

Twentieth-Century
Literary Criticism

TCLC

242

TOPICS VOLUME

Volume 242

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Commentary on Various Topics
in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary
and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and
Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys
of National Literatures**

Lawrence J. Trudeau

Project Editor



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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)* has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” *TCLC* “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*.

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the author's actual name is given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the name of its author.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it originally appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the numbers of the *TCLC* volumes in which their entries appear.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Kuester, Martin. "Myth and Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)." In *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*, edited by Reginald M. Nischik, pp. 163-74. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 206, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 227-32. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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The Algonquin Round Table

The following entry presents critical discussion of the Algonquin Round Table, a group of writers and journalists active mainly in the 1920s.

INTRODUCTION

Commentators use the designation Algonquin Round Table to refer to a group of writers, journalists, and critics who met regularly at the Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan, in New York City, during the 1920s. Interconnected professionally and personally, members of the group were notorious for their wit, satire, pranks, and well-publicized escapades. Founding members included Alexander Woollcott, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Robert Sherwood, Marc Connelly, George S. Kaufman, Franklin P. Adams, Heywood Broun, and Harold Ross, but over the years the group was joined, either for a time or permanently, by such writers as Edna Ferber, Ring Lardner, Bill Murray, and Art Samuels, as well as by such figures from the world of theater and show business as John Peter Toohey, David Wallace, Herman J. Mankiewicz, Margalo Gilmore, and Harpo Marx.

Rob Morris has pointed out that the Algonquin Round Table “refers to a place, a group, a sensibility, and an era.” Beginning with a party at the Algonquin Hotel in 1919, ostensibly to commemorate the World War I service of Adams, Woollcott, and Ross, the group decided to meet regularly for lunch at the Algonquin. Most of them worked nearby and, as young professionals, gravitated toward the mutual support and camaraderie the other members of the group provided. Urbane and sophisticated, the Algonquin Round Table members attracted publicity, attention in newspapers, and hangers-on. Though the members of the group congregated first at the Algonquin Hotel, later they also met in clubs, lavish apartments, and at the summer homes of wealthy friends—for example, at the Great Neck, Long Island, summer home of Herbert Bayard Swope—to engage in card playing (as the Thanatopsis Poker and Inside Straight Club), croquet, and word games. Over the course of the decade many of them became successful and prominent in their individual careers and began to drift away from the group; with the onset of the Great Depression, the Algonquin Round Table gradually disbanded in the early 1930s.

The group became more famous, powerful and diverse as individual members became well known and influential. As Robert E. Drennan has noted, “Their common

bond and peculiar genius was, of course, wit, although their excellence in conversation, repartee, and bon mots may have caused them to undervalue their contribution to the community of letters.” Wit and satire were the main hallmarks of Algonquin Round Table style, evident in Woollcott’s drama reviews in the *New York Times*, Benchley’s pieces in *Vanity Fair*, and Murray’s music articles in the *Brooklyn Eagle*. As drama editor of the *New York Times*, Kaufman maintained a sharp, ironic journalistic tone, echoed in Heywood Broun’s play reviews for *The New York World*, Adams’s popular “The Conning Tower” column for the *New York Tribune*, and Ross’s satirical style as founder and general editor of the *New Yorker* magazine.

Kaufman became perhaps the most admired of the Algonquin Round Table members. In a highly successful playwriting collaboration with Marc Connelly, he wrote and produced *Merton of the Movies* (1922) and *To the Ladies* (1922), among other plays; with Edna Ferber he co-wrote *Minick* (1924), *Stage Door* (1926), and *The Royal Family* (1927); and with the Marx Brothers he wrote screenplays for *The Cocoanuts* (1925) and *Animal Crackers* (1928).

Sherwood’s *The Road to Rome* (1927) was a popular play, Lardner’s comic sketches and short stories enjoyed a wide following, and Woollcott’s caustic, gossipy reminiscences about theater life in his *Enchanted Aisles* (1924) and *Going to Pieces* (1928) entertained his many readers. Parker’s pieces on drama for *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, and *The New Yorker* shone with satire and a sense of playfulness, and her poetry mixed a withering, emancipated tone with self-deprecation. Her collection of poetry, *Enough Rope*, (1926) was a best-seller.

Critics have remained interested in the Algonquin Round Table as a literary and social phenomenon and still admire their unique, playful point of view. For instance, Margaret Chase Harriman has written that the members “were no different from any group of plumbers, advertising writers, bankers, or farmers, except for one thing: their minds were born to think of things in an unusual way.” But there has been a critical recognition, too, that the group could not but come to a natural end with changing times and the pull of individual pursuits. James R. Gaines has traced the social and economic milieu of their heyday and the gradual weakening of their cohesiveness as a group. Parker, as the sole woman in the original Algonquin group, has continued

to attract the attention of feminist critics. Nina Miller has explored how Parker adapted to changing gender roles during the 1920s by leveraging the prevailing "culture of publicity" surrounding the group and by forging an intimate, tell-all, relationship with her readers.

In the end, assessment of the Algonquin Round Table remains somewhat mixed. While Gaines has praised the light, volatile, comic quality that characterizes the best of their satirical works, Morris has pointed out that their writings could be parochial, narrow-minded, and depressing. Furthermore, according to Morris, they never really found anything worthwhile to write about: at a time of great political, social, economic, and artistic upheaval, "again and again, when they searched for something to write about, Algonquins simply looked across the lunch table."

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

- Franklin P. Adams
The Melancholy Lute (prose) 1936
- Robert Benchley
The Benchley Roundup (prose) 1983
- Marc Connelly
Merton of the Movies [with George S. Kaufman] (play) 1922
To the Ladies [with George S. Kaufman] (play) 1922
The Green Pastures (play) 1930
- Edna Ferber
Minick [with George S. Kaufman] (play) 1924
So Big (novel) 1924
Stage Door [with George S. Kaufman] (play) 1926
- George S. Kaufman
The Cocoanuts [with the Marx Brothers] (screenplay) 1925
The Royal Family [with Edna Ferber] (play) 1927
Animal Crackers [with the Marx Brothers] (screenplay) 1928
- Ring Lardner
You Know Me, Al (novel) 1916
"Haircut" (short story) 1925
- Dorothy Parker
Enough Rope (poetry) 1926
The Portable Dorothy Parker (poetry and prose) 1944; revised edition 1976

- Robert Sherwood
The Love Nest (play) 1927
The Road to Rome (play) 1927

- Alexander Woollcott
Mr. Dickens Goes to the Play (biography and criticism) 1927
Enchanted Aisles (essays) 1924
The Story of Irving Berlin (biography) 1925
Going to Pieces (prose) 1928

OVERVIEWS

Margaret Case Harriman (essay date 1951)

SOURCE: Harriman, Margaret Case. "How Did It All Begin?" and "How to Be A Wit." In *The Vicious Circle: The Story of The Algonquin Round Table*, pp. 3-20; 219-32. New York: Rinehart & Co., 1951.

[In the first essay below, Harriman presents a number of vignettes and anecdotes that demonstrate the wit of the members of the Algonquin Round Table and their companions. In the second essay she introduces the main members of the Algonquin Round Table and their fields of endeavor, also noting their personal and professional interconnections.]

One day in 1919, just after World War I, two rotund young men entered the Algonquin Hotel on West 44th Street in quest of angel cake. The tall, serene gentleman was a theatrical press agent named John Peter Toohey; the short, explosive one was Alexander Woollcott, then drama critic of *The New York Times*. Toohey had earlier discovered the wares of Sarah Victor, the Algonquin's pastry cook, and knowing his friend Woollcott's sweet tooth, had brought him there for lunch.

The cosy combination of a critic lunching with a press agent was to become a familiar one around the Algonquin, and was to lead to some lively accusations of "logrolling" from certain jaundiced observers; but all that came later. On this particular day, it is safe to say that Woollcott and Toohey had nothing on their minds more sinister than angel cake.

Seated at a table for two, Woollcott focused his revolving stare upon the room. He was then thirty-two years old and already a striking combination of hero-worshiper and Madame Defarge. On this, his first visit to the Algonquin, his roving appraisal found food for speculation as rich as Sarah's cake. As on most days at the luncheon hour, there was Ethel Barrymore sitting at

a corner table, perhaps with her brother Jack or her uncle, John Drew. At other tables were Laurette Taylor, Jane Cowl, Elsie Janis, Rex Beach, Commander Evangeline Booth of the Salvation Army, Irvin S. Cobb, Ann Pennington, Constance Collier . . . all the stimulating array of people that had already made the hotel famous. Woolcott's starry-eyed gaze sharpened into the knitting needles of Madame Defarge only when it encountered the two columnists in the room, O. O. McIntyre and S. Jay Kaufman. McIntyre was gently dismissed as a kindly old corn-fed writing slob by Woolcott's generation of newspapermen, but they really hated S. Jay Kaufman, a more debonair type who ran a column in the *Telegram* called "Around the Town." No one now knows the exact reason for this dislike. Some say that the boys considered Kaufman's city slicker airs a little too grand and glossy, a touch pretentious; others trace the distaste to the fact that S. Jay once referred to their pal, Marc Connelly, in his column as "poor Marc" after a play of his had failed, and they found this sympathy patronizing. At any rate, their disinclination for Mr. Kaufman is notable because it was a feature of the first gag to be pulled off by the Algonquin Round Table as a group, at what might be called its first luncheon.

It is hard to say just when the first luncheon of the Round Table took place, or just which *was* its first luncheon. Like any other group which meets mainly for companionship, with no formal organization, no by-laws, and no dues, it came into being gradually. Many of its members—Bob Benchley, Brock and Murdock Pemberton, Toohey, Heywood Broun—had lunched at the Algonquin singly or together for some years before there was a Round Table. Franklin P. Adams, one of its oldest patrons, had originally gone there to call on his friend Samuel Merwin, the novelist. Adams, Woolcott, and Harold Ross had known one another during the war in France where they were all attached to the A.E.F. and to the staff of the *Stars and Stripes*; as F. P. A., a former captain, wrote in his *Diary of Our Own Samuel Pepys* in 1926, "To my office, and remember that nine years ago this day we had declared war against Germany, and if it had not been for that, methought, Private Harold Ross never would have carried my gripsacks through the streets of Paris, and called me 'Sir.'"

None of these men ever said to any other, "Hey! Let us start a regular lunch-group at the Algonquin and call it the Round Table." Nobody ever said anything like that. The whole thing just bloomed as slowly and pleasantly as any June moon, so it's difficult to pin down its moment of inception. Perhaps it was Toohey's introduction of Aleck Woolcott to the angel cake. But more probably it was the occasion of Toohey's next lunch with Woolcott a few weeks later, in company with Heywood Broun, the Pembertons, Laurence Stallings (who was yet to write *What Price Glory?*), Deems Taylor, Art Samuels (then editor of *Harper's Bazaar*), Adams, and

Bill Murray, a music critic on the Brooklyn *Eagle* who was later to become an ex-husband of Ilka Chase and one of the heads of the William Morris Agency.

This luncheon was a Welcome Home to Woolcott from the Wars, tendered by the above long-suffering friends who had been listening to him tell about his experiences ever since his return from France some months earlier. "From my seat in the theatre of War . . ." he would begin, taking a long breath, and this had once goaded Bill Murray into muttering "Seat 13, Row Q, no doubt?" Fresh from a Woolcott recital at lunch one day, Murdock Pemberton and Murray repaired to the Hippodrome across the street where Murdock, the Hippodrome's press agent, had his office. There, they set a covey of stenographers to typing out announcements of a great rally at the Algonquin in honor of Woolcott the Warrior, and hopefully designed to shut him up for a while. Knowing Woolcott's extreme touchiness about the correct spelling of his name (three o's, two l's, two t's, *if you please*), they laboriously spelled it wrong in all possible ways throughout the announcement—Wolcot, Woolcot, Wolcott, and Woolcoot. Having mailed this document to all their friends, and Woolcott's, they got the Hippodrome's wardrobe department to make a huge red felt flag, lettered in gold as follows:

AWOL
cot

and, conscious of his aversion to S. Jay Kaufman, the man-about-town columnist, they thoughtfully added:

S. JAY KAUFMAN POST NO. 1

This banner, on the appointed day, they hung over the luncheon table in the Algonquin. It was a table in the dining room now called the Oak Room and then known as the Pergola, and economically decorated with murals of the Bay of Naples along one wall and mirrors along the other, so that you saw the Bay of Naples twice for the cost of one mural. All the invited guests turned up, and the luncheon was such a success—although it never achieved its aim of stifling Woolcott—that somebody said, "Why don't we do this every day?" According to most people's recollection, it was Toohey who said it. As far as anyone knows, the Round Table was born then and there.

At first, the group had no name, and it didn't meet at a round table. After some months at a long table in the Pergola, it moved to another long table in the Rose Room, up front near the door. As more people kept coming they overflowed into the aisles and upon adjoining tables, so my father, Frank Case (who operated but did not yet own the hotel in those days), had Georges, the headwaiter, move them for greater comfort to a large round table in the center of the room, toward

the rear. This was the table they made famous. Father, who liked them individually and loved faithfulness in anyone, gave them one or two extra little attentions—free olives and celery and popovers, and their own pet waiter named Luigi. The nearest the group had come to a name was when certain members referred to it lightly as The Board, and to the luncheons as Board Meetings. With the regular appearance of Luigi it was no time at all, of course, before they took to calling the table the Luigi Board.

Their own favorite name for themselves soon became The Vicious Circle, but as the members grew in prominence and achievement, and began entertaining even more famous people at lunch, other guests in the Rose Room fell to pointing them out to their own guests; "There's Mrs. Fiske over there, between Woollcott and Benchley at that round table"—or "That's Arnold Bennett sitting over there next to Heywood Broun, at the round table." Columnists and out-of-towners would drop in to ask Georges, "Who's at the round table today?" About 1920, a cartoonist named Duffy on the *Brooklyn Eagle* published what was probably the first caricature of the group, seated at a luncheon table which he called the Algonquin Round Table. Soon newspaper columns began featuring quips and other items that originated at the Algonquin Round Table. Although other tables in the Rose Room still had their own smaller groups of celebrities, these altered from day to day, and the unchanging circle in the center of the room became its focal point.

The Round Table became a focal point, too, to the people who lunched at it. They were hard-working young people who led busy and scattered lives, but they were a group close-knit by common tastes, common standards, and the same kind of humor, and they enjoyed one another's company better than anybody else's in the world. At the Round Table they were sure to find it, at least once a day, and they gravitated to it like skiers to a fireside.

The charter members of the Round Table were Franklin P. Adams, Deems Taylor, George S. Kaufman, Marc Connelly, Robert Benchley, Harold Ross, Heywood Broun, Art Samuels, Alexander Woollcott, John Peter Toohey, the Pembertons, Bill Murray, Robert E. Sherwood, John V. A. Weaver, Laurence Stallings, and a couple of theatrical press agents named David Wallace and Herman J. Mankiewicz; and, on the distaff side, Dorothy Parker, Jane Grant, Ruth Hale, Beatrice Kaufman, Peggy Wood, Peggy Leech, Margalo Gillmore, Edna Ferber, and Neysa McMein. F. P. A. was generally considered the dean of the group since he was, in 1920, one of its few solvent members, with a steady job and a large reading public. His column, "The Conning Tower," ran in the *New York Tribune*, and a good part of his fellow lunchers' waking thoughts were devoted to try-

ing to write something good enough to "land" in it. Once a year Adams gave a dinner and a gold watch to the contributor who had landed the greatest number of verses or bits of prose in the column during the year, and one year, the proud winner of this award was Deems Taylor, then music critic of the *World*, who contributed under the name of "Smeed." When somebody once asked Adams why he gave a prize for the *most* contributions, and not for the best single one, he threw back his head and closed his eyes in his familiar gesture of thought, and intoned, "There is no such thing as the 'best' contribution. The fact that any contribution is accepted by me means that it is peerless."

Another constant, and fairly peerless, contributor to "The Conning Tower" in the days when the Round Table started was "G. S. K.," or George S. Kaufman. Kaufman was drama editor of *The New York Times*—a job he held on to long after his plays were successful—but in 1920, he was known as a playwright only as co-author, with two men named Evans and Percival, of a majestic failure called *Someone in the House*. The only thing that anyone now remembers about *Someone in the House* (aside from the inevitable cracks about there being no one in the house where it was playing) is that Kaufman, during the influenza epidemic in New York when the health authorities urged people to stay away from crowds, commanded the show's press agent to send out an urgent behest to all New Yorkers to hurry to the theatre where *Someone in the House* was on view. "Only place in town you can be absolutely safe from a crowd," he pointed out.

Marc Connelly, with whom Kaufman was to write *Dulcy*, *Merton of the Movies*, and many other hits, was a newspaper reporter from Pittsburgh who also had written a play. It was *The Amber Empress*, and if anybody asks Marc about it now he just says, "Oh, God. But, you know—I kind of *liked* that show."

None of the charter members of the Round Table was much more of a celebrity than Kaufman and Connelly, in fact, in 1920 when Duffy published his cartoon. Broun was a sportswriter on the *New York Tribune*. Laurence Stallings, a reporter from the *Atlanta Journal*, who had lost a leg in the war, was a long way from writing *What Price Glory?*, or even from his collaborator, Maxwell Anderson, who was then an editorial writer for the *New York World*. Harold Ross was editor of the *American Legion Weekly*, and mainly known for his crew cut which, measured one day by a friend in a statistical mood, proved to be an inch and a half high. Johnny Weaver had not yet written *In American*, the poems that were to make him famous, and Brock Pemberton was an assistant producer to Arthur Hopkins.

The girls at the Round Table were doing a little better than the men, in 1920. Edna Ferber had already written *Dawn O'Hara* and the Emma McChesney stories, Peggy

Wood was making a hit in musical comedies like *Marjoline* and *Sweethearts*. Jane Grant, a *Times* reporter who later married Harold Ross, and Ruth Hale, a Selwyn press agent who married Heywood Broun, had made good in jobs that were not usually open to women in 1920; and they had, besides, made so much noise about Votes for Women that they were instrumental in getting the Woman Suffrage Act passed in 1920. In contrast to these militant gals, there was Neysa McMein, the ultrafeminine, the siren, who painted magazine covers and illustrations and had begun to be successful, in a softer way, in 1920. There were Peggy ("Peaches-and-Cream") Leech, who wanted to be a writer, Margalo ("The Baby of the Round Table") Gillmore, who wanted to be an actress, and Beatrice Kaufman, who just wanted to lunch with her husband, George. In order to be eligible to the Round Table as a professional worker, Bea took a job as reader for Horace Liveright, the publisher, a man so generally disliked that the Round Table hated him even ahead of S. Jay Kaufman. For some time Horace Liveright, a daily luncher at the Algonquin, had to watch his employee, Mrs. Kaufman, slip into her accustomed seat at the Round Table—which he was never asked to join. One day he spoke to Mrs. Kaufman about it in his office.

"Look here," he said, "those kids at what you call the Round Table are starving to death. I could *publish* them."

Bea looked at him. "Do you think so?" she said.

The three glossiest members of the group were Bob Benchley, Bob Sherwood, and Dorothy Parker; not because they were any more prosperous than the others, but because they all worked on *Vanity Fair*, as managing editor, drama editor, and drama critic respectively. There was a great prestige in working for *Vanity Fair* in those days, if not much money. What presently happened to these three proved that the Round Table friends, although they could—and later did—bicker and even quarrel violently among themselves, had an unswerving loyalty to one another in time of trouble.

In 1920, Dorothy Parker reviewed in *Vanity Fair* a Maugham play called *Caesar's Wife*, starring Billie Burke. "Miss Burke," wrote Mrs. Parker, "is at her best in her more serious moments; in her desire to convey the girlishness of the character, she plays her lighter scenes rather as if she were giving an impersonation of Eva Tanguay." When this tribute appeared on the newsstands, Florenz Ziegfeld threatened to tear the offices of *Vanity Fair* apart, and what was more drastic, to remove his advertising from all Condé Nast publications unless Mrs. Parker were fired. Mrs. Parker was fired. Without a moment's hesitation her friends Benchley and Sherwood quit too, in sympathy and protest, and all three repaired to lunch at the Round Table, where they

calmly announced their unemployment. Everyone at the table applauded the Benchley-Sherwood gesture but took it, as they themselves did, as a matter of course; injustice had been done and a pal roughly treated—what else could anyone do but string along with her?

Such loyalty meant a real sacrifice to Benchley and Sherwood at that time. They had no money to speak of, and no other jobs, and neither had yet had much success in selling his own stuff. Sherwood, before long, got a job as an associate editor on the old *Life*, but Benchley and Mrs. Parker, disdaining the career of wage slaves, rented an "office" in the loft building over the Metropolitan Opera House and set up joint shop as free-lance writers. Little work got done in this atelier, mainly because of their habit of subscribing to undertakers' trade journals and other hilarious publications, and whiling away the mornings reading them until it was time to go up to the Algonquin for lunch. They nearly always found the money for a taxi, especially for open cabs in fine weather, and on at least one Spring day the journey was enlivened by Dottie's leaping to her feet and shrieking wildly to passers-by, "Help! Help! This man is abducting me!" while Benchley whipped off his scarf and proceeded to gag her with it.

After some months of free lancing Benchley gave in to financial pressure and took a job as drama editor on *Life*, but Mrs. Parker announced that she would stay on alone in the office over the "Met" and get some real work done. She was a gregarious soul, however, and the loneliness began to get her. When nobody had dropped in to see her for a week, she finally hit upon a way to acquire the visitors she craved; she tacked a large cardboard sign on her office door that read simply: MEN.

Dottie Parker was then—and is still—a little dark-haired woman with bangs and an almost overpowering air of dulcet femininity. She was married to Edwin Parker, a young insurance man generally liked but seldom seen. She wore bows on her shoes, spoke in muted tones, and had a way of resting a hand confidently on yours when she talked to you. From this honeyed exterior, like the bee sting from the rose petal, regularly issued, of course, a gunfire of devastating cracks. One day, another lady writer, pausing at the Round Table (although not invited to sit down), was congratulating herself at some length on the success of her marriage and the virtues of her husband, whom the Round Table privately considered a rather dull fellow.

"I've kept him these seven years!" crowed this happy matron complacently.

"Don't worry," cooed Dottie, "if you keep him long enough he'll come back in style."

Toward the end of lunch that same day she said, "Excuse me, everybody, I have to go to the bathroom." Halfway out of her chair, she added, "I really have to telephone, but I'm too embarrassed to say so."

A wave of easy laughter followed her as she left. The Round Table wasn't trying to impress anybody, and they had no thought of treasuring any member's remark for the anthologies. They met purely for enjoyment, and their humor was the product of minds geared to high activity by hard work and ready to relax for an hour in the company of friends. They were no different from any group of plumbers, advertising writers, bankers, or farmers, except for one thing: their minds were born to think of things in an unusual way.

All of their humor was casual in the early days, and much of it was merely pensive . . . almost like a man talking to himself. Once, F. P. A. took Harold Ross tobogganing on a country weekend, and on Monday, at lunch at the Round Table, somebody asked him how Ross had looked, tobogganing. Adams looked across the table, at Ross's clown face and rigid crew cut.

"Well," he said, thoughtfully, "you know how he looks *not* tobogganing."

Talk at the Round Table was mostly like that in 1920—easy, unrehearsed, and full of unexpected pleasures. It took Herman J. Mankiewicz, the press agent (now a gold-plated Hollywood producer), to put his finger on the bitter fact that none of this fun was bringing in any money. Mank watched his friends leaving the Algonquin one day after lunch: Benchley, Sherwood, Parker, Ross, Kaufman, Connelly, Broun, Stallings, and so on. Mank shook his head sadly.

"There," he said to Murdock Pemberton, "goes the greatest collection of unsalable wit in America."

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Most of the Round Table group worked in offices (or living quarters) near the Algonquin, and one o'clock every day would find them converging briskly on foot toward the common watering hole. Those who came from the north often took a short cut through the Seymour Hotel, a few doors east of the Algonquin, which had a long corridor leading directly from 45th Street to 44th. The Round Tablers found this very convenient, especially in bad weather, and they would scurry through the corridor, muddying up the carpet, and naturally never pausing to give the Seymour any trade—not even so much as buying a paper at the Seymour newsstand. One snowy day Marc Connelly limped indignantly into the Algonquin and, meeting Father, said with some heat: "Wouldn't you think those Seymour people would have the decency to clean their sidewalk: I just slipped on a piece of ice outside their door and damn near broke my ankle!"

"My, my," Father murmured sympathetically. "If I were you, Marc, I'd march right back in there and tell 'em you'll never walk through their old hotel again!"

Marc visibly enjoyed this—when he laughs, his shoulders come up around his ears and he shakes all over—and after lunch, he rewarded Father with a laugh of his own. He came out of the dining room brushing violently at some lint a new napkin had left on his dark blue trousers.

"You know what?" he said. "I'm going to have a suit made of lint and see if I can pick me up a blue serge."

Possibly Marc had already sprung this line at the table a moment before, but the Vicious Circle were always refreshingly candid about repeating a good crack. They never said, as bores do, "Did I tell you what I said to so-and-so last Friday?"; their quips were too fast and frequent to be resurrected and rehashed. But when one of them did say something good, and a little later ran into a friend who hadn't heard it, no false modesty restrained him from generously sharing it again.

Because they were all so full of drolleries and retorts, and wished none to be lost in the general conversation, they developed a miraculous sense of timing. A Round Tabler might treasure for half an hour a remark he had thought up, chatting amiably meanwhile, and then, in the space of an indrawn breath, expel it into precisely the right moment of silence.

Round Tablers had a sense of rhythm, a sense of the dramatic . . . and, besides, they were all born hams, in the most lovable sense of that word.

Oddly enough, the writers were better at this trick than the theatre people, whose profession demanded split-second timing. Even so expert an actress as Peggy Wood at least once muffed a line at the Round Table.

"Well, back to the mimes," she said one day, rising to return to rehearsal. Peggy has since freely admitted that she thought of this japery the night before, and could hardly *wait* to get to the Round Table to utter it casually.

Nobody heard her except George Kaufman, sitting next to her, and he merely threw her a brief approving glance over the top of his glasses. It would have been against the rules for George to say, "Hey, did you hear what Peggy just said?" or for Peggy to repeat it. The Round Table knew the code of true comedy and the danger of anticlimax. With them, a joke had one chance, and one only. Operating by this creed (with which every right-minded writer, storyteller, or comedian must agree) it is hardly any wonder that they were often accused of sitting around the table waiting for a lull like vultures hovering and waiting for a man to die.

Rugged as they were with one another, they were even more severe toward any outsider who even inadvertently repeated a Round Table crack without giving credit to its originator. Grim-lipped, they would track the offender down and make him eat his words. One time, they were discussing a charity affair to be given for the benefit of the A.S.P.C.A. A guest at the Round Table that day was Kate Sproehnle, a young writer from Chicago who was distantly related to Franklin P. Adams.

"You know what?" somebody said. "The tickets to this damn show are going to cost fifteen dollars apiece!"

"Goodness," Kate exclaimed innocently, "it would be cheaper to buy a horse and just be kind to it."

Kate's line got around, and soon reached Neysa McMein, who told it to Douglas Fairbanks. A few nights later Fairbanks, called on suddenly for a speech somewhere, repeated the line without mentioning Miss Sproehnle—whose name he had genuinely forgotten, or, perhaps, never heard. The next morning F. P. A.'s "Conning Tower" took him to task, none too gently, for his oversight. If Adams thought Douglas would feel rebuked by his paragraph, he simply didn't know Fairbanks.

Douglas Fairbanks was a man who never read *anything*. Even his method of deciding on scripts was to glance over them rapidly and then hand them to someone more fond of reading than he. Sometimes it would be his wife, Mary Pickford (always a great and studious reader of practically everything), sometimes it was his director, sometimes his trainer, often his butler, and most often his stooges . . . people like Bull Montana and Benny Zeidman. Douglas would do *anything* to get out of reading the printed word. It was not lack of intelligence or intellectual curiosity that prevented him—simply the fact that he couldn't bear to sit still long enough. Father once said to me, in a bewildered kind of way, "I don't know how I can be so fond of a man who has never read a book."

Douglas seldom read even a newspaper, so he naturally missed F. P. A.'s reference to him in "The Conning Tower." The next day he breezed into the Algonquin in his usual bonhomous way, greeting friends left and right, and pausing for a cheerful word at the Round Table. He was met by cool stares, and the crisp demand to know what the hell he meant by using Kate Sproehnle's line without giving her credit.

"Well, I just couldn't remember her name on the spur of the moment," Douglas explained. "Anyway, I didn't know she was a special pal of you people."

"Special pal or no special pal," F. P. A. intoned, "plagiarism is plagiarism, whether her name is Kate Sproehnle or Lizzie Borden."

"Oh," said Douglas earnestly, "if her name had been Lizzie Borden I would have known *Aleck* said it!"

Woolcott's interest in famous crimes (especially Lizzie Borden's) was well-known enough to give this remark a cockeyed point, and it restored Fairbanks to favor. But Douglas, who thrived only on unbroken popularity with everyone, worried about the incident. When he talked to Father about it later he brought forth another artless quip which the Round Table never heard.

"Gee, Frank," he said, "it's a good thing I'm not a really *big* guy. I mean, like the President, or something."

"Why?" Father asked.

"Well, because . . . Gee, I don't know how to explain it. But those fellows at the Round Table certainly can make molehills out of mountains!"

The fact that everybody at the Round Table was fiercely concerned with the credit given his colleagues for a crack or a pungent comment may be one reason why so many thousands of witticisms have been attributed to Dorothy Parker—more, possibly, than any one person could utter in a lifetime. Another reason is, obviously, that she did say a great many of them. Her one-line review of a play of Channing Pollock's called *The House Beautiful* has become a classic: "*The House Beautiful*," Mrs. P. wrote, "is the play lousy." So has her remark when someone wondered aloud how a certain mutual female acquaintance had managed to break her leg while on a holiday in London. "Probably sliding down a bar-rister," Dottie opined.

One of her long succession of dogs was a mild-manneder dachshund named Robinson, and one day Robinson unaccountably got into a fight with another dog and came off pretty well lacerated.

"Well, your dog started it!" the other dog's owner accused Mrs. Parker.

"Oh, certainly," Mrs. Parker retorted. "I have no doubt that he was also carrying a revolver."

When Woolcott and Benchley called on Dottie during one of her occasional hospital sojourns, she welcomed them cordially and then reached up and rang the bell beside her pillow. Did she want something? Could they fetch her anything? the two gentlemen inquired solicitously.

"No," said Mrs. Parker. "That bell is supposed to summon the night nurse, so I ring it whenever I want an hour of uninterrupted privacy."

When she was solvent—and frequently when she was not—Mrs. Parker was a great one for giving parties, and to one of these, at the Algonquin one night, came