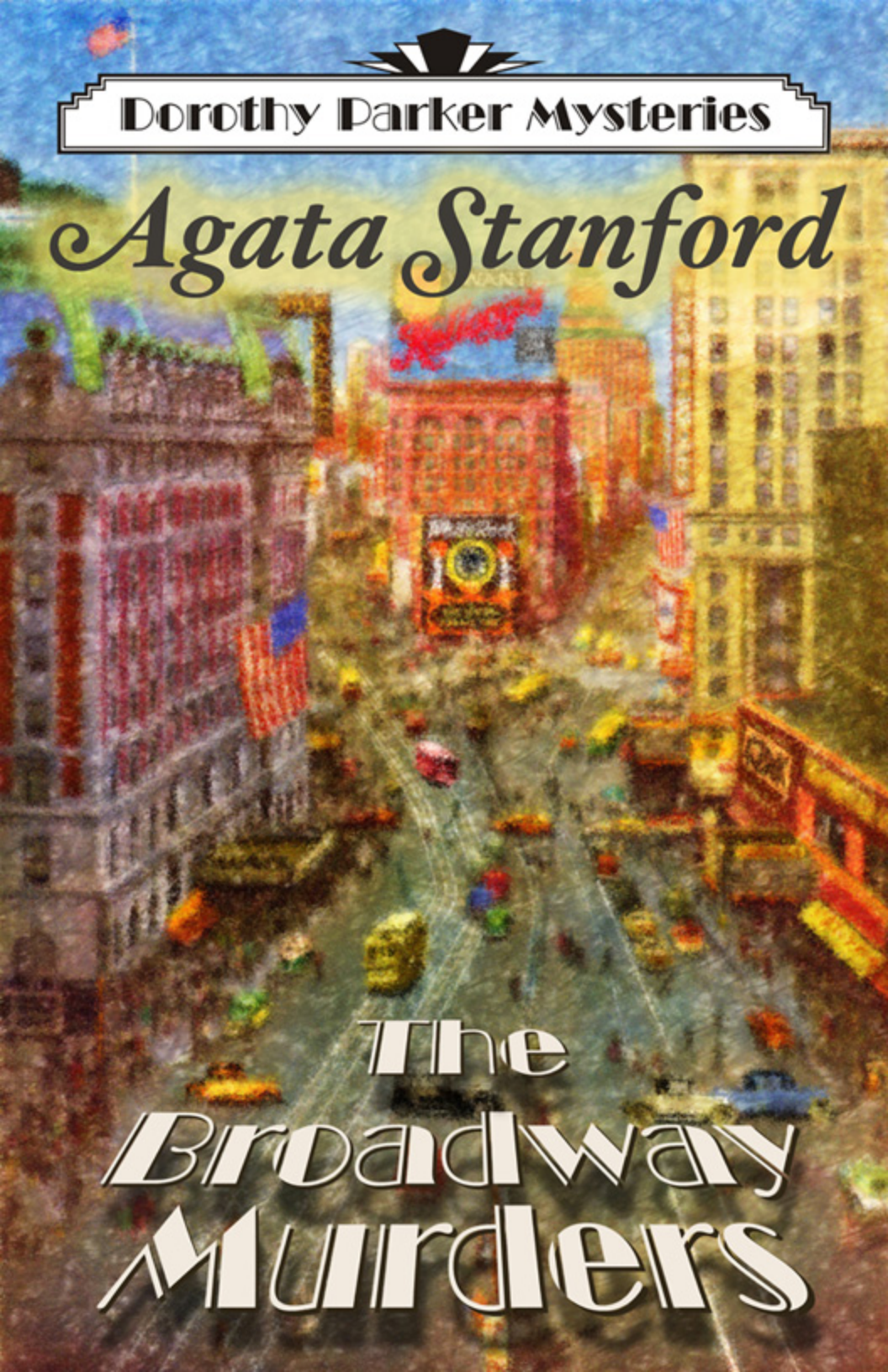
Dorothy Parker Mysteries
Agata Stanford
The Broadway Murders

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for Serena

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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 skewed 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.

The Broadway Murders

Chapter One

"Woodrow Wilson," I ordered, "sit there and don't say a word. If Aleck suspects, the Wit will throw a fit!"

I spooned out a small helping from the rounded hill of pâté de foie gras, and then, with my fingers and a butter knife, filled in the unsightly crater. I admired my handiwork, and then peeked over my shoulder for witnesses to my thievery, as I fed the chopped liver to Woodrow Wilson, my co-conspirator.

"Too much garlic, don't you think?" I asked Woodrow as I licked my fingers.

Garlic or not, he wanted more.

It is the fall of 1924. Manhattan. We're sitting at the table waiting for the others, and this room, a hotel dining room on West 44th Street, is the heart of my world.

A couple blocks away is Broadway. Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne are making their first big splash in *The Guardsman*, and *Desire Under*

the Elms promises fame for its playwright, Eugene O'Neill. The ubiquitous Barrymores dominate the stage for yet another season. George S. Kaufman has two shows running, one written with Edna Ferber, the other penned with Marc Connelly, and Sam Harris's and Irving Berlin's *Music Box Revue* (starring my closest friend and confidant, Robert Benchley) has recently closed after a lengthy run. These glorious people are just a few of my friends, people I've broken bread with and washed down the crumbs with innumerable bottles of hooch, here in this dining room, the Rose Room of the Algonquin Hotel, the heart of my world.

While the Gershwin boys are hacking away at words and music, and gin is distilling in bathtubs throughout the country, political dramas (demanding suspension of disbelief) play out on the world stage: Calvin Coolidge is running for president against J.W. Davis; a smug bullyboy named J. Edgar Hoover just got appointed director of the Bureau of Investigation; and Woodrow Wilson, a man of great insight, integrity, and intelligence (unusual qualities in a politician) has died. To honor the great man I've named my Boston terrier puppy after him.

On the other side of the pond, in Germany, a nasty little upstart with a Little Tramp mustache has been sentenced to jail, an uncouth braggart named Mussolini grips power in Italy's first Fascist election, while philosophical infighting among the

Reds is causing havoc in Russia. Had I to review such melodrama, top-heavy with villainous protagonists and shakily supported by an incompetent cast, I'd've asked, "What fresh hell is this?" and advised an absinthe chaser after swallowing such swill!

As these great and inconsequential events pass through my life, resulting in little more emotional reaction than a head-shake and a mindless tongue-cluck, I am unexpectedly knocked for a loop when Reginald Ignatius Pierce, Broadway producer, man-about-town, bon vivant, general swell, and pain-in-the-ass, is found dead in his 46th Street apartment, saving anyone the bother of pulling a trigger, plunging a dagger, or poisoning his highball. It was generally known in Theatre circles that there were numerous people who would have gladly wielded an ax, tightened a rope, bloodied their hands, but for fear of persecution, if not lack of nerve to live out their dreams of murdering Reginald. Not to sound hard-hearted, but for me and my friends, the surprise is not that he is dead, but that he had not been murdered.

The news of his sudden death came as we were lunching at our usual haunt, the Rose Room of the Algonquin Hotel. Frank Case, the hotel manager, had called Aleck Woollcott away to the telephone, putting an end, if only temporarily, to Aleck's vitriolic remarks concerning Condé Nast's latest sexual transgressions.

All of the kids were arriving; the scrape of chairs and shuffling feet were reminiscent of the game of musical chairs at children's parties.

Alexander Woollcott and I had been the first to arrive. George (S. Kaufman) and Edna (Ferber) were taking a break from yet another collaboration, arriving in time to scoop up and devour most of the popovers. Charlie (MacArthur) bounded in with Harold Ross, who grabbed the remaining stalk of celery and crunched a fervent plea in my left ear for the short story I had promised to deliver a week ago last Thursday. Ross is all worked up about a new magazine he is about to publish, which we'd all agreed should wear the moniker, *The New Yorker*, if he ever got it off the ground.

Columnist FPA—Frank Pierce Adams—and sports journalist Heywood Broun beat my friend and neighbor, artist Neysa McMein, who ambled in with Irving Berlin, to the last sorry pickles, and wouldn't you know that Harpo (Marx) flew into the room and used the art of distraction by kissing my right shoulder to help himself to a handful of pâté at my left, which I had been diligently guarding, like a dodo bird her newly laid eggs, for Aleck. I couldn't sculpt over the devastation, so I popped the garnish of parsley into my mouth and offered the smattering that remained to a grateful Woodrow Wilson, before signaling our waiter, Luigi, to bring another portion.

We are all a little crazy. The War made us this way. Artistic temperament and youthful

energy, too. Reckless pride brought Europe to war, and America jumped in to end it. The often frenzied exuberance of my generation is just our juvenile insistence that we return to a happier time: before loss, before senselessness. Senseless death inspires in some people a quest for meaningful living; for others, senseless death gives rise to senseless living. (How else does one explain the song lyrics, "Diga-Diga-Doo, Diga- Doo-Doo"?) I live in a place somewhere between the Sublime and the Ridiculous.

As in a well-directed farce, Aleck bounced back into the room with the authority of a school headmaster, and an unprecedented silence fell over the table. Except for celery chewing that crunched a beat not unlike the tick-tock of a time bomb, *no one spoke!* Such a thing had never happened before. We are a circle of friends whose rapid-fire conversation could send a stenographer off for an extended stay at Bellevue.

All eyes were drawn toward Aleck's sizable form. His triple chins quivered in rotation, sunlight reflected off one of the lenses of his heavy spectacles, and he was solemnly wiping sweat from his brow with his kerchief. Our silent expectancy did not escape his notice. He milked the moment, relishing the rare, undivided attention for a few dramatic seconds, almost overlooking the fact that the plate of pâté was gone. I thought he was about to make comment of it, when, with dour

expression, his hands resting on the back of his chair, he stared down at the expanse of white cloth, and announced solemnly, "Pierce, Reggie Pierce is dead!"

"Well, we know that, darling; his last show bombed—dead in the water," I jumped in, relieved that Luigi had arrived with the new plate of chopped liver.

"Not finished, Dottie, but dead."

"*Holy moly!*" squeaked FPA.

"What a scoop!" yelled Harold Ross.

"*Awww, shit!*" I added.

It was just then that Bob Benchley arrived, scanned the table for something edible, and settled on the very last, forlorn-looking cherry tomato on the pickle dish, which he tossed into the air and caught in his mouth. "How'd he kick off?" he asked.

"Choked on a cherry tomato."

Like the newfangled machine that spits out tennis balls, Mr. Benchley ejected the murderous fruit for a high velocity flight across the table, only to be caught by an ever-ready, ever-scavenging Harpo, who donned it like a clown's nose.

"Natural causes? Who'd have thunk it?"

"He was found in his apartment just a little while ago."

"How come I didn't hear about it?" asked George Kaufman, who still works at the *New York*

Times for seventy-five dollars a week, even though he's made a fortune as a playwright.

"I have a friend at the *Morning Telegraph* who has a friend whose brother has a friend whose sister's husband has a friend on the police force," said Aleck.

"Aleck, you mean your Cousin Joe up at the 20th Precinct," piped in Ross.

"I guess we have to scribble a piece on Pierce for tonight's editions," said Heywood.

"I rather like that alliteration," considered Marc Connelly.

"Can't somebody who didn't know him write it?" asked George. "How about you, Ross?"

"Afraid?" challenged Aleck.

"You bettcha! If I had to write it, they'd suspect he was murdered and that I'd've done him in."

"I can see the headline now: 'Stage Star Tomatoed!'" chimed in Harpo.

Autumn in New York is a truly glorious time of year. The days are cool and crisp and usually a welcomed relief after summer's deep-fry heat rising off the streets.

A couple hours after lunching at the Gonk and hearing the news about Reggie Pierce, Woodrow Wilson and I took a long walk around the

neighborhood. We walked through Bryant Park, behind the New York Public Library. Construction on the new American Radiator Company Building was nearing completion. Thirty-six stories high, its black brick and four-storied pyramidal step-back tower stood like a dark imposing guard over the park, library, and 40th Street. Such feats of human ingenuity amaze me.

An hour later, Woodrow Wilson and I were window-shopping fifteen blocks north along Fifth Avenue, when my attention was called by the very chic moss-green silk Charmeuse little number, draped over one shoulder with a lace reveal at the bodice, in one of Bergdorf's windows. The gown would go very nicely with the bracelet I'd just admired at Tiffany's, and wouldn't you know, I had the perfect little pumps at home to complete the look. I was contemplating how I might justify such purchases, had I the cash in the first place, when I was heralded by a sound, like a deep and raspy foghorn, wafting on a breeze of Bal au Versailles. Without needing to turn my head I knew who'd addressed me.

"Dottie, *dahhhling*," drawled the star, "any designs you may have on that dress must never be realized, you know that, don't you? It screams 'Hippodrome Chorus Girl.'"

"Tallulah, dear," I said, turning to greet the glamorous creature. Her honey-colored hair lashed my cheek as she leaned in for an airy kiss. "Those

are Worth Paris gowns, and 'darling' yourself. You were planning on buying it for yourself, of course. And ravishing you will be in it."

Woodrow Wilson barked agreement.

"I wouldn't be caught dead in it!"

Woodrow Wilson chimed in with a whine.

"Good, because Marilyn Miller purchased that one this morning. She didn't know that Helen Hayes had bought one yesterday. One more girl wearing that dress at the Actors Equity Ball— why, the three of you'd be mistaken as a triplet vaudeville act brought in for after-dinner entertainment."

Once again Woodrow Wilson barked.

"Does he always agree with you?" Tallulah looked at me and then down at Woodrow with a suspiciously raised pencil brow. "How do you know such things? Do you bribe the store clerks to ring you up after they've rung up their cash registers?"

"I have my sources." I knew for certain that neither Marilyn nor Helen had purchased a frock. My friend, Jane Grant, had seen the ad in yesterday's *Tribune*, cut it out, and slipped it to me this morning. Jane knew I was looking for a new dress and suggested I stop by the store to check it out. I really couldn't afford such a gown, but I made up the tale about the Broadway stars' purchasing the dress because I could read Tallulah like a cheap novel, and I thought I'd have a little

fun playing with her. I've found that all really beautiful and accomplished women are riddled with self-doubt. Everything this actress did bordered on the outrageous, and I suspected most of her escapades were born from her fear of being perceived as normal and boring. As if she could ever be boring! Tedious at times, but never boring. We've been friends for several years, since she first arrived in town. Every day during her first year in New York, before she got steady work on the Broadway stage, Tallulah Bankhead would bound into the Algonquin at lunchtime, wearing the same sorry black dress, and pick at the food from our plates. She was clever and funny and wild, so we rarely slapped her hand. And, now, she was doing well enough to buy most any dress in Bergdorf's windows. She was welcome to the dress, really. I just didn't want to be rushed out of my fantasy of buying it just yet.

"Did you hear about Reginald Pierce?" she asked, pushing a Marcel wave under her hat, while checking her reflection in the window glass. "Alas, we won't have Old Reg to sling mud at anymore."

"There's always Billie Burke," I reassured her. She gave me a sly smile, then threw back her head and let out a hearty, throaty laugh.

You see, a couple a years ago, while working at my first job as an arts editor at *Vanity Fair*, Frank Crowninshield, the magazine's editor-in-

chief, took me out to lunch at the Tea Court of the Plaza Hotel, and while sipping cocktails and slurping down oysters—actually we were slurping down cocktails as well as the oysters—Frank fired me after four years in his employ. He explained I was not being let go because I didn't know how to change the typewriter ribbon (as was my usual quip for not handing in copy in a timely manner), but because of my review of Miss Billie Burke's performance on Broadway in *Caesar's Wife*. I made note that Miss Burke was far too "mature" at thirty-five to be playing the ingénue role in the play. Actually, I think she was miffed because I insinuated that she had thick ankles. Had the review been about anyone else, or had Miss Burke not been the wife of the great Florenz Ziegfeld, one of the most powerful Broadway producers as well as the magazine's biggest advertiser, my comment that Miss Burke's impersonation of Eva Tanguay (the *I Don't Care* Girl) had been an unfortunate artistic choice might have merely elicited chuckles of agreement and kudos for my cutting wit.

"Poor old Reggie," moaned Tallulah, slipping a hankie from her purse. She was dabbing dry eyes when an idea suddenly dawned to light up her face. "I must be off, Dottie, *dahhhling*."

"You're running off! Well, I thought, since we're here, we'd go in the store and look around, 'Lulla, and then slink on over to Tony Soma's for a drink," I pouted with disappointment. I liked

Tallulah, and I was glad she'd stopped me on the street. Here was an opportunity to catch up with some long-neglected gossip. She was as serious a drinking woman as I, and lots of fun. "Why the bum's rush?"

"*Dahhhling* Dottie, you're no bum, *dahhhling*. It's just—I realized Reggie's apartment must be available, now he's dead and all. . . . I've got to find out if it's available to rent before anyone else leases it!"

"'Lulla, dearest, unless you wish to purchase the Reginald Pierce Theatre on West 46th, you can't get the apartment." Her frowning stare informed me she hadn't a clue about what I was talking about. "Reggie lived in the apartment above his new theatre. You'd have to buy the entire building."

"Rats!" she said, her hopes dashed. "I thought he had an apartment at the Dakota."

"*Ahh*, I see. No, dearest, his wife threw him out last winter, so he made himself a gorgeous pied-à-terre on the top floor of the theatre."

"That's right, he was married. I forgot he was married."

"Reggie forgot he was married, too; that's why Myrtle threw him out."

We walked into Bergdorf Goodman's, where Tallulah drove a salesgirl to the brink of insanity while deciding which of four hats she should buy, before rejecting all and insisting we make a stop

at Henri Bendel's, just up the street along 57th, to check out their haberdashery.

The streets were teal blue and the street lamps alight when we walked out of Bendel's. Rectangles of yellow light stacked vertically into the darkening sky, lending warmth to the dimming geometry of New York's cityscape. It was rush hour, and the hum and honking of traffic and the murmur of humanity bustling along the sidewalks on a million journeys brought a new rhythm to the music of my Manhattan. I love New York. It all happens here, and I never know, upon waking in the morning, what my day will bring.

All's fair in love, war, and, in Manhattan, securing a taxi. We managed to snag a cab out from under the grasp of two very determined businessmen with the help of Woodrow Wilson and a much-rehearsed trick. I said, "Hail a cab, Woodrow!" With his teeth gently pulling the cuff of one gentleman's trouser leg, before moving on to the cuff of the other fellow's, he succeeded in causing just enough distraction for us to hop into the cab before the boys realized they had been bamboozled.

"Good boy, Woodrow!" I laughed as he leaped onto my lap and licked my face.

"I have to get me one of those," said Tallulah.

"Woodrow is a very special puppy dog," I cooed, rustling his wiry fur.

It was only a dozen blocks to Tony Soma's, my favorite watering hole. We got out on 49th Street before what appeared a brownstone whose residents were not at home. The ground-floor windows were shuttered, and those who didn't know better would never guess at the action happening within. The peephole isn't even a giveaway. Tony's establishment is only one of dozens of places like this along 49th Street.

My knock was answered, and I gave the password. Not that I had to; Buddy, the doorkeeper, knew me well. Metal rasped against metal as the slide bolt released and the door swung open. We entered the secret world of Tony Soma's Speakeasy.

At Tony's you can be assured that the liquor is safe and won't make you sick, as in some less salubrious establishments around the city, and the clientele includes lots of my friends in the Theatre and publishing. Best of all, Tony's doesn't close until the last customer has gone home.

A homey haze of cigarette smoke mingled with the aroma of frying steak and tomato sauce. There was the promise of a T-bone in Woodrow's near future, and he sat, expectantly, while we checked our coats and bags before we were shown to a checker-clothed table.

Maurice, our waiter, took our order: an orange blossom for me, a gin-fizz for Tallulah, and a bowl of water for Woodrow. It wasn't

long before we were joined by Bunny Wilson and Heywood Broun who had spotted us from the bar. No girl-talk tonight, I realized, when Johnny Barrymore, still high from last -year's brilliant portrayal of Hamlet, moved in on us. An hour later he and Tallulah ordered dinner in time to leave for their respective stage shows.

Aleck Woollcott walked in with Mr. Benchley, and as none of us had a show to review this evening, we were all free to relax into an evening of good food, great conversation, and if not quality liquor, at least decent booze.

Under the table, Woodrow Wilson was snoozing in postprandial splendor, several steak bones nibbled clean at his paws, as we drank from heavy white "coffee" cups. The sudden death of Reginald Pierce was among the various topics of discussion, and there was wild speculation about what would happen now that his empire had been dealt such a blow. Rumor had it the divorce from wife Myrtle had not been finalized, although there were rumors that it had been. If he and Myrtle had still been married when he died, would she cancel the evening's performances of his three Broadway shows, or would the curtains go up? Would, because of the publicity and perhaps a macabre interest, his shows sell out, even though two were just hanging in there by threads and the third was set to close any day now, after a shaky opening and bad reviews? Three-hundred-and-

fifty-six people might either be out of work soon, or enjoy a reprieve from joblessness. And then there was the real estate, the vast art collection, the many stockholdings, as well as the production companies. Who, if the divorce had been finalized, would inherit? All I can say is that there had been a lot of scrambling around the past nine hours since the discovery of Reginald's dead body, and along with the disingenuous whispers and long faces there existed a good smattering of glee that he'd finally gotten his comeuppance. Just as soon as the topic had made a full circle, people moved on to the next pain-in-the-neck of local gossip: Lee Shubert and his new theatre, which was built without stage access from the dressing rooms and without hot water!

Bunny and Heywood got into enthusiastic conversation with a couple of editors from the *Times*, who sat at the next table, about the elections in Italy, and by eight o'clock, Aleck, Mr. Benchley, and I, pulling along a very reluctant Boston terrier, bid all a good-night and bustled out into the street.

The evening was pleasantly cool as we sauntered along toward Sixth Avenue. We were only a couple of avenues from Broadway and Times Square. Curtains would rise soon, and the streets became brighter and busier with automobile, streetcar, and pedestrian traffic as we neared the Great White Way.

Fur-wrapped and chiffon-gowned women, their jewels sparkling, and men in shiny black top hats and tails spilled out of Silver Ghosts, Duesenberg touring cars, Packards, and Stutzes at the prompting of liveried chauffeurs. And mingling with the swells were modestly attired office girls and stock clerks arriving in cabs and trolleys, and rising from the steps of the subways to fill the cheap seats of the balconies.

Marquees were lit with the names of our friends. On 47th Street alone, Katherine Cornell was appearing in *The Outsider*, Helen Hayes in *Dancing Mothers*, Ethel Barrymore in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, and Marilyn Miller in a revival of *Peter Pan*, with Leslie Banks playing Captain Hook! We were stopped numerous times, much to Aleck's pleasure—he is a ham and likes to be fawned over—by many friends and acquaintances, as we strolled through the crowds of theatregoers, who were eagerly anticipating the exciting spectacles of the Stage. Not only were the marquees lit up with electricity, so were the people.

On our way to Aleck's new residence, which he had purchased with Jane Grant and Harold Ross on West 46th Street, it came at us like a surprise to find ourselves approaching the Reginald Pierce Theatre. It looked like the curtain was going to go up in spite of the producer's death and the show's God-awful reviews. Aleck's critique for the *New York Times* was hysterical, if brutal, if deserving.

The play received only one good notice, and that was from the *Tribune's* Ralph (pronounced *Rafe*) Chittenham, in which he praised the show, calling Lucille's Montaine's performance "inspiration in touching understatement," whatever the hell that means!

"See what the right kind of publicity can do?" I said.

"Murder the producer and you've got a hit," agreed Mr. Benchley.

"Better to have murdered the star, of course," said Aleck. "Lucille Montaine's performance will most definitely clear the house—if not tonight, then eventually."

"I agree with you, Aleck. After this mob endures Lucille's mumbling, bumbling and stumbling, my review for the *Saturday Evening Post* will seem kind."

This is where I should enlighten those who do not know me—people living in Saskatchewan or the sparsely populated regions of these United States that receive no postal delivery for subscriptions of the *Saturday Evening Post* or *Vanity Fair* or the *Bookman*. For those who might chance upon this journal, unwittingly tossed aside by a camper from the city during an exploratory expedition, when, while relaxing with one of the aforementioned journals by the evening campfire, said camper was rudely interrupted by a black bear demanding more than the fellow's marshmallows: My "celebrity,"

for I would not be so presumptuous as to call it "fame," aside from my very fresh, honest, and often self-deriding poetic verses, arose from my natural talent of cutting to the quick in a fashion that is humorous. Sometimes, I flip the viewpoint, as in my review for this, Reginald Pierce's new show, which was such an abomination, I couldn't find a way to begin to tell my readers just how bad it was without using the word "shit." So rather than deal with the censors, I concentrated my critique on the very fine performances of the theatre ushers, the doormen, the house manager, and the box office staff, and the exceptional debut of the ladies' lounge attendant, a newcomer in black dress and starched white pinafore and cap, agile in sensible shoes, who delivered her line, "Good-evening, Madame!," with aplomb, while at the same time handing over a crisp, white towel. I rested all my criticism on the audience: their failure to applaud, stomp, and whistle at the appropriate times.

I love the Theatre and the people who are part of making *great* Theatre. It's true that my readers expect me to write with clever, entertaining insight, but why be mean when I can get the point across by being droll? And here's a secret: I actually liked Reginald Pierce. Others may have seen him as a rat, but he always behaved gentlemanly toward me. Aside from the fact that he'd suffered more than his fair share of flops in recent years, he'd also brought to the Stage many

successes, many works of high quality. I think people didn't like him because, like me, he didn't suffer fools easily. And the Theatre is full of fools, let me tell you. In this business, too, as in any other, success *does* breed contempt. People relish the downfall of the rich, the powerful, and the accomplished.

"Aleck, have you ever been to Reggie's apartment?" I asked, picking up Woodrow Wilson, who was dragging from fatigue.

"Only been to the Dakota apartment with Edna [Ferber], to a party for Myrtle, her birthday or something-or-other. . . ."

"Is the entrance to the apartment from inside the theatre's lobby?"

"How the hell should I know! I've never been here, I say!"

"Stop being such a crank," I chided. He was obviously more upset by Reggie's death than he had been letting on. "I only thought we might go on up and pay our respects, and maybe drink a toast to him; I hear Reggie imported the very best Scotch, so they say."

That lightened his mood.

We inquired within the lobby for the entrance to the apartment, but were told we needed to walk around past the stage-door entrance where another door, further along, led to an elevator that would take us up to the top floor.

Easily found, but the door was locked. I

rang the doorbell. No one answered after a second and third try. Finally, disgruntled once more, but this time at the disappointing possibility of really fine Scotch whiskey being beyond his reach, Aleck took my purse and riffled through, looking for an appropriately sharp and pointed object. Failing that, Mr. Benchley took out his penknife and told us to step aside. A couple of precise twists and we were in.

"Mr. Benchley, I'm pleased to inform you that you are now among the rank-and-file of New York's criminal element," I applauded him.

"But, I deplore politics!"

We entered the elevator, and soon found ourselves arrived at a small foyer, walls painted blood-red, and facing an elaborately decorated door. We knocked and waited, and knocked again. It never dawned on me that there would be no staff to welcome us. When I turned the knob as a last resort, it turned without resistance.

We located a switch and the room that lay before us came alive with light. And what a room it was! No luxury had been spared in its décor, and one would never guess this had once been an empty space above a theatre. It was as architecturally detailed as any Beaux Arts building on Central Park West, and the soft pools of lamplight accentuated the sleek, curved lines of modern sofas, banquettes, and upholstered silk chairs in the latest Art Deco style. Wall sconces

sent inverted triangles of light toward the ceiling, and scattered about with deliberation among the furnishings were sculptures by leading artists of the day. We crossed the thick white carpet toward the blond-birch mirrored bar.

"This is some joint!" I said, as Mr. Benchley poured neat whiskies into three crystal tumblers. I looked over the bar's shelves and found a box of pretzels. I fed one to Woodrow Wilson, and offered the box to Aleck.

"Odd," I said, looking around the vast expanse, "for a man with an extensive collection of Impressionist Art, the walls are blank."

"Maybe Myrtle nabbed them in the divorce settlement," said Mr. Benchley.

"Perhaps. . ."

Aleck handed me a drink, and we sipped in silence.

"Heavenly," I cooed, enjoying the smooth, warm ribbon of liquid as it made its way down my throat. The boys hummed agreement.

"Let's find something to eat," said Aleck, looking around for the entrance to a kitchen. There were several doors to choose from, but like a boar rooting out truffles, Aleck opened the door leading to the kitchen and butler's pantry on his first try. Mr. Benchley and I followed, and as if he hadn't eaten less than an hour before, Aleck attacked the icebox. His huge figure blocked our view to its contents, but a moment later he turned

to face us with a gleeful chirp, holding up a turkey drumstick.

"What?" he asked, mouth full, as we looked on with disapproval. "Want a bite?"

"Thank you, no. And don't you dare give that bone to Woodrow Wilson. Please move aside, now."

I peered inside to see a wheel of Stilton alongside the remains of the bird, a couple bottles of Taittinger, but little else, not even a stalk of celery.

I thought Mr. Benchley was at my side, but I heard him call to me from a distance. Returning to the salon, I followed a narrow rectangle of lamplight through the opened door of Reginald Pierce's library.

Here was the marvelous art collection, and I was immediately drawn to the little Renoir.

"So here is my pastel."

"What's this?" said Aleck. "A portrait of our Mrs. Parker?"

"This is the Renoir he bought out from under me. It really does look a little like me!"

"Spitting image," said Mr. Benchley, before losing interest and walking away to peruse other objets d'art.

"Yes, me wearing a bonnet I'd never be caught alive in, wearing too much Coty lipstick and rouge. . . ." I considered it for another moment. "I do love it, though."

Mr. Benchley said, "I see Reginald lived with his 'Mummy.'"

"Whatever are you babbling about?" I asked.

"Come and see this sarcophagus coffin."

"From some play—last season's *Anthony and Cleopatra* no doubt; Jane Cowl was indeed marvelous as the Egyptian Queen," said Aleck through his food.

"Not on your life, Aleck. This is the real deal."

"'Lot of junk in here."

I turned away from the Renoir to join Mr. Benchley. I said to Aleck, "That piece of junk you're looking at is an altar triptych from the 13th century."

"Refill?" asked Aleck, leaving the room to fetch the bottle from the bar.

"Shit, Mr. Benchley," I said as I approached the huge coffin. "It looks like the one at the Metropolitan. Open it up!"

Just then, Woodrow Wilson yelped, and Aleck came bounding back in from the salon, decanter in hand. "Someone's coming up the elevator!"

We searched the room for a hole of escape, like mice who'd stolen the cheese when the cat fell asleep in a dish of cream. The cat was opening one angry green eye, and there was nowhere, no closet, no sofa, big enough to conceal us.

The curtains were drawn closed and extended the entire exterior wall of the room. We killed the lights and dashed behind the drapery, Aleck, decanter in hand. If someone entered, we wouldn't be seen right away—that is, as long as no one looked toward the floor, where they'd see two pairs of size-tens flanking size-five pumps.

The door creaked open and there was the *woosh* of footsteps rushing across the Persian carpet; a pull of the lamp chain and a column of light came through the break in the curtain panels. As I was advantageously placed near that opening, I looked out to see the figure of a man lifting the seat cushion of the desk chair. Light from the desk lamp glinted off an object he retrieved: a key. With it, the man opened the front panel of the desk and began riffling through its contents. Then, the releasing *pop* of a metal spring, after which a panel opened to reveal a secret cubbyhole. The man removed something, which he placed into his pocket before shutting the small compartment. And then, oddly, he stood bolt-upright, frozen, as if listening, fearing he might be caught. Could he have heard us? Had Aleck belched? *We were done for, now,* I feared, for he turned in our direction. I held my breath, pulling back from the break in the curtain, and gripped the arms of the two men flanking me.

But I had seen the man's face: He was young, Asian, and of small and slim stature. Suddenly the

light was dashed, putting all of us in darkness. I heard the scattering of feet, and then, a *thump*, as if he had knocked into furniture in the scurry. After the brief moments of darkness, the pull of the light chain sounded once again.

I peeked out, but instead of the Asian there stood a woman, late twenties, early thirties, and dressed to the teeth in Chanel. The little Chinaman was nowhere to be seen, and I wondered where on earth he could have hidden himself?

The woman appeared to search the room with her eyes, walked over to the bookcases, changed her mind and returned to the desk. But, she didn't stop there; rather, she moved toward us. Adrenalin sobered me quickly. I was sure she had heard my knees knocking, if not Woodrow Wilson's panting.

She hesitated, and then, as if struck by a sudden revelation, spun on her heels and headed toward the refectory table.

Reaching inside a Ming Dynasty vase, she pulled out a fabric-wrapped item; after she removed the cloth, she was left holding the figurine sculpture of a duck—no, it was a falcon; well, it looked like some kind of bird, anyway. A smile crossed her lips, and it was uncanny how much she reminded me of Mary Astor, the actress, but for this girl's blonde hair. Satisfied with her find, she threw the room into darkness and was gone.

I was afraid to move, but Woodrow Wilson

squirmed in my arms, demanding freedom. The boys stood in their places, but the clink of decanter to glass as Aleck refilled his glass rang out. I'd had enough cloak-and-dagger for one evening, and as Woodrow Wilson made his break, so did I.

"You two can come out, now," I said, walking over to the vase to peer into its dark interior. The smell of cigarette smoke and the faint scent of shoe polish lingered about the room and then was gone.

"But it's quite cozy here, and somebody else may chance by," said Mr. Benchley.

"So, we'll say hello and offer him a drink. By the way, either of you see a little Oriental man standing behind the curtain with us?"

Aleck stepped forth and looked around the room. From the blank look on both their faces, I realized neither had been in a position to see all I had witnessed through the break of the curtain panels. I replayed for them the past couple of minutes.

"Strange, though, I can't figure out how the Asian got out of here before the Mary Astor look-a-like came in."

"Did you say 'Mary Astor'?"

"Her blonde double."

"Sounds like you saw Marion Fields, Reggie's girlfriend," said Aleck.

"Oh, I remember her," said Mr. Benchley. "Pretty thing."

I asked, "You've met Marion Fields?"

"No, Mary Astor."

Aleck rolled his eyes, and I grabbed the hand of a slightly inebriated Mr. Benchley, to lead him out of the apartment before more people descended on us.

The wake for Reginald Ignatius Pierce was held at Campbell's Funeral Home on Manhattan's East Side. Hundreds poured in to pay their respects and offer condolences to his widow, Myrtle, and his two sons, Richard and Raymond.

Held on a Sunday evening before the Monday funeral mass and burial, the royalty of Broadway were in attendance, as most theatres were dark this evening. However you felt about Reggie, whether you loved, hated, or were disinterested, it was a stellar event for even the peripheral court members to be seen attending.

All the friends of our luncheon club, which had in recent years been dubbed the "Round Table", came to the viewing. Groucho Marx said that he wanted to see for himself that Reggie was indeed dead, and that the whole thing was not some sort of practical joke. But, the truth was that a Broadway King was dead, and however much at odds many people had been in their dealings with Reggie, he was respected for his many talents. And even more, they came out of great admiration for

his wife, Myrtle, who was, before retiring from the stage, not only a great dramatic actress, but instrumental in organizing the union, Actors Equity Association. Her involvement may have caused tension in their marriage, for she was, after all, married to a producer; it is common knowledge that there isn't a producer out there who was ever willing pay an actor more than coolie wages, if he could get away with it. But, Reggie didn't try to stand in her way. He came around to the idea of fair pay in his later years, once he had built his great fortune from the sweat of underpaid performers. His disputes were with those from whom he demanded impossible deadlines; his fights were with temperamental playwrights, directors, and set and costume designers. And critics!

Outside the funeral home, those hoping to catch a glimpse of the stars lined the canopied entrance ten deep. More people were wearing black than all the widows of Greece. And it was raining, to boot, so the smell of wet wool predominated and mingled with the lavender fragrance that lay heavy over the viewing parlor. There were scores of black umbrellas dripping onto the entry carpet. No one in his right mind could possibly sort out his own umbrella from that sea of black!

Aleck Woollcott, Robert Benchley, and I were joined by George and Bea Kaufman; Edna Ferber (with whom we would have dinner afterward at her apartment) arrived with Irving Berlin. It was

a veritable Broadway *Who's Who* that greeted us: Jane Cowl, George Arliss, Irene Dunne, and Will Rogers; the Barrymore and Drew clans; the Astaires—brother and sister, Fred and Adele; all the Marx Brothers (for their show, *I'll Say She Is,* was dark that evening); and Ed Wynn, W.C. Fields, and Gertie Lawrence were in town, as all had shows running, so they were there, too. There was Beatrice Lillie and Marilyn Miller, and then a commotion as Marie Dressler and Eleanora Duse bounded in off the street dripping wet after their shared umbrella was ripped by a fierce gale. Oh, my, I could go on! But I won't.

We signed the guestbook and made our way through the crowd and into the parlor. There was a queue of people wrapped around the room, like a stalled conga line, to view the body. From where we stood, I could see little beyond the black-suited backs of those on line, and as I am a small cluck, an inch under five feet tall, I had to rely on the observations of my friends for any sense of what was going on around the room.

"George White and Flo Zeigfeld are actually talking to each other," said Mr. Benchley, referring to the biggest producers of musical extravaganzas.

"*Hot dog!* Sam Harris just joined in. Wish I were a flea in David Belasco's ear, because he and Lee Shubert's just joined the poker game. Shall I lift you up on my shoulders to see the spectacle,

Mrs. Parker?"

"Thank you, no; people already think me lofty."

"Then you won't be able to see your favorite critic and sewer-dweller, Ralph Chittenham."

"Oh, 'Shit-in-head' is here?"

"Yes, and he's got some nice little chorus girl cornered. . . in the corner."

"Do you think there are refreshments?" Aleck asked, while waving hello to young Walter Huston.

"What do you think this is? A cocktail party?"

"Feels like we're on line for the buffet."

There are advantages to being of small stature in a tight crowd. As you're rarely eye-level with anyone else it's easy to go unnoticed. And this night, wedged between Aleck and Mr. Benchley, who fell into discussion with the promising young actress, Eva La Gallienne and our Round Table friend, newspaper columnist Frank Pierce Adams, who would undoubtedly mention our names in his column tomorrow as having attended RIP's wake, I could do little but listen to the conversations around me, unable, due to my odd positioning, to easily identify the speakers. But I recognized the distinctive voices of a man and woman in conversation, so I leaned in closer to listen.

"Have you seen Lucille Montaine? She's nowhere to be found. She doesn't answer her

telephone, and I stopped by her apartment, but she wasn't there, and her neighbors haven't seen her in days."

The deep, distinctive British bell tones identified Evelyn Woods, the director of Reginald Pierce's awful new play (which I panned), *Trees in the Forest*, starring the missing actress.

"I haven't seen her here. Do you think she's so upset about RIP kicking off that she's gone off her rocker someplace, grieving?"

I had to laugh, inwardly, at the unfortunate monogram Reginald Ignatius Pierce had had to live with all of his life. I pictured sweaters, towels, bed sheets, and handkerchiefs embroidered with his initials. Undoubtedly, he'd received many such gag gifts for Christmas and birthdays.

"If she's grieving anything, it's her reviews. Did you read Dottie Parker's? If I hadn't been laughing so hard, I would have cried. At least Parker didn't mention my name; one can be thankful for that. Maybe people will take Ralph Chittenham's review to heart. I don't know why that old bastard was so nice. All I can say is, thank God there's Rosemary Willard to understudy for Lucille. She was marvelous last night. She should have had the part from the start, had I had my way."

"I don't get it. Why didn't she get the role in the first place, if she was so good?"

"RIP. He wanted Lucille. Nothing I could do would convince him."

"Maybe Lucille is so distraught she's taken her own life."

"That's not nice of you, Maddie, but from your lips to God's ears!"

"Well, it's one way to save the show. With Lucille in it, it will close as soon as interest in RIP's death lessens."

The woman speaking was costume designer Madison. She spoke with that affected New England twang that so many young actors were wearing these days.

The line was moving forward, and as we neared, I was able to glimpse, through a break in black, members of RIP's family seated opposite the casket.

Two young men, of similar, but rather sullen features and build as the man laying prone in his coffin, sat to the right of Reggie's wife, Myrtle. To her left sat Gerald Saches, Reggie's business manager.

Both Reggie and Gerald were the children of immigrants, and from the same Lower East Side neighborhood. Both were adolescents when their fathers, who had become friendly while working as laborers digging in the tunnels of the New York City subway system, were killed in an explosion and cave-in. As each was the eldest son, each had to go out to work to support his family.

Green-grocer Robert Saches long had eyes for Gerry's mother, and offered the boy a job delivering groceries and stocking and sweeping

out the store. Gerry was a clever boy and saw the grocer's interest in his mother. He was also a loyal friend to Reggie, who had few prospects for finding work, so he refused the offer from the storekeeper unless he hired his friend Reggie as well. A couple of years later, Gerry's mother married the grocer, who adopted her children, before promptly dying of an aneurysm.

Gerry, at sixteen, took over the store. Reggie continued to work there, but he had big ideas for expanding the business. Gerry listened to those ideas, and although he was of a cautious nature, he was easily convinced by his outgoing and charismatic friend to take the leap. And a very successful leap it was.

Thirty years later, their frozen-food company supplied a great share of the city's restaurants, and they had discovered other markets in which to invest their money. The men had little other than their businesses in common, but for two things: Gerry's middle name, Aaron, after his maternal grandfather, also gave him an unfortunate monogram, and both men had, at one time or another, been in love with Myrtle.

It was no secret that Gerald had pursued the young Myrtle Price, after seeing her photograph in an advertisement for Milton's Castile Soap, and for a time, he believed she might agree to become his wife. Myrtle found Gerry a congenial young man, if rather conservative and plain in dress and

demeanor. But, as their friendship grew, she realized that she could never think of Gerry as more than a precious and faithful friend, especially after being introduced to his business partner, Reginald Pierce. It wasn't simply that Reginald was handsome and immaculately turned out. Myrtle was not a shallow woman; she had been wooed by many good-looking fellows dressed to impress. But Reginald excited her imagination with the zest with which he lived his life. She was swept into the gravity of the planet Pierce, and Gerald, gracious and understanding, if quietly broken-hearted, toasted the couple on their wedding day.

Now, as I observed Myrtle and Gerald, I could see what anyone but an idiot could see: Gerald was still in love with the wife of his closest friend.

I felt like a voyeur, watching his tender leanings, the way he took her hand in his own, the expression of pain that hung over his fair features as he spoke to her between interruptions of those offering condolences. There was such gentle intimacy there, and out of decency, I turned away, my eyes taking in the lifeless mask of Reginald Pierce.

The usually high-colored countenance that was Reggie alive was paled by death. The bright, compelling green eyes were shut and sunken under papery lids. The Max Factor pancake makeup looked false and powdery. The big, powerfully

built body was shrunken, having exhausted all earthly energy. I was struck, suddenly reminded of the finality of death; my lofty attitude toward my own mortality frightened me. I shivered. I am loath to admit that bad times have recently sent me to the brink of death, most ashamedly by my own hand!

As I stood contemplating the meaninglessness of human existence, I felt a hand on my shoulder, drawing me back into the crowded room. Expecting Mr. Benchley or Aleck at my side, I was taken aback by a devastatingly handsome face that proceeded to address me. I must have appeared peculiar, because he smiled, divinely, I must say, and cautiously backed away.

"Mrs. Parker."

"Yes."

"My name is Wilfred Harrison."

He reached to shake my hand.

My usual firm handshake melted to a limp lump, giving meaning to the expression, "putty in his hands".

"I am the attorney for the Reginald Pierce family, and the executor of Mr. Pierce's estate."

He must have thought me daffy, as my jaw dropped and my head bobbed inanely, as all reasonable thoughts were purged from my brain, along with the flow of blood, which rushed to other organs of my body. My silence prompted him to continue.

"Mrs. Parker?"

I blinked assent.

I guess that egged him on, for he offered, "As you have been named in Mr. Pierce's will, I am inviting you to attend its reading after the interment tomorrow morning."

Key words crank-started my brain once again.

"Wait, let me understand this," I said, in recovery. "I'm in Reginald's will?"

"Yes, that's right. The burial is at ten o'clock, followed by a reception at the Dakota apartment of Mrs. Pierce. The reading of the will is at three o'clock, at Mr. Pierce's apartment above the Reginald Pierce Theatre."

"*Ahhh*," I gurgled.

"Will you attend?"

"Yes. . . I mean, yes. . . I didn't say no, did I?" I babbled.

He squinted, turned his head a little as if scrutinizing me with his best eye. And then, "Then we'll expect to see you tomorrow."

"I'd be delighted. I mean, thank you for inviting—"

An amused expression confirmed I was making a damned fool of myself. I pulled my groveling self up from his feet, lifted my chin (and jaw) in an effort to regain my dignity, and said, quite competently, "I shall be there, at three o'clock, Mister—?"

"Harrison. Wilfred Harrison."

"Mr. Harrison."

"Call me 'Will', Mrs. Parker."

"Yes. 'Will,' then, Mr. Harrison."

He released my cranking handshake. I sighed a huge breath of relief as he moved away. I hadn't breathed since his approach, I don't think; his animal magnetism was so strong, I felt unstrung and embarrassingly overheated.

Aleck and Mr. Benchley were at my side, and by the way they looked at me, I knew that they had witnessed my shameful behavior.

"I'm jealous, Mrs. Parker," said Mr. Benchley.

"You, my darling Mr. Benchley, are in no danger of losing your place in my heart."

"I'm sure Mrs. Benchley will be happy to know that," said Aleck, with sardonic glee, referring to Gertrude, Mr. Benchley's wife, tucked away with the kiddies in the suburban bliss of Timbuktu, and to the close, but platonic, relationship Mr. Benchley and I enjoyed.

It has been rumored that we are more than just the very best of friends. The truth is that our deep love and respect for one another has never breached the bedroom door. Our mutual affection developed while working together, dining and drinking together, bucking each other up when one felt low, standing tall together in friendship (Mr. Benchley, so loyal a friend, had handed in

his resignation when I was fired from *Vanity Fair*), and in sharing the sharp wit and humor that we have become famous for. We are very much on the same plane, our bantering dialogue almost an extension of each other's, if differing in style. In fact, our celebrity is a result of our having set the style for our generation. I am willingly Mr. Benchley's straight man, and he is often mine. We, along with Aleck and others of our Round Table Club, set a standard, unwittingly (excuse the pun!), but a standard, nonetheless, of all that is clever and fun and exciting in 1920s New York City. I can honestly say that in many respects Mr. Benchley might be dubbed the masculine side of Mrs. Parker. So maybe we *are* having an affair of sorts, an intellectual and emotional one, but certainly with no threat to either of our spouses.

Aleck, on the other hand, is all things clever and bright and perfectly in tune with raising the bar to new heights, but sexually speaking, well, it is speculated that he has no sex life, as far as anyone knows. But, that is a story for another time. For now we had to face the widow and sons of Reginald Pierce.

Gerald rose to his feet to greet us, and I leaned in to speak comforting words to Myrtle, who graciously, and I'm sure, for the thousandth time, gave her thanks for our attending.

The sons, whom I had never seen before, appeared more interested in our celebrity than

in the reason for our presence, and I got the very distinct impression that they'd had a few conflicts with the man in the box. They seemed impatient; not with their mother; with her they appeared protective. I can't tell you why I felt an undercurrent of *something* not quite right, but I did, and I would soon discover the answer.

We left a few minutes later to join Edna at her apartment across town for dinner, after which, it being two in the morning, we three piled into a cab and returned downtown to our respective apartments.

I have recently moved into the Algonquin Hotel, on West 44th Street. Not only are my rooms convenient—I can roll out of bed around noon and simply take the elevator down to the lobby and stroll a couple of yards into the Rose Room for one o'clock luncheon with my friends. Better yet, if I've imbibed a bit too much, I can retreat back to my room on the aforementioned lift. I have room service, which is convenient, occasional dog-walking services, and the management doesn't press too hard for my rent when I am short of cash, which is often. In spite of my various demands, they are thrilled to have me, a celebrity, in their midst.

In truth, the reason for my move from

uptown was not really for the Gonk's convenient location, but because my husband of seven years and I have parted ways. To best alleviate my sadness, I sought new surroundings.

When Eddie had returned from the War in Europe he was a changed man, and because of his war wounds, both emotional and physical, he found great solace in morphine and alcohol. He gave up his position at Paine Webber and returned home to the family manse in Hartford, Connecticut, and to the bosom of his family. We each had, in our own ways, tried to make our marriage work, but the demands of my career and his disinterest in his own future fractured our union. He wanted to leave New York, which he compared, unkindly, to Gomorrah, and I knew, deep in my heart, it was really for the best that we part ways. No rancor; we parted friends, and there is no reason to divorce as neither one of us has plans to wed anyone else. I needed to make a new start, and the rooms at the Algonquin suit me very well. Nothing fancy; I have never coveted possessions. All I've ever needed were three or four well-cut suits, my typewriter, Woodrow Wilson, and "a place to lay my hat and a few friends."

When I arrived home at 2:15 A.M., I stopped at the front desk to ask for an eight o'clock wake-up call, and then took Woodrow Wilson out for a quick pee. I was settled under the covers and just falling off to sleep when I was shaken from

imminent slumber by the oddest thought, one so unexpected that I bolted upright and turned on the light. I had come to the realization that Reginald Pierce did not die from choking on a cherry tomato. He was murdered!

The King and Queen of Broadway—*the Lunts*

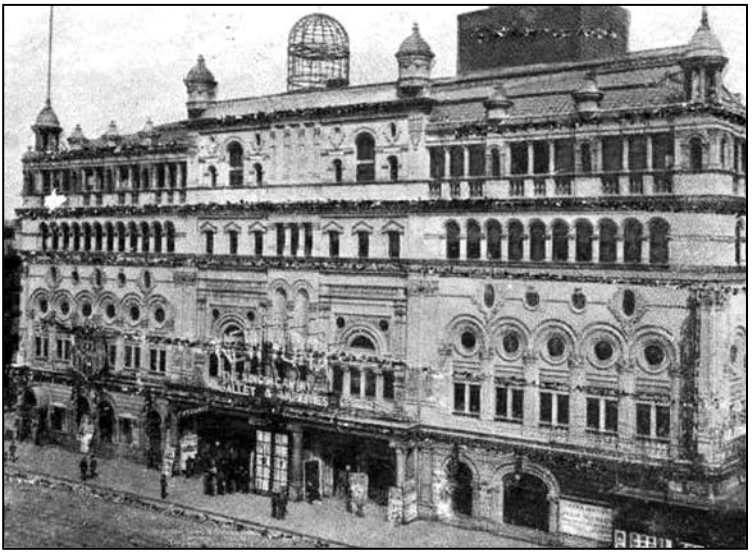
Times Tower overlooking the Square

The Algonquin— *Where I live and lunch.*

Worth Gowns— *Tallulah and I admired the one on the right in Bergdorf's window.*

Two Girls and a Man— *A couple of swells between acts.*

Ziegfeld Follies— *Billie Burke, Flo Ziegfeld's wife, didn't like the review I wrote of her performance. She got me fired from* Vanity Fair.



The Reginald Pierce Theatre— *You can see Reggie's pied-à-terre, the bank of windows on the left behind whose curtains Mr. Benchley and I spent several hours.*

Mary Astor— *Marion is the spitting image of Mary Astor, but blonde.*

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 *The Broadway Murders*

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*

Oh, boy! I just read *The Broadway Murders*! 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.

Dorothy Parker Mysteries

When producer Reginald Ignatius Pierce, (Reggie to his friends, RIP to his enemies) is found dead in his luxurious apartment above the Broadway Theater bearing his name, it is believed he choked on a cherry tomato. That he was not murdered is a surprise for Parker, Benchley, Woollcott and the regulars of Round Table, upon receiving the news while lunching at the Algonquin Hotel. But for the fact that RIP was allergic to tomatoes, his death might have been deemed accidental. There are a number of suspects, from the estranged wife, his business partner, mistress, dozens of actors, even Woollcott is not beyond suspicion.

Told from Dorothy Parker's point of view, the murderer is tracked with the help of Robert Benchley and Aleck Woollcott, delving into the pasts of the victims, eavesdropping behind the drapery, chasing clues around town and generally sleuthing about. With the help of the Round Table's newspaper men Frank Pierce Adams (FPA), Heywood Broun and Harold Ross among them, and the antics of The Marx Brothers, the reader follows the clues to the surprising conclusion.

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