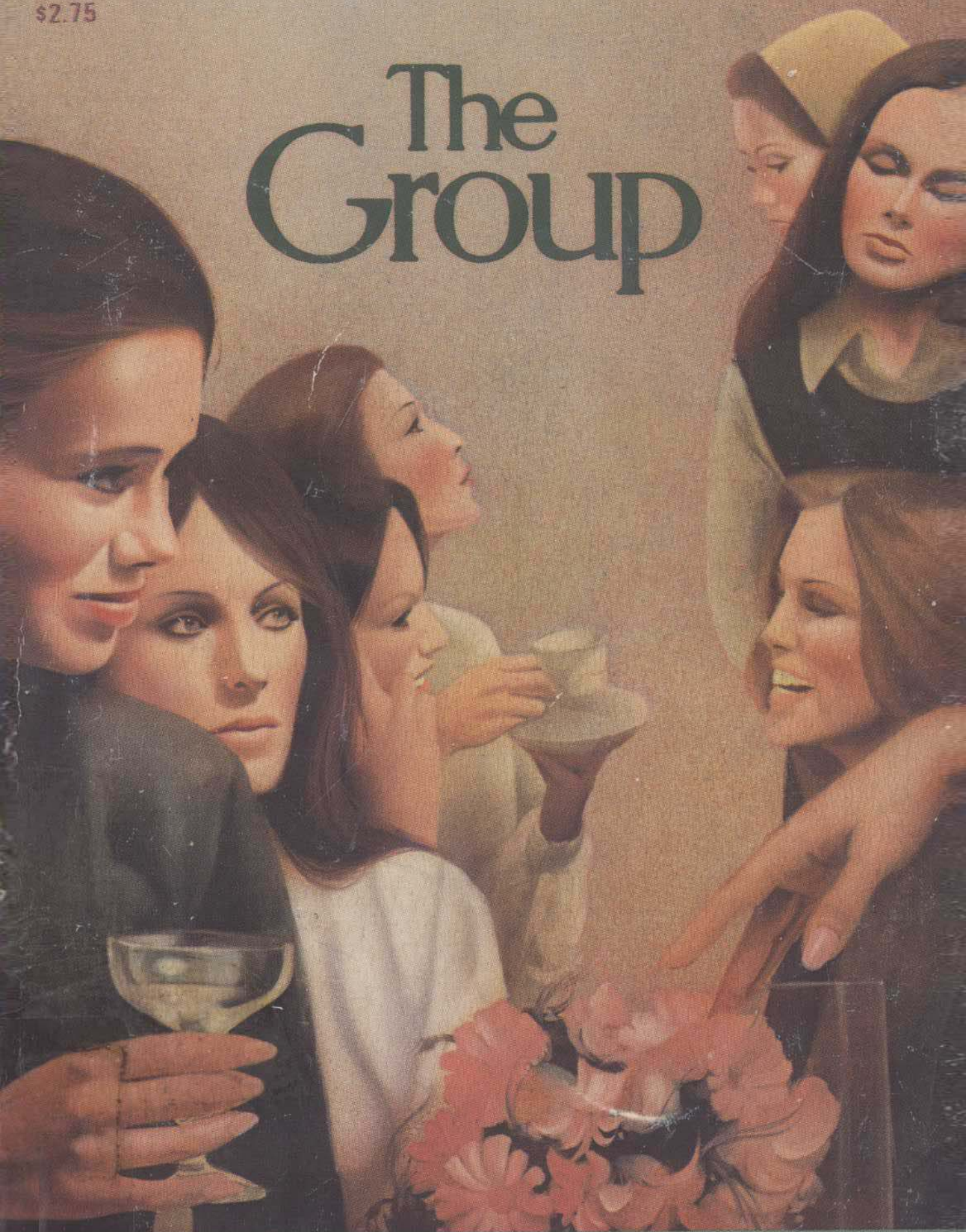


MARY MCCARTHY



AVON
52134
\$2.75

The Group



By the author of CANNIBALS AND MISSIONARIES
THE BESTSELLER THAT SHOCKED A GENERATION

"A witty moving, instructive and wise novel...
very good fiction...a gem." NATION

**“A DELIGHTFULLY POLISHED
WRITER WITH A MIND
THAT IS RAZOR-SHARP.”**

Atlantic Monthly

**“Brilliantly contrived, extremely funny and totally
adult—by far her best book.”**

London Sunday Times

**“Amusing . . . skillful . . . sensitive . . . an
admirable piece of fiction.”**

Saturday Review

**“Miss McCarthy has once more achieved the
continuing aim of her dazzling literary career.”**

The New York Times

**“Social reporting of a decade . . . vivid . . . mordant
humor . . . her scarifying best.”**

New Republic

“Clearly one of the best novels of the decade.”

National Review

Other Avon Books by
Mary McCarthy

CANNIBALS AND MISSIONARIES

Coming Soon

BIRDS OF AMERICA

A CHARMED LIFE

THE GROUP

THE GROVES OF ACADEME

THE OASIS

SELECTED SHORT FICTION BY MARY MCCARTHY

MARY MCCARTHY

The Group



AVON

PUBLISHERS OF BARD, CAMELOT AND DISCUS BOOKS

Chapters 11 and 12 appeared originally in *The New Yorker* in somewhat different form; one chapter appeared in *Partisan Review*, and one in *Avon Book of Modern Writing No. 2*.

The author wishes to acknowledge with thanks the grant of a Guggenheim Fellowship which was helpful to her during the writing of this book.

AVON BOOKS

A division of
The Hearst Corporation
959 Eighth Avenue
New York, New York 10019

Copyright 1954, © 1963 by Mary McCarthy
Published by arrangement with
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 63-15316
ISBN: 0-380-52134-2

All rights reserved, which includes the right
to reproduce this book or portions thereof in
any form whatsoever. For information address
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.,
757 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10017

First Avon Printing, October, 1980

AVON TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND IN
OTHER COUNTRIES, MARCA REGISTRADA,
HECHO EN U.S.A.

Printed in the U.S.A.

The Group

1

It was June, 1933, one week after Commencement, when Kay Leiland Strong, Vassar '33, the first of her class to run around the table at the Class Day dinner, was married to Harald Petersen, Reed '27, in the chapel of St. George's Church, P.E., Karl F. Reiland, Rector. Outside, on Stuyvesant Square, the trees were in full leaf, and the wedding guests arriving by twos and threes in taxis heard the voices of children playing round the statue of Peter Stuyvesant in the park. Paying the driver, smoothing out their gloves, the pairs and trios of young women, Kay's classmates, stared about them curiously, as though they were in a foreign city. They were in the throes of discovering New York, imagine it, when some of them had actually lived here all their lives, in tiresome Georgian houses full of waste space in the Eighties or Park Avenue apartment buildings, and they delighted in such out-of-the-way corners as this, with its greenery and Quaker meeting-house in red brick, polished brass, and white trim next to the wine-purple Episcopal church—on Sundays, they walked with their beaux across Brooklyn Bridge and poked into the sleepy Heights section of Brooklyn; they explored residential Murray Hill and quaint MacDougal Alley and Patchin Place and Washington Mews with all the artists' studios; they loved the

Plaza Hotel and the fountain there and the green mansarding of the Savoy Plaza and the row of horse-drawn hacks and elderly coachmen, waiting, as in a French *place*, to tempt them to a twilight ride through Central Park.

The sense of an adventure was strong on them this morning, as they seated themselves softly in the still, near-empty chapel; they had never been to a wedding quite like this one before, to which invitations had been issued orally by the bride herself, without the intervention of a relation or any older person, friend of the family. There was to be no honeymoon, they had heard, because Harald (that was the way he spelled it—the old Scandinavian way) was working as an assistant stage manager for a theatrical production and had to be at the theatre as usual this evening to call “half hour” for the actors. This seemed to them very exciting and of course it justified the oddities of the wedding: Kay and Harald were too busy and dynamic to let convention cramp their style. In September, Kay was going to start at Macy’s, to be trained, along with other picked college graduates, in merchandising techniques, but instead of sitting around all summer, waiting for the job to begin, she had already registered for a typing course in business school, which Harald said would give her a tool that the other trainees wouldn’t have. And, according to Helena Davison, Kay’s roommate junior year, the two of them had moved right into a summer sublet, in a nice block in the East Fifties, without a single piece of linen or silver of their own, and had spent the last week, ever since graduation (Helena had just been there and seen it), on the regular tenant’s sublet sheets!

How like Kay, they concluded fondly, as the tale passed along the pews. She had been amazingly altered, they felt, by a course in Animal Behavior she had taken with old Miss Washburn (who had left her brain in her will to Science) during their junior year. This and her work with Hallie Flanagan in Dramatic Production had changed her from a shy, pretty, somewhat heavy Western girl with black lustrous curly hair and a wild-rose complexion, active in hockey, in the choir, given to large

tight brassières and copious menstruations, into a thin, hard-driving, authoritative young woman, dressed in dungarees, sweat shirt, and sneakers, with smears of paint in her unwashed hair, tobacco stains on her fingers, talking airily of "Hallie" and "Lester," Hallie's assistant, of flats and stippling, of oestrum and nymphomania, calling her friends by their last names loudly—"Eastlake," "Renfrew," "MacAusland"—counseling premarital experiment and the scientific choice of a mate. Love, she said, was an illusion.

To her fellow group members, all seven of whom were now present in the chapel, this development in Kay, which they gently labeled a "phase," had been, nevertheless, disquieting. Her bark was worse than her bite, they used to reiterate to each other, late at night in their common sitting room in the South Tower of Main Hall, when Kay was still out, painting flats or working on the electricity with Lester in the theatre. But they were afraid that some man, who did not know the old dear as they did, would take her at her word. They had pondered about Harald; Kay had met him last summer when she was working as an apprentice at a summer theatre in Stamford and both sexes had lived in a dormitory together. She said he wanted to marry her, but that was not the way his letters sounded to the group. They were not love letters at all, so far as the group could see, but accounts of personal successes among theatrical celebrities, what Edna Ferber had said to George Kaufman in his hearing, how Gilbert Miller had sent for him and a woman star had begged him to read his play to her in bed. "Consider yourself kissed," they ended, curtly, or just "C.Y.K."—not another word. In a young man of their own background, as the girls vaguely phrased it, such letters would have been offensive, but their education had impressed on them the unwisdom of making large judgments from one's own narrow little segment of experience. Still, they could tell that Kay was not as sure of him as she pretended she was; sometimes he did not write for weeks, while poor Kay went on whistling in the dark. Polly Andrews, who shared a mailbox with her, knew this for a fact. Up to the Class Day dinner, ten days ago,

the girls had had the feeling that Kay's touted "engagement" was pretty much of a myth. They had almost thought of turning to some wiser person for guidance, a member of the faculty or the college psychiatrist—somebody Kay could talk it out to, frankly. Then, that night, when Kay had run around the long table, which meant you were announcing your engagement to the whole class, and produced from her winded bosom a funny Mexican silver ring to prove it, their alarm had dissolved into a docile amusement; they clapped, dimpling and twinkling, with an air of prior knowledge. More gravely, in low posh tones, they assured their parents, up for the Commencement ceremonies, that the engagement was of long standing, that Harald was "terribly nice" and "terribly in love" with Kay. Now, in the chapel, they rearranged their fur pieces and smiled at each other, noddingly, like mature little martens and sables: they had been right, the hardness was only a phase; it was certainly a point for *their* side that the iconoclast and scoffer was the first of the little band to get married.

"Who would have thunk it?" irrepressibly remarked "Pokey" (Mary) Prothero, a fat cheerful New York society girl with big red cheeks and yellow hair, who talked like a jolly beau of the McKinley period, in imitation of her yachtsman father. She was the problem child of the group, very rich and lazy, having to be coached in her subjects, cribbing in examinations, sneaking weekends, stealing library books, without morals or subtleties, interested only in animals and hunt dances; her ambition, recorded in the yearbook, was to become a vet; she had come to Kay's wedding good-naturedly because her friends had dragged her there, as they had dragged her to college assemblies, throwing stones up at her window to rouse her and then thrusting her into her cap and rumpled gown. Having now got her safely to the church, later in the day they would propel her into Tiffany's, to make sure that Kay got one good, thumping wedding present, a thing Pokey, by herself, would not understand the necessity of, since to her mind wedding presents were a part of the burden of privilege, associated with detectives, bridesmaids, fleets of limou-

sines, reception at Sherry's or the Colony Club. If one was not in society, what was the point of the folderol? She herself, she proclaimed, hated being fitted for dresses, hated her coming-out party, would hate her wedding, when she had it, which, as she said, was bound to happen since, thanks to Daddy's money, she had her pick of beaux. All these objections she had raised in the taxicab on the way down, in her grating society caw, till the taxi driver turned round at a stop light to look at her, fat and fair, in a blue faille suit with sables and a *lorgnon* of diamonds, which she raised to her weak sapphire eyes to peer at him and at his picture, concluding, in a loud firm whisper, to her roommates, "It's *not* the same man."

"What perfect pets they look!" murmured Dottie Renfrew, of Boston, to quiet her, as Harald and Kay came in from the vestry and took their places before the surpliced curate, accompanied by little Helena Davison, Kay's ex-roommate from Cleveland, and by a sallow blond young man with a mustache. Pokey made use of her *lorgnon*, squinting up her pale-lashed eyes like an old woman; this was her first appraisal of Harald, for she had been away hunting for the weekend the one time he had come to college. "Not too bad," she pronounced. "Except for the shoes." The groom was a thin, tense young man with black straight hair and a very good, supple figure, like a fencer's; he was wearing a blue suit, white shirt, brown suède shoes, and dark-red tie. Her scrutiny veered to Kay, who was wearing a pale-brown thin silk dress with a big white *mousseline de soie* collar and a wide black taffeta hat wreathed with white daisies; around one tan wrist was a gold bracelet that had belonged to her grandmother; she carried a bouquet of field daisies mixed with lilies of the valley. With her glowing cheeks, vivid black curly hair, and tawny hazel eyes, she looked like a country lass on some old tinted post card; the seams of her stockings were crooked, and the backs of her black suède shoes had worn spots, where she had rubbed them against each other. Pokey scowled. "Doesn't she know," she lamented, "that black's bad luck for weddings?" "Shut up," came a furious growl from her other side. Pokey, hurt, peered around, to find Elinor

Eastlake, of Lake Forest, the taciturn brunette beauty of the group, staring at her with murder in her long, green eyes. "But Lakey!" Pokey cried, protesting. The Chicago girl, intellectual, impeccable, disdainful, and nearly as rich as herself, was the only one of the group she stood in awe of. Behind her blinking good nature, Pokey was a logical snob. She assumed that it was taken for granted that of the other seven roommates, only Lakey could expect to be in *her* wedding, and vice versa, of course; the others would come to the reception. "*Fool,*" spat out the Madonna from Lake Forest, between gritted pearly teeth. Pokey rolled her eyes. "Temperamental," she observed to Dottie Renfrew. Both girls stole amused glances at Elinor's haughty profile; the fine white Renaissance nostril was dented with a mark of pain.

To Elinor, this wedding was torture. Everything was so jaggedly ill-at-ease: Kay's costume, Harald's shoes and necktie, the bare altar, the sparsity of guests on the groom's side (a couple and a solitary man), the absence of any family connection. Intelligent and morbidly sensitive, she was inwardly screaming with pity for the principals and vicarious mortification. Hypocrisy was the sole explanation she could find for the antiphonal bird twitter of "Terribly nice," and "Isn't this exciting?" that had risen to greet the couple in lieu of a wedding march. Elinor was always firmly convinced of other people's hypocrisy since she could not believe that they noticed less than she did. She supposed now that the girls all around her *must* see what she saw, *must* suffer for Kay and Harald a supreme humiliation.

Facing the congregation, the curate coughed. "Step forward!" he sharply admonished the young couple, sounding, as Lakey observed afterward, more like a bus conductor than a minister. The back of the groom's neck reddened; he had just had a haircut. All at once, the fact that Kay was a self-announced scientific atheist came home to her friends in the chapel; the same thought crossed every mind: what had happened in the interview in the rectory? Was Harald a communicant? It seemed very unlikely. How had they worked it, then, to get married in a rock-ribbed Episcopal church? Dottie Renfrew, a de-

vout Episcopal communicant, drew her clasped furs closer around her susceptible throat; she shivered. It occurred to her that she might be compounding a sacrilege: to her certain knowledge, Kay, the proud daughter of an agnostic doctor and a Mormon mother, had not even been baptized. Kay, as the group knew too, was not a very truthful person; could she have lied to the minister? In that case, was the marriage invalid? A flush stole up from Dottie's collarbone, reddening the patch of skin at the V opening of her handmade crepe de Chine blouse; her perturbed brown eyes canvassed her friends; her eczematous complexion spotted. She knew by heart what was coming. "If any man can show just cause, why they may not be lawfully joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace." The curate's voice halted, on a questioning note; he glanced up and down the pews. Dottie shut her eyes and prayed, conscious of a dead hush in the chapel. Would God or Dr. Leverett, her clergyman, really want her to speak up? She prayed that they would not. The opportunity passed, as she heard the curate's voice resume, loud and solemn, as if almost in reprobation of the couple, to which he now turned. "I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured, that if any persons are joined together otherwise than as God's Word doth allow, their marriage is not lawful."

You could have heard a pin drop, as the girls agreed later. Every girl was holding her breath. Dottie's religious scruples had given way to a new anxiety, which was common to the whole group. The knowledge, shared by them all, of Kay's having "lived with" Harald filled them with a sudden sense of the unsanctioned. They glanced stealthily around the chapel and noted for the nth time the absence of parents or *any older person*; and this departure from convention, which had been "such fun" before the service began, struck them now as queer and ominous. Even Elinor Eastlake, who knew scornfully

well that fornication was not the type of impediment alluded to in the service, half expected an unknown presence to rise and stop the ceremony. To her mind, there was a spiritual obstacle to the marriage; she considered Kay a *cruel, ruthless, stupid* person who was marrying Harald for ambition.

Everyone in the chapel had now noticed something a little odd, or so it seemed, in the curate's pauses and stresses; they had never heard "their marriage is not lawful" delivered with such emphasis. On the groom's side, a handsome, auburn-haired, dissipated-looking young man clenched his fist suddenly and muttered something under his breath. He smelled terribly of alcohol and appeared extremely nervous; all through the ceremony, he had been clasping and unclasping his well-shaped, strong-looking hands and biting his chiseled lips. "He's a painter; he's just been divorced," whispered fair-haired Polly Andrews, who was the quiet type but who knew everything, on Elinor Eastlake's right. Elinor, like a young queen, leaned forward and deliberately caught his eye; here was someone, she felt, who was as disgusted and uncomfortable as she was. He responded with a stare of bitter, encompassing irony, followed by a wink directed, unmistakably, at the altar. Having moved into the main part of the service, the curate had now picked up speed, as though he had suddenly discovered another appointment and were running off this couple as rapidly as possible: this was only a \$10 wedding, his manner seemed to imply. Behind her large hat, Kay appeared to be oblivious of all slights, but Harald's ears and neck had turned a darker red, and, in his responses, he began, with a certain theatrical flourish, to slow down and correct the minister's intonations.

This made the couple on the groom's side smile, as if at a familiar weakness or fault, but the girls, in *their* pews, were scandalized by the curate's rudeness and applauded what they called Harald's victory over him, which they firmly intended to make the center of their congratulations after the ceremony. There were some who, then and there, resolved to speak to Mother and get her to speak to Dr. Reiland, the rector, about it; a

capacity for outrage, their social birthright, had been redirected, as it were, by education. The fact that Kay and Harald were going to be poor as church mice was no excuse, they thought staunchly, for such conduct on the part of a priest, in these times especially, when everybody was having to retrench. Even among their own number, one girl had had to accept a scholarship to finish college, and nobody thought the worse of her for it: Polly Andrews remained one of their very dearest friends. They were a different breed, they could assure the curate, from the languid buds of the previous decade: there was not one of them who did not propose to work this coming fall, at a volunteer job if need be. Libby MacAusland had a promise from a publisher; Helena Davison, whose parents, out in Cincinnati, no, Cleveland, lived on the income of their income, was going into teaching—she already had a job sewed up at a private nursery school; Polly Andrews, more power to her, was to work as a technician in the new Medical Center; Dottie Renfrew was slated for social work in a Boston settlement house; Lakey was off to Paris to study art history, working toward an advanced degree; Pokey Prothero, who had been given a plane for graduation, was getting her pilot's license so as to be able to commute three days a week to Cornell Agricultural School, and, last but not least, yesterday little Priss Hartshorn, the group grind, had simultaneously announced her engagement to a young doctor and landed a job with the N.R.A. Not bad, they conceded, for a group that had gone through college with the stigma of being high-hat. And elsewhere in the class, in the wider circle of Kay's friends, they could point out girls of perfectly good background who were going into business, anthropology, medicine, not because they had to, but because they knew they had something to contribute to our emergent America. The group was not afraid of being radical either; they could see the good Roosevelt was doing, despite what Mother and Dad said; they were not taken in by party labels and thought the Democrats should be given a chance to show what they had up their sleeve. Experience was just a question of learning through trial and error; the most

conservative of them, pushed to the wall, admitted that an honest socialist was entitled to a hearing.

The worst fate, they utterly agreed, would be to become like Mother and Dad, stuffy and frightened. Not one of them, if she could help it, was going to marry a broker or a banker or a cold-fish corporation lawyer, like so many of Mother's generation. They would rather be wildly poor and live on salmon wiggle than be forced to marry one of those dull purplish young men of their own set, with a seat on the Exchange and bloodshot eyes, interested only in squash and cockfighting and drinking at the Racquet Club with his cronies, Yale or Princeton '29. It would be better, yes, they were not afraid to say it, though Mother gently laughed, to marry a Jew if you loved him—some of them were awfully interesting and cultivated, though terribly ambitious and inclined to stick together, as you saw very well at Vassar: if you knew them you had to know their friends. There was one thing, though, truthfully, that made the group feel a little anxious for Kay. It was a pity in a way that a person as gifted as Harald and with a good education had had to pick the stage, rather than medicine or architecture or museum work, where the going was not so rough. To hear Kay talk, the theatre was pretty red in tooth and claw, though of course there were some nice people in it, like Katharine Cornell and Walter Hampden (he had a niece in the Class of '32) and John Mason Brown, the thingummy, who talked to Mother's club every year. Harald had done graduate work at the Yale Drama School, under Professor Baker, but then the depression had started, and he had had to come to New York to be a stage manager instead of just writing plays. That was like starting from the bottom in a factory, of course, which lots of nice boys were doing, and there was probably no difference between backstage in a theatre, where a lot of men in their undershirts sat in front of a mirror putting on make-up, and a blast furnace or a coal mine, where the men were in their undershirts too. Helena Davison said that when Harald's show came to Cleveland this spring, he spent all his time playing poker with the stagehands and the electricians, who were the nicest people