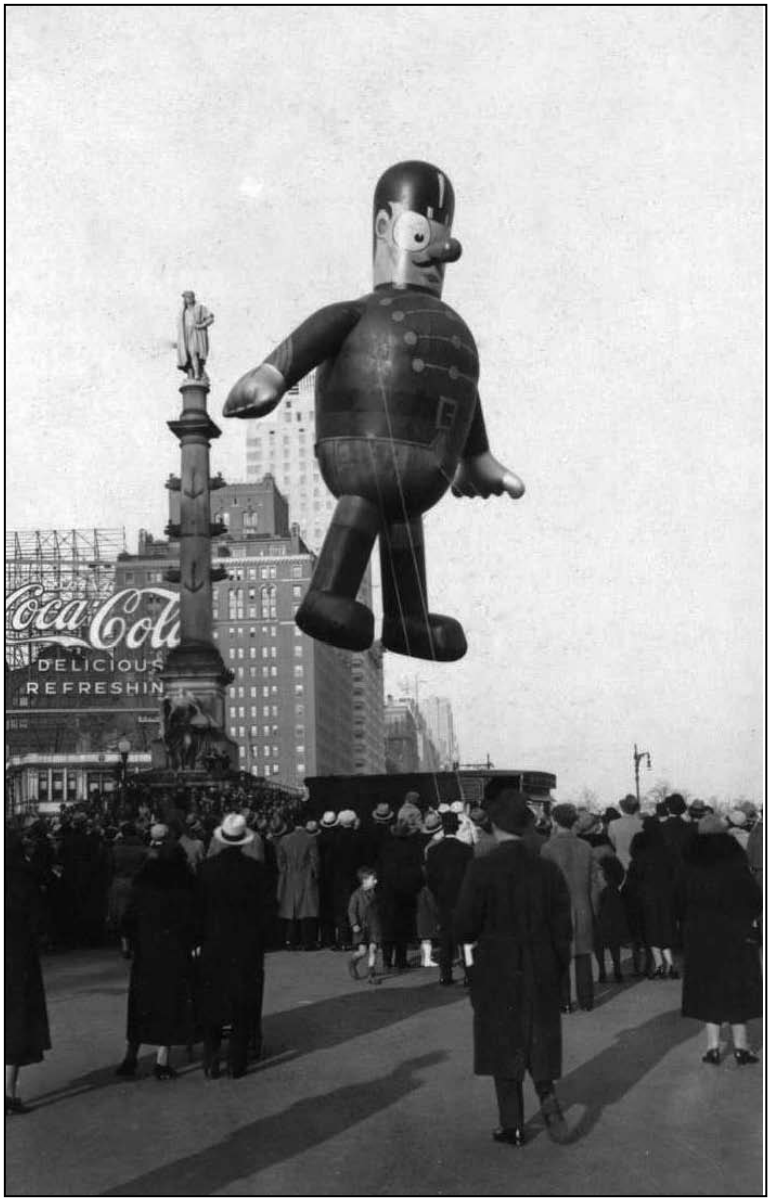
". . . save him . . ."

"Tell me his name! Who did this to you?"

"Save him . . . ."

But it was too late. Just as a policeman arrived at the scene, the man fell dead in Aleck's arms.

When pigs fly



Marching to oblivion

In memoriam

Jane and Ross

Chapter Two

I hate happy people.

Perhaps I should rephrase that statement.

I am suspicious of people who wear a smile all the time—people who laugh when nothing humorous has been said. The glass-is-half-full-look-on-the-bright-side-everything's-going-to-be-all-right-it-could-be-worse-God-doesn't-give-you-anything-you-can't-handle-when-a-door-closes-a-window-opens Pollyannas make me puke.

On what planet are they living? What do they know that I don't know? More to the point: *What they are hiding?*

Are these people blind to the tragedies of this world? Or are they so self-involved that they simply cannot see the inequities and torments that plague the human condition? Sometimes everything *isn't* going to be all right. Sometimes things can't be worse, and sometimes God, if one entertains the possibility of His existence, crushes a person, and they die because they can't handle

what He's meted out. As the sky falls in on those smiling idiots, do they bother to run for cover? You bet!

I admire people who've suffered, yet move forward with courage. But always putting a brave face on misfortune is dishonest; it proves only that you don't trust your friends with your very real concerns, or that you believe they might think less of you for your failings. Such people reek of pride; so superior to others that they won't admit disappointments, losses, and tragedies. Who wants to be friends with an automaton? Who wants to be friends with a person who refuses to see your sadness, who goes around pitching platitudes like "When a door closes a window opens"? Sometimes when a door closes you're trapped, and you just yearn for a sympathetic shoulder to cry on.

Edna Ferber is a happy woman.

I have struggled; therefore, we are only fair-weather friends.

Edna writes big, fat, overblown potboilers. I imagine she types away at the speed of light, so content in her characters' miserable circumstances that her fingers fly along the keys, with frequent breaks for rubbing palms together in diabolical delight of the schemes in which she has ensnared them.

Like a spider spinning her web.

And as if her wretched tale is not enough, she wraps up the whole thing with an improbable,

sappy, happy ending! In life, there are no happy endings—just temporary reprieves. And for the lie of the happy ending, she wins the *Pulitzer*!

I don't hate Edna Ferber; in many ways, I marvel at her success. She tolerates me because Aleck and FPA (Frank Pierce Adams) are her friends and they adore me. She knows that I know that she knows that her novels are nothing more than cash-cows that pay for her beautiful furnishings in her Central Park West apartment at the Prasada. I, by contrast, who have never cared much for acquiring things, and wish only to create works of literary art, view her prolificacy as prolixity. And so, I find her good humor difficult to stomach for very long.

When Aleck and I arrived at Edna's for Thanksgiving dinner several hours late, we were greeted warmly, handed martinis, and immediately seated at the dining room table. As I'd telephoned from the police station earlier to tell Edna we had encountered "a problem," and were being interrogated at the precinct, she'd graciously offered to send her lawyer over to post bail for my release, certain I had committed some crime. She didn't quite get the remark I'd hissed into the receiver, and came back with, "I beg your pardon?"

She'd wanted to serve dinner soon, and we were holding things up: "The gravy is congealing and the turkey toughening, you see," and it was all she could do to keep the stuffing from drying up.

"Stuff it, Edna."

"The bird *is* stuffed," she said.

She couldn't see me roll my eyes.

"Oh, put a sock in it."

"A sock?"

"*Awwwhhh*, crap! Put a wet rag on it, would ya, Edna?"

"Oh, all right," she said.

She must have taken me literally, because between the numerous questions posed by the dinner guests to Aleck, who held court as usual, we dined on the most succulent fowl, drowned with the richest gravy and the most divine chestnut stuffing I'd ever tasted in my life. The guests *oo-h*ed and *ahh*ed their compliments on the fine fare through indistinguishable grunts.

A voracious school of piranhas had descended upon the fixings in their usual Round Table feeding frenzy, sloshing gravy (Ross and Heywood Broun), spilling the Riesling (Groucho and Zeppo), flinging globs of cranberry sauce onto the crisp white linen tablecloth (Ross, Heywood, Groucho, Chico and Bunny Wilson), knocking over water glasses (Aleck and Frank), and gnawing and sucking the carcass clean in no time (all of the abovementioned). I began to think that Harpo might be the only male to leave the beautifully appointed table unsullied, until, while waving his spoon to make a point in the conversation, it flung from his fingers

and splashed into the pumpkin pudding, sending an orangey dollop into the eye of our hostess.

Edna was, if annoyingly buoyant, a terrific cook, and despite her sudden expression of despair, a good sport to our faces (although I doubted she'd ever invite us *en masse* to dinner again). To her surprise, Woodrow Wilson displayed the best table manners of the whole lot; he quietly ate all the lovely turkey and potatoes on the plate she had presented to him and licked the plate clean, leaving not a spot on the parquet, before curling up to sleep beside the fire.

"What is your secret?" asked Jane Grant. "This has to be the best turkey I've ever tasted."

"I told Edna to stuff it," I chimed in.

"But, of course, I'd already done that, you see . . ."

"So I told her to put a wet rag on it."

"Yes, well," replied Edna, nervously watching a fine crystal wineglass teeter toward extinction. "Sometimes your suggestions are very clever, Dorothy," said Edna, oblivious to the true meaning of my words.

"What's this about a rag?" asked Jane.

"Never mind that," said Frank, sometimes referred to by his initials, FPA. "I want to know more about what happened this morning."

"I'll tell you what happened! A couple-hundred- thousand kids watched Felix bust a gut right before their eyes," said Ross.

"I wasn't asking you, Dopey!" said the newspaper columnist. "I was talking to Aleck and Dottie about the murder."

"What do you call what happened to the Toy Soldier, Frank? A ride in the country?" said Zeppo, taking Ross's side.

"*Awww*, stuff it, Zeppo!"

"Yeah, stuff it!" said Harpo.

"Throw a wet rag on it!" said Chico.

When it dawned on her at last, Edna shot me a burning glance that a wet rag would not extinguish.

"Why're you all picking on me?" whined Ross, in his most pathetic victim's voice.

"The turkey's picked clean, Ross, and what better carcass to pick on than yours?" said Aleck.

Harold Ross has always been the butt of Aleck's acid tongue. It had been the case since they met during the War as writers for *Stars and Stripes*.

Aleck had introduced himself as "dramatic critic for the *New York Times*." The image of the pudgy, puffed-up, and pretentiously pompous Woollcott reporting about prancing, dancing chorines for a military newspaper produced a hearty laugh.

"What kind of sissy-boy job is that?" Ross had asked.

Not to be belittled, Aleck had haughtily scrutinized the gawky, disheveled figure before him

and replied gaily, "You know, you remind me a great deal of my grandfather's coachman."

It was the beginning of their love–hate relationship.

Later, while in Paris, Aleck introduced Ross to Jane Grant, a society reporter for the *Times*. Ross was immediately smitten, and although he never intended to live in New York after the War, he did so to be near Jane. Stateside once more, Ross and Aleck resumed their rather odd, rather deprecating friendship. Ross was editing *The Home Sector*, but dreamed about publishing his own magazine someday. Last winter he did just that when *The New Yorker* debuted to less-than-rave reviews. Harold Ross may look like a tramp, but under those rags is an exacting and excellent editor. But as it appears now, it's doubtful the magazine will see another year of publication, even though lots of us have been contributing to the weekly in hopes that it will eventually find its readership.

"All of you behave yourselves," said Edna, knowing her remonstration held little impact on the men.

"Aleck picked up the dagger," I said. "That's why we were dragged down to police headquarters."

"Outrageous, really, that the police would think that I'd stab a good man of God with a stiletto!"

"A stiletto was the next logical step up, I suppose, after shooting all those bad actors with your vitriol," I said, trying to lighten his dark mood.

"Once the police looked me over they knew I couldn't have thrown the dagger."

"Because you throw like a girl?" asked Ross.

The table shuddered and the crystal clinked as Jane kicked Ross in the shin under the cloth. He flashed a frown at her smiling face.

Aleck pointed a beaky nose at Ross. "Thank you, Jane, for my retort!"

"What 'good-God-man' was murdered?" asked Harpo.

"A priest!" said Aleck. "Father John O' Hara from some little town down South."

"A priest! But why?" asked Edna. "Why would anyone kill a priest?"

"He couldn't find a rabbi?" said Heywood Broun.

"Was the stabbing random? Some act of a madman wielding a knife in a crowd?"

"I don't know, Edna," I said. "But Father O'Hara spoke to Aleck before he died, and it appears the priest may have known his killer."

All eyes turned toward Aleck, who paused, a fork of pumpkin pie hovering midway off his plate. "He said, 'stop him; save him.'" Aleck looked genuinely shaken as he uttered the words, but immediately found comfort in the forkful of pie.

"So he wanted you to stop his killer and then save him," said Jane. "A final act of forgiveness . . ."

"He was a priest! Salvation was the commodity he sold, for crissake!" said Ross.

"Looks like he made an exit while trying to make a sale," said Groucho.

"Have they caught his killer?" asked FPA.

"Not yet. Dottie's description of a man she saw fleeing the scene wasn't exactly what the police had in mind when they asked her what he looked like," said Aleck. "What was it you told the detective?" He didn't wait for me to reply: "'He was a tortured soul with eyes like drowning pools.'"

"Well, yes," I interjected. "It was a God-awful, frightening face."

"And she knows a God-awful frightening face when she sees one," said Groucho, and everyone turned on cue to stare at him. "I wasn't referring to myself."

Everyone turned to stare at Heywood Broun.

"Actually," said Groucho, "I was referring to Ross, you nincompoops, but the majority rules: Heywood's got him topped, I'd say." (I remembered the time a few years back, when Heywood stood outside the Gonk after lunch, cap in hand, waiting for Aleck to join him. A woman passerby stopped, looked over the bedraggled, unkempt creature, and

placed a dime in his cap so that he could "have a good meal.")

Aleck took the moment to shovel in a forkful of pecan pie.

"They hadn't the faintest idea what she was talking about," he continued after a gulp of coffee, "so she said he looked like the figure in Munch's *The Scream*, but that didn't help, so she offered to draw a picture."

"Oh, Lord, I can only imagine. I've seen a few of your sketches, my dear Dorothy," said Bunny, chuckling.

"Yes, Munch-ish, and I don't mean Benedictine!" said FPA.

"Well, borrowing Mary Shelley's description of Frankenstein seems farfetched, so I thought a good pictorial rendition might work," I said. "Wait! Where's my purse?"

I pushed aside items inside my pocketbook: pressed-powder compact, reading glasses, lipstick, comb, hair pins, pencil stub, and loose change. Paper money floated like debris atop an unfathomable ocean of long-forgotten days and nights. I pulled out a circular, grainy item that left a gritty mess on my fingers. It took a moment, but after a sniff I identified the cookie I'd stashed away during an afternoon tea I'd attended last month. Eventually, I found the folded sheet of paper I was looking for. "Here's my sketch," I said, handing it to Bunny.

"Just as I thought," he said, bursting out with laughter.

"Don't be a critic, Edmund Wilson, you're no good at it!" I said.

"You have to admit, Bunny," said Edna, "that there is a 'Munch-ish' quality about it." She gurgled when she laughed, and for a moment I did hate her.

"I'd say the artist is influenced by the cubists: Braque, Picasso . . .," said Groucho.

"I see more a melding of the surrealists with the cubists, don'chathink?" added Zeppo.

"Dada, no?" said Chico.

"Dada, no," said Harpo, shaking his head.

"Dali, no?" said Groucho.

"Dali, yes!" said Harpo, nodding.

"Shut up," I said, and they all fell silent. "It's his expression that I was trying to—well, express."

"Expressionism!" yelled FPA, jumping up from his chair.

"Laugh if you like, but if you saw the monster, you'd be hard-pressed to describe him in any ordinary way."

"Dottie's, right," said Aleck. "He did have a crazed look about him, and Dottie saw his face clearly. I did not; only saw the back of him as he fled. So she will have to identify whomever the police bring in as suspect."

"In the morning, a police artist will try to make sense of what I've been saying."

Later, we all lounged around Edna's overly decorated "cranberry-red-and-buttercup-yellow" (her description!) salon: lots of *frou-frou* ruffles, sumptuous velvet and silk over down-filled upholstery.

Again, I sound wretched, but the truth be known, I am happy in my rooms at the Algonquin Hotel—all right, perhaps not exactly *happy*, but it suits me fine. I can tumble out of bed at noon, fall into the elevator, and roll through to the dining room for our Round Table luncheon each day. If while there I've had too much to drink, I'm a few steps from the elevator and my rooms. At the Algonquin I need not pay for a telephone answering service, or a maid. I have room service and dog-walking service, so the ice bucket is kept full and the dog is regularly emptied. With all those benefits, Edna can keep the *frou-frou*.

We played word games, and then a rather rambunctious round of charades, which woke up Woodrow Wilson. He barked and ran circles around the boisterous team members before settling on my lap.

After the splendid dinner (much of which landed off the table), Edna appeared less nervous about Woodrow soiling her thick white carpet. It was more likely that one of the boys would knock over the coffee pot, or the decanter of crème de menthe brought over from the bar. With friends like ours, it's best to hold your parties in a gymnasium.

Ira Gershwin arrived with his tall, lean brother, George, in tow. Although I see Ira occasionally at the Gonk at our one o'clock luncheons, I hardly ever see Gorgeous George. George looked marvelous in his pin-striped, double-breasted navy-blue suit, rose-colored silk tie, and immaculate white spats. He greeted the ladies with a big smile and pecked our cheeks and shook hands with the men. Aleck, stretched out on a divan with the air of a Renoir nude, but looking more like a fat frog in heat lying on a lily pad, looked up admiringly at George through his thick, round eyeglasses.

"How's the new show going, George, my boy?"

"Working with Oscar Hammerstein—well, he's a good lyricist, all right, but I'll be glad when the show opens on December Thirtieth. The show looks as good as any show looks the month before opening, I guess."

"What he means," said Ira, "is whatever the show looks like now is no indication of what it will look like on opening night."

"How true," said Aleck.

"Act Two was scrapped last week, and I wrote three new numbers for Act Three."

"What title did they decide on?" asked Edna

"*Song of the Flame*, with a title song by that name."

George made a beeline to the grand piano. Groucho and Harpo made like bookends.

"Got a new song for the second act."

"For heaven's sake, George, play it," said Edna.

"Thought you'd never ask."

George's fingers ran over the keyboard for the intro of *Midnight Bells*. Groucho and Harpo sat quietly as George played, proving that music soothes the savage breast. When the song had been sung, George said, "Ira and I are working on a show for next fall." He tinkled the keys as he spoke.

"Gertie Lawrence and Victor Moore are set to star. It's called *Oh, Kay!*" said Ira. "George, play them one of the songs we wrote."

"*'Do, Do, Do*?'"

"No, no, no."

"Please, please, please?" mimicked Groucho.

"Sure, sure, sure," said Harpo.

Ignoring the Brothers, Ira walked to the piano and turned to face his audience. "George, key of G!"

George whipped off a string of notes in the key of G.

They broke into an up-tempo tune that raised our spirits from out of our postprandial stupor. *Clap Yo' Hands* had us all singing the chorus; Harpo and Chico became dance partners;

Groucho grabbed me for a twirl about the room, and Zeppo, Jane.

Edna refilled glasses, and watched us from the bar.

Aleck bobbed a dangling foot.

Heywood observed, puffing his cigar.

Ross picked his teeth.

Frank sat smiling, tapping his feet, and I knew he was planning how best to describe the scene in his famous daily column, "The Conning Tower," for his paper's morning edition.

George's music was so reminiscent of Negro church spirituals I'd heard in Harlem. "Clap yo' hands, stomp yo' feet, *alleluia, alleluia!*" I said as much when he'd finished the number with a flourish and everyone fell back into chairs, breathless, laughing and exhilarated.

"*You* get it, don't you, Dottie!" said George. "It's the Negro prayer, born in the colored man's church." He beamed that beautiful smile at me, and in an instant I wished he loved me!

Ever since George teamed with lyricist Buddy Da Silva to write the score of *George White's Scandals of 1922* to include a short Negro opera called *Blue Monday*, which was cut after opening night, George became obsessed with the Negro influence of jazz on popular music. Although *Blue Monday* was what I and most critics thought a failure because it was presented in outdated blackface, with a story that was boorishly melodramatic and frankly

demeaning of colored people, the musical style and the dramatic possibilities it promised were evident. In other words, the idea was sound; its execution, wanting.

Only a year earlier, a musical derived from the Harlem production, *Shuffle Along*, had made a hit with white audiences when it was moved to Broadway. But *Blue Monday* proved only a sad attempt by the producers to cash in on that popular Negro musical. George was brilliantly original, but the book was trite.

Even though the short opera failed, it brought a young, unknown Negro composer named Wil Vodery into George's life. It was he who wrote the orchestral arrangements of the failed opera, and he and George became fast friends. George, who is always genuinely interested in the works of other composers, admires and has learned much from Wil. Paul Whiteman, who was orchestra conductor of the *Scandals* production, saw something unique in George's talent. Although George's "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise" became one of the biggest hits of the day (White and Ziegfeld and other producers liked "stairs" so they could get all the show's chorus members onstage and make a big finale number), it was the jazzy *Blue Monday* that prompted Paul Whiteman to ask George to write a jazz symphony for a concert he was planning the following year. And what a piece George composed! *Rhapsody in Blue* is more than just a jazzy

modern symphony: It is the sound of New York, and when a blind man hears it, the city appears in sharp focus!

"You need to write another Negro opera, George," I said. "But next time you need a story as good as the music you write."

"And with colored singers, no whites in blackface," said Aleck. "Leave that to Jolson." Then, as a thought popped into his head, he looked up over his spectacles and said with a frown, "There's a colored actor who sings mighty good, George. Name's Robeson. Dottie, remember that young man we saw? Real stage presence . . ."

"Paul Robeson. He sure can act and sing. Aleck's right, you know. Blackface is just plain silly. You need a colored cast."

"I have a story for you to consider, George," said Aleck. "It's a true story, and it is so current that you'll not be able to write the ending until the trial is over."

"Oh?"

"A man, a doctor, buys a house where he and his wife hope to raise their children and live the fulfillment of 'The American Dream.' Problem is, the doctor is a colored man, and the house he's bought is in a white neighborhood."

"And why is there a trial?" I asked. "Just because he jumped to the other side of the tracks?"

"The doctor's father shoots a man when a mob storms his home—a white man. Because he defended his property and family, the old man is on trial for murder."

Ross piped in, "Yes, I read about the incident. An old friend of ours from *Stars and Stripes* days is covering the story for the *Detroit Herald*. You remember Harry Nash, Aleck?"

"Sure. I know a few of the principal players, too."

"Elaborate, will you?" said Jane.

"Arthur Garfield Hays is a friend of mine."

"Oh, the lawyer . . ."

"Not just any old lawyer. He sat second chair to Clarence Darrow during the Scopes Trial."

"The 'Monkey Trial'?" asked George.

"Yes, that's right."

"Darrow hasn't exactly been on a winning streak," said Ross. "The young men he defended, those kid murderers, Leopold and Loeb, were found guilty, anyway, and as far as the Scopes Trial, he lost again; they say the trial and what Darrow put William Jennings Bryan through killed the statesman."

"Nonsense!" yelled Heywood. "Darrow saved the young killers from death sentences, and the Scopes decision is on appeal so that the law banning the teaching of science can be reckoned with. Darrow knows what he's doing. He knows how best to lose a case, how to get it the most attention,

too, in order to get the country talking seriously about important issues."

Aleck waved his hand, a gesture of disregard for Ross's comment. "Where was I?"

"You were talking about the Negro doctor's father who shot a white man when—the Detroit case," offered Heywood.

"Yes, yes, before I was rudely interrupted. Darrow has been asked to defend the case against the doctor's father."

"A controversial subject."

"Political dynamite, yes it is, George."

George thought for a moment about the idea of creating an opera around a politically volatile subject. "After what *Birth of a Nation* did to rile-up the Ku Klux Klan ten years ago, maybe it's time to face our disgraces," he said after a moment's consideration.

Edna was smiling an unusual, rather secret smile as she listened to the conversation. The homely face shone with a light that made her almost beautiful. Aleck noticed and commented, "That Cheshire Cat over there has something up her sleeve!"

"You're mixing your metaphors, for crissake!" said Ross.

"Oh, be quiet or I'll mix up your face," said Aleck. "Edna, dear?"

"*Humm?*" said Edna, drawn back into the room from her distant travels. "Just thinking . . . ."

"Don't be coy, Edna dear," I said, admittedly losing patience. "Share what little dust motes are floating around in that little brain of yours."

"It's just that racial prejudice is a theme in my new book."

"You've been working on that tome for centuries, darling," said Aleck.

"Yes, well, *Slowpoke* is finally finished. It's done, out of my hair, out of my hands at last. The publication date is sometime next year."

"*Slowpoke*?" I said. "What-in-fresh-hell kind of name is *that* for a book?" I said. "Is *Slowpoke* the name of some poor antebellum slave boy? Like "Step'nfetchit"? How shameful."

Edna laughed, and made me look like the idiot I was. "My name for *Showboat.* It just took me *forever* to write."

Yeah, sure, I thought, a sour taste in my mouth. She just cranks them out like pork sausage links. "Oh, the Mississippi tugboat story you were writing," I said.

Another doorstopper, I thought, *and goddammit, another Pulitzer, no doubt!*

I, who have trouble writing the shortest of short stories, hoped the green hue rising along my jaw might be mistaken for gangrene. "Great," I said, hoping my envy didn't bleed through. "Good for you," I said, trying again, pretending heartfelt wonder, but hearing only the strident tone of my revolting resentment.

"It's a love story and a tragedy, and a tale of struggle and survival."

"Sounds like a fun read," I said, trying to lighten up. I caught Aleck looking at me; I was transparent to him, if not to everyone else in the room, except Edna.

"Well, it's timely, anyway," continued Edna. "A story about what happens when a light-skinned Negro tries to pass for white. What Dottie calls a 'potboiler.'"

Forget the green, my cheeks were *red*. I knew the woman hadn't read my thoughts, yet she knew my sentiments, and that the little bird who'd told on me was not so little after all, but the fat man posed like a diva on the divan. *Serves me right*, I thought—*never tell Aleck anything you don't want coming back to haunt you.*

"What did you say, Dorothy, about my book, *So Big*?" asked Edna, referring to her Pulitzer Prize–winning novel of the year. "Something like, 'It's not a novel to toss aside lightly; it must be thrown across the room with great force?'"

"That was Benito Mussolini's book, actually. I said your book was . . . " I continued on sheepishly at first. Then, realizing I was digging myself into a deeper hole, "Now, don't gloat, Edna. It makes you look bloated."

I can be unconscionable.

"Not everybody can be like you, Dorothy."

"Oh, God, I hope not," I said, looking around the room for a rock to crawl under.

"Most people actually have to write something to be called a 'famous writer.'"

"*Touché*, Edna dear," I relented, hoping this was my chance at redemption. She was right, of course; it was always a great strain for me to write anything. And yet, I was famous for my *bon mots*, a few poems and short stories. Edna had invited me to dinner and had fed me the most divine meal imaginable. I needed to rein in my bitch-let-loose.

I said, "My fame is my potential, you see, dear. It might be years before I deliver on projected profits. That I should have all this one day," I said, indicating the splendid room with a wave of my hand, "is what keeps me going. Let's retract our claws, whaddayasay?"

Edna laughed, and refilled my glass.

It's hard to dislike happy people, but I keep on trying.

Eight stories below, the view of Central Park had darkened to black. Balls of light from lamps along the walkways threw an ethereal glow that floated up from beneath the building. Earlier in the afternoon we had marveled at the sight of scores of wild turkeys fluttering alongside sheep that grazed the park's Sheep Meadow, marveling that they had escaped the ax on this, their execution day.

Looking around the beautifully appointed salon, I noted that the reds and yellows of the fabrics couldn't have been prettier and more intense

in the daylight than they were now. Firelight and soft pools from table lamps warmed the elegant space. The ebony piano shimmered from reflected light, and George's swarthy complexion was striking against his black hair and rich brown eyes. The Marx Brothers circling Edna as she danced awkwardly was surreal, and to see Aleck beaming in reclining splendor—well, for a moment I had the odd impression that there was something very special about this gathering.

George switched tempo and startled us with a simple little melody, with lyrics by Ira, that brought tears to my eyes. It is not often that that happens! Animals make me teary; the sight of a tired hack-horse stops me in my tracks; I'm an easy mark for strays. Whether it was because I'd had too much whiskey, or because autumn days were growing colder, shorter, and darker, or because I had no man to hold me close at night, the lyrics George sang, "Someone to Watch Over Me," tore at my heart. I truly felt like "a little lamb who's lost in the wood/I know I could always be good to one who'll watch over me."

Ira is a brilliant lyricist who touched on the need in all of us to be loved, and with George's soulful, haunting melody, it is a song that will endure a hundred years, I am sure. I think what I like most about the song is its lack of cynicism. For a woman famous for mistrust in matters of the heart, this is big.

By the time George picked up the pace with "Fascinatin' Rhythm," I was back to my dry-eyed self. The jazziness of the tune, with its musical hesitations, prompted me to ask if anyone wanted to take a ride up to Harlem to hit a couple of clubs.

Before I received an answer, Irving Berlin walked into the room, talking a blue streak as usual, in lieu of a normal greeting. As is often the case with him, it was more as if we had suddenly moved into his space, while he was in the middle of his dialogue with whomever happened to wander across his path.

"What'd I tell you, George?" said Irving, slapping George on the back. The older man looked at the rest of the party and said, "Ain't these boys the best you've ever heard!" referring to the Gershwin brothers. "This young man," he said, indicating George, "came to me a few years ago, and he wanted work from me as a pianist. I asked him to play me something he'd written, and he did, and I said to him, 'Whatta ya wanna work for me for, kid? You're so good, you gotta work for yourself!'" Irving turned back to us and asked, "Was I right or what?" The National Treasure rumpled the black hair of the prodigy.

There was lots of joking about the new show, *The Cocoanuts*, music by Irving and book by George S. Kaufman and starring the Marx Brothers. It was due to open after successful tryouts in Boston and Philly.

Irving pretended to crack the whip, and George relinquished his seat at the piano when Edna begged a number from the show. Groucho leapt up and sang his big number from *The Cocoanuts*, entitled, "Why Am I a Hit With the Ladies?," with the boys taking on the roles of the chorus girls backing him up.

Edna hugged our mutual friend, handed him a scotch, and asked if he had another song for us.

"Sure I do, but Fran Williams ain't here to do it justice," he said, looking at Groucho, who feigned a hurt expression. (Frances Williams is in the show, too.) He sat down on the sofa next to me and asked, "Did I hear you say something about heading up to Harlem?"

"I haven't seen the new show at the Cotton Club, and George was just playing a new tune that reminded me of Negro spirituals, so I thought . . . ."

An hour later, George, Ira, Aleck, FPA, Heywood, and I were sitting pretty at a table amid the lush jungle décor at the Cotton Club, watching the floorshow. Woodrow Wilson slept alongside me on the banquette. Jane and Ross begged off as the magazine's deadline loomed over their heads and the night must be spent working. Edna wanted a quiet night at home, probably to recover from the task of playing nursemaid all day to a schoolroom of overgrown children. The Brothers left to join

their mother, Minnie, for a second Thanksgiving feast, and Irving's latest *Music Box Revue* had an 8:40 P.M. curtain.

Aleck was a bit down-in-the-mouth, and it was no wonder, as the full import of the events of the morning began to weigh on his spirits. A man had died in his arms, he'd been questioned for several hours at the police station, and he'd eaten enough potatoes at Edna's to have saved a small Irish village from famine. He'd been getting quarrelsome, too, from the time we'd left Edna's, during the cab ride uptown, and the wait to be seated at the club.

His irritability waned when the orchestra ended its jazzy rendition of "When My Sugar Walks Down the Street," and a brisk musical intro brought a dozen long-limbed mulatto beauties scantily dressed in silver halters and tap pants onto the stage.

Andrew Peer conducted his ten-man Cotton Club Orchestra; the Chicagoan musicians squeezed the blue notes from a variety of brass. The fever of expectation thrilled through from the banquettes, across the dance floor, over the gleaming horseshoe bar and up onto the multileveled stage, egged-on by the cool, insistent heartbeat of percussion.

The all-white audience purred with joy as the bevy of beauties parted ranks, and Earl "Snakehips" Tucker slid out onto the stage. His astonishing dance contortions sent waves of applause over the footlights.

Dan Healy, the new director of the Cotton Club show, had outdone every production before him. The orchestra was finely pitched to meet its match in the precision choreography, as the tall, handsome Snakehips, dressed in snug-fitting trousers, cummerbund, and open-collared silk shirt, lithely gyrated with sophisticated grace before turning to welcome the beautiful, long-limbed Evelyn Welch onto the stage to partner the routine, her brief costume's red fringe flirting along her glorious thighs, moving at counterpoint to the beat.

You couldn't help but feel the excitement course through you; that uplifting kick that comes with awe and mirth and admiration for the brilliant talents gathered onstage. Such fun! Such perfectly synchronized performance!

Here was artistic expression pitched at us white folks, screaming with more honesty and energy and humanity than any contrived *Ziegfeld Follies* extravaganza I'd ever seen. One's admiration is unsullied by the prejudices of race; art mixed with joy and as unpretentious as this transcends envy, suspicion, fear, and hatred. How can one feel anything but profound happiness when swept over by such pure exhilaration? Brass blared, percussion vibrated through the room, applause reverberated.

The world outside these doors should understand how simple it is for souls to connect, but we

often need devices to make the connections. The graciousness and generosity of the performers inspires the connection, and through some irresistibly flowing force the audience returns the favor.

George was ecstatic; reveling in his musical element, he entered a different consciousness. His face wore an otherworldly glow as he absorbed the sights and sounds. It was as if he could smell the music, swim in the rhythms, so wholly absorbed was he. While the rest of us were emotionally driven, his connection was *visceral*.

White audiences flock to the black clubs not merely to be entertained or to be seen at a currently trendy nightclub. Say it's a call from God, a force, whatever, but here they find a kind of love springing forth through music and dance and voice and the riptide of blatant sexual allure that makes one grasp for some unspoken truth. Here the Negro is a superior race; even though he appears to serve the white clientele, he is really instructing them. The illusion of the jungle décor, the muted lights and the revealing costumes touch a deeper, primal yearning: life lived to the fullest with love, with raw, lusty, undiluted, unchecked emotion.

The rich white swells, the young white New York socialites, and the tourists from small towns let their hair down along with their defenses, abandoning propriety to experience the innate primeval dance long hidden in the dark places of the soul. They flock to the club on 143rd Street likes wolves

to the call of the wild. It isn't slumming, for in fact the bar is raised. Perhaps they feel the urge, like children wanting to run away from their staid, secure homes to join the circus, to seek out carnie adventures alongside the flame thrower, the aerialist, the lion tamer. And here, too, they are witness to the dignity of a culture unbeknownst to them: a world so attractive and rich and unique that they can't help but desire to leave their poor and parsimonious existences for a time to go on a trip into fantasy.

In Harlem clubs the Negro is royalty. For the first time since leaving the African continent, the Negro is not looked upon as chattel, but revered as treasure. Here, for a few hours, the banker from Buffalo donning top hat and tails can contemplate the possibilities of his nature. For a few hours, the Park Avenue hostess might imagine a dreamed existence of abandoned responsibilities, even if she has never before been conscious of those deep desires.

Etiquette is maintained, of course, but the example is set by the Negro. The colored waiter is dressed to the hilt, his blindingly white linens crisply starched; the crease of his trouser leg, sharp; his tie, level. He smiles without the grimace of subservience, and speaks without deference, although always polite in approach. The white clientele is expected to refrain from loud, obnoxious behavior, especially during the floorshow, or

the party is asked to leave the premises. It may be the only place in the world that a Negro can order a white man to quit his place of business!

The condition of the Negro beyond these few precious blocks of Harlem is not enviable. Stripped of talent, muted-hued stage lights, glamour and exotic illusion, a harsh light glares upon him. The colored man becomes, once again, suspect. As the banker boards the train home to Buffalo, the colored redcaps, who can't sing and dance or torment his soul with the soaring refrains of jazz, revert to nonentities in his eyes. He views with indifference the indignities suffered by the Negro race and acknowledges no part or responsibility in society's injustices. The hostess from Park Avenue accepts no blame for the past and offers no help for the future of her dark-skinned sister scrubbing her marble floors or nursing her baby. Walk outside these doors, these few square blocks of real estate, and the struggle is ongoing.

I loved the entertainment at the Cotton Club, and at Connie's Inn, but I don't like the idea that coloreds aren't allowed in their audiences. I heard tell that W.C. Handy, the Father of the Blues, was turned away by Frenchy, the doorman at the Cotton Club, even while the band was playing his own "St. Louis Blues"!

Many clubs that adopt a white-only policy don't last long.

A new club opened last month with a dance floor the size of a football field painted blue and orange. It has a great band, and top-notch entertainment, and it's called Small's Paradise. At Small's the swells in cutaways and Poiret gowns dance alongside the shoeshine boys and kitchen maids from the neighborhood.

I prefer the less audacious, integrated places, the less salubrious joints where the patronage is mostly colored, the dance floors smaller, the jazz wilder, and the fried chicken crispier. But whites aren't really welcomed in those clubs; it's seen as blatantly disrespectful—*slumming*. A white face is conspicuous, intrusive. A sort of reverse lunch-counter discrimination, or how you might be made to feel showing up at a dinner party uninvited. Outright resentment is veiled but can't help but bleed through. I understand it, but I don't like it. Only people like George Gershwin and Heywood Broun can walk into those places and really feel welcomed.

We ordered a fifth of scotch for eighteen bucks under the table, and George bought me a bottle of champagne. By midnight we piled into a cab and headed downtown, dropping George and Ira at their apartments and FPA home to his wife, but Heywood wandered off to Small's Paradise with a young Negro poet we met on the street by the name of Langston Hughes. Aleck, subdued, if

not a little depressed, didn't want to return to his apartment in the house he'd bought with Jane and Ross a couple of years ago on West 47th Street, so I invited him to my rooms at the Algonquin Hotel for a nightcap.

We got out of the taxi on Broadway and 44th, and walked Woodrow Wilson the two avenues east toward home. Whether it was the effect of the liquor, or the windless night, the air felt pleasant, less frigid than when we stood watching the parade that morning.

Then, abruptly, Aleck said, "Why does one murder a priest, Dottie?"

"Wish I knew," I said. "Maybe some disgruntled Catholic, for all we know."

"I got the strangest impression that the fellow knew me. The priest, that is, not the murderer."

"Who in hell doesn't know Alexander Woollcott? And, I should add, who on earth doesn't for that matter?"

He ignored my little joke. "The way he looked at me. He was trying to tell me something more."

"Like whom to stop and whom to save?"

"That's it, Dottie!" said Aleck, stopping in his tracks. He said, 'Stop him. Save him.' He wasn't telling me to stop his murderer so that I could save him from something. He was telling me to stop the murderer so I might save someone else."

"Oh, I see what you mean."

Aleck looked distressed again. His eyes narrowed and his brows lifted behind his spectacles. For the first time since we met back in '19 he appeared to be at a loss for words. And for a man known for his verbal prowess, I found this disturbing.

"How am I supposed to do anything about that?" he finally said, and then the solution dawned. "Let's call Bob and—oh, I forgot. He's not in town."

Bob is Robert Benchley, famous writer, wit extraordinaire, critic for *Life* magazine, star of last year's *Music Box Revue*, and best of all, my closest friend and confidant. We met half a dozen years ago, when I was hired by *Vanity Fair* as theatre critic, where he was editor. A couple years later, when I was fired because I was, let's say, uncharitable to a Broadway star (Billie Burke) in my scathing review of her performance, disregarding the fact that her husband was not only one of Broadway's biggest producers (Florenz Ziegfeld) but a major advertiser in *Vanity*, Robert Benchley resigned his post in protest of my dismissal! No one had ever stood up for me before. He was not just a fair-weather friend with whom I shared good times. He became my champion.

With no job, but with a wife, children, and mortgage in the suburbs, Mr. Benchley decided to try freelance writing, so together we set up an office in a broom closet. Might as well have been a

broom closet—a partitioned-off four-by-eight-foot end of a hallway in the Metropolitan Opera House studios close to Times Square for thirty dollars a month. With room for one desk, two chairs, one on either side, our typewriters butt-to-butt ("an inch smaller and it would have been adultery"), we set up shop. There was always some work to be had, for we were writers of note, but during the months we rented the broom closet we spent most of our time unproductively, lunching half the afternoon away with our Algonquin Round Table friends as had become our custom, then returning to our cubbyhole to play cards, watching and commenting on the traffic of pedestrians from the window, and generally joking around until five o'clock. Eventually we abandoned our pathetic enterprise.

Since shutting the door of that closet we spend much of our time together, lunching, going to the theatre, shooting the breeze, and gallivanting all over town. Mr. Benchley (who calls me "Mrs. Parker," as we were first introduced to each other at *Vanity*) keeps rooms at the Hotel Royalton, a bachelor residence across the street from the Algonquin, since appearing on Broadway last year; the commute to Scarsdale after the show each night didn't get him home until two in the morning. He's kept those rooms, however, since the show closed last summer, and returns home to the suburbs on the weekends. There's been lots of talk, lots of

speculation about our relationship. Some people have insinuated we are lovers. We are *not*, and never have been. Mr. Benchley and I were married to other people when we met, and although I have been separated from my husband, Eddie, for over a year and feel free to seek out new relationships, Mr. Benchley is happily married. Happily enough to stay married, anyway, although of late he has been visiting Polly Adler's brothel with some regularity: "Mistresses break the monogamy, Mrs. Parker." He is my best friend in the whole world. We share a mutual admiration, and our "love" for each other transcends the romantic, and therefore holds great value for me. I sometimes think that if I had been born a man, I'd *be* Mr. Benchley.

"Mr. Benchley was having Thanksgiving with Gertrude and the boys."

"Let's call him from your room."

"Don't think Gertrude would appreciate a one-A.M. call, Aleck."

"Oh, bother."

We were passing a corner newsstand when Aleck stopped, turned, and walked over to pick up an evening paper. He grabbed a *New York Post* and a *Tribune*, too, and flipped a nickel to the newsy.

"Let's see if there is any mention of this morning's murder."

We stood for a moment as he perused the headlines on the first few pages of each paper. Woodrow Wilson tugged at his leash, so I followed

his lead that he might investigate an unidentifiable dropping off the curb. I didn't like the looks of it, so I pulled my pup away and turned to look for Aleck, twenty paces back.

As I waited for the big man to catch up to us, my attention was called by a group of rowdy young men in evening clothes, decidedly "tight," staggering out of the Harvard Club. Several bent fellows stumbled off the curb, arms flailing, spitting out anemic whistles in ineffectual attempts at commandeering a cab to take them on to a brothel adventure, no doubt. A couple doors down at the New York Yacht Club, there emerged from its French Rococo façade and brightly lit bowed windows a doorman looking to see what the ruckus was about. Noting that the fuss was simply the breast-beating of healthy youth, the guard retreated back into the sanctuary of the club.

Fifty feet further along and across the street, the Hippodrome's marquee was dark at this late hour, the crowds having long since dispersed from the extravaganza that was currently playing there. The stately white limestone building directly across from my hotel, the New York Bar Association, dozed in dark shadows like sleeping royalty.

Aleck called out and was catching up to me, re-folding the newspapers, when something caught my eye and I turned back to look across at the Bar Association Building.

A man lurked in a doorway, his hat slouched over his eyes and casting a shadow across his

face. Our eyes met, and he stepped back into the doorwell's dark recess. Even with all the millions of men in New York City dressed in nondescript overcoats and banded fedoras, I knew that underneath that hat would be revealed a shock of wild blond hair.

I ran back toward Aleck, Woodrow Wilson sprinting after me.

"Aleck!" I yelled, grabbing his arm and causing one of the newspapers to fall to the sidewalk. "The murderer! He's there!"

Aleck stopped, bent down to retrieve the paper, and turned to look in the direction at which I pointed. "I don't see anyone."

"The man across the street," I said, as a truck passed, blocking our view. When it was gone, so was the man.

"There he is, walking toward Fifth Avenue," I said, watching him turn the corner. "He was waiting for us."

"Dottie, dearest, your nerves are shot. Your imagination is running away with you."

"No, Aleck, it was the man, the murderer!"

"But how can you know for sure? It's dark, the streetlights cast shadows, and he was just a fellow walking down the street."

"He was waiting for us, lurking in the doorway across from the Gonk."

"No, dear; if you are right about the fellow's identity, it was not *us* he was waiting for, but *you.*

I don't live here, remember? He would have been watching your hotel, if I'm not mistaken. But, how likely is that, now? The fellow might have just stopped to light a cigarette out of the wind."

"There is no wind tonight."

"But, how can you be so sure he is the man? Did you see his face?"

"No, but it was he," I insisted. "Why else would he bolt when I looked his way?"

"All right, if you feel so certain, perhaps we should call in the police."

"And what would I tell them? I saw the murderer; he looks like every man on the street?"

Aleck took my arm. "Let's get inside and get that drink you promised me."

Peter, the Algonquin's night doorman, whom we referred to as "St. Peter" because he guarded our heavenly gates, greeted us as we entered, and once in the lobby I thought to ask if he'd seen the man, whom I described, lurking in the doorway of the Bar Association.

"I can't honestly say for sure, Mrs. Parker," said Peter. "Overcoat and fedora? I'm sorry, but there are so many—"

I stopped him in mid-sentence. "That's all right, Peter, never mind. But, if you notice anyone hanging around, watching the hotel, would you call up to my room?"

Peter, a tall Scotsman, leaned in to scrutinize

at my face.

"This guy bothering you, Mrs. Parker?"

"I don't really know," I replied vaguely.

"You will let us know if you see anyone skulking about, won't you?" asked Aleck, more an order than a request.

"I will keep a vigilant eye on the street, Mr. Woollcott!" said the saint. "And I will make sure that Joseph is told to do so when he comes on in the morning." He straightened his epaulettes and touched his cap in affirmation.

I checked at the front desk for telephone messages and wires: My sister Helen called from Connecticut where she was on a short holiday to wish me a happy Thanksgiving, as did my friend and once-neighbor, artist Neysa McMein, to invite me up for drinks Friday at five. There was a wire from Scott and Zelda (Fitzgerald) from Cap d'Antibes where they were spending the holidays with Sara and Gerald Murphy, ex-pats living in France: "When was I sailing across the pond for a long visit with the Murphys?" they wanted to know.

Scott's latest novel, *The Great Gatsby,* had received scathing reviews and had flopped in sales since it came out last summer. I'd wired to him in Paris that I liked the book.

Some accuse Scott of being guilty of having

set a standard for the mindless, sophomoric, devil-may-care philosophy of the wealthy, spoiled, upper-class fops of our generation: "Have fun before it's too late." The strict code of social behavioral ethics practiced by the Victorian parents of today's youth had brought their children into a war. "Let's abandon the rules," their children seem to say. "Be outrageous! *Carpe diem*. Tomorrow we all die." The rich can get away with anything, and in Scott's book, even murder. Scott acts the fool much of the time, indulging in too much booze and naughty behavior, but shallow he is not. He isn't encouraging any devil-may-care philosophy for living. He is simply showing in *Gatsby* that such a life of carelessness, purposelessness, and disloyalty has become glamorous, when in fact it masks betrayal and empty promises. Sophistication has less to do with education and culture and fortunes and poses, and more to do with the corruption and adulteration of longstanding mores. One has only to attend one of the extravagant soirees hosted by Herbert Bayard Swope and his wife at their Long Island estate to understand the point of his book, written with self-effacing, brutal honesty about his own life and his fascination with Zelda, but I doubt any of the reviewers had ever been invited to one of those parties, and therefore they have missed the point entirely.

My other messages were that the police sketch artist had called to ask if I would appear at

the precinct house at 11:00 A.M. so that he might create a portrait of the culprit from my description.

And Mr. Benchley had called.

"It would be rude not to return his call, Dottie," Aleck said, rationalizing why I should ring up our friend. We'd gotten off the elevator and were walking toward my door.

"But be a good soul and let him sleep. You can tell him everything in the morning. Now, let's get settled with a scotch and soda."

Aleck resplendent

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Duke Ellington backing the Cotton Club chorus

Snake Hips

This is the end of the book sample.

Enjoyed the sample? Well, buy it now!

Available at the author's website, DorothyParkerMysteries.com, iTunes, Amazon, Barnes and Noble, or where ever fine ebooks are sold.

Praise for *Dorothy Parker Mysteries*

Those of us who since childhood had wished there was a time machine that could let us experience and enjoy life in other periods, should read Agata Stanford's "Dorothy Parker Mysteries" series. They wonderfully recreate the atmosphere and spirit of the literary and artistic crowd at the Algonquin Round Table in the 1920s, and bring back to life the wit, habits, foibles, and escapades of Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, and Alexander Woollcott, as well as of the multitude of their friends and even their pets, both human and animal.

—*Anatole Konstantin*
Author of *A Red Boyhood: Growing Up under Stalin*

Agata Stanford's "Dorothy Parker Mysteries" is destined to become a classic series. It's an addictive cocktail for the avid mystery reader. It has it all: murder, mystery, and Marx Brothers' mayhem. You'll see, once you've taken Manhattan with the Parker/Benchley crowd. Dorothy Parker wins! Move over Nick and Nora.

—*Elizabeth Fuller*
Author of *Me and Jezebel*

About the Author

Agata Stanford is an actress, director, and playwright who grew up in New York City. While attending the School of Performing Arts, she'd often walk past the Algonquin Hotel, which sparked her early interest in the legendary Algonquin Round Table.