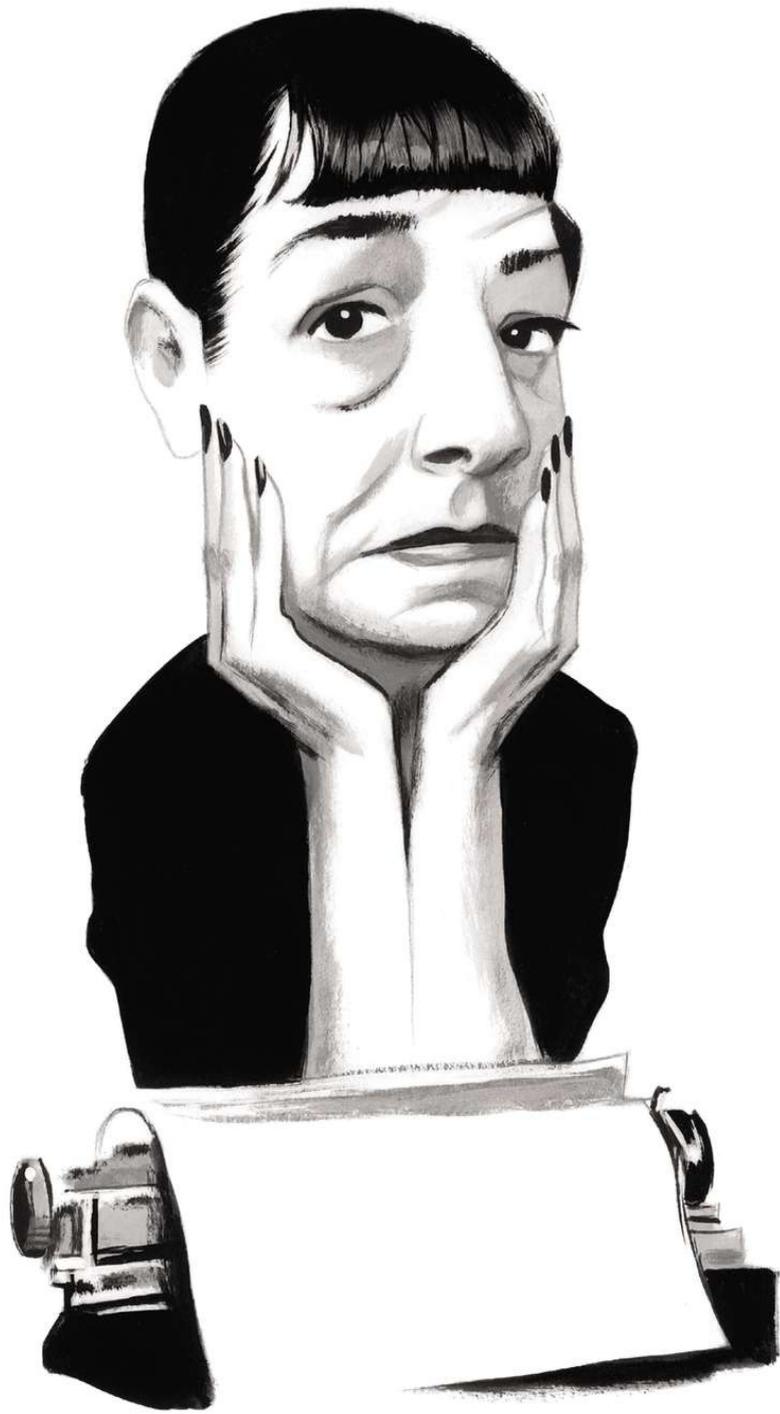


A PENGUIN CLASSICS SPECIAL



PENGUIN  CLASSICS

**DOROTHY PARKER**

*Alpine Giggle Week*

Introduction by MARION MEADE



# CONTENTS

[Author and Introducer Bios](#)

[About the Book](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[A Note on the Text](#)

[Introduction](#)



## **ALPINE GIGGLE WEEK**



[Cast of Characters](#)

[Notes](#)

## ALPINE GIGGLE WEEK

**DOROTHY PARKER** was born in West End, New Jersey, in 1893 and grew up in New York, attending a Catholic convent school and Miss Dana's School in Morristown, New Jersey. In 1916 she sold some of her poetry to the editor of *Vogue* and was subsequently given an editorial position on the magazine, writing captions for fashion photographs and drawings. She then became drama critic of *Vanity Fair* and the central figure of the celebrated Algonquin Round Table.

Famous for her spoken wit, she showed the same trenchant commentary in her book reviews for the *New Yorker* and *Esquire* and in her poems and sketches. She wrote several poetry collections, including *Not So Deep as a Well* and *Enough Rope*, which became a best seller, along with numerous short-story collections, including *Here Lies*. She also collaborated with Elmer Rice on a play, *Close Harmony*, and with Arnaud d'Usseau on the play *The Ladies of the Corridor*. She had two Broadway plays written about her and was portrayed as a character in a third. Renowned for her cynicism and the concentration of her judgments, Parker's name remains practically synonymous with modern urbane humor.

Parker (née Rothschild) married Edwin Pond Parker II, and although they were divorced some years later, she continued to use his name, which she much preferred to her own. Her second husband was actor-writer Alan Campbell. They went to Hollywood as a writing team in 1934 and maintained a tempestuous marriage until his death in 1963, when she returned to New York. Dorothy Parker died in New York of a heart attack in 1967.

**MARION MEADE** is the author of *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?* and *Bobbed Hair and Bathtub Gin: Writers Running Wild in the Twenties*. She has also written biographies of Nathanael West, Woody Allen, Buster Keaton, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Victoria Woodhull, and Madame Blavatsky, as well as two novels about medieval France. For Penguin Classics, Meade has edited *The Portable Dorothy Parker* and has introduced Parker's *Complete Poems* and *The Ladies of the Corridor*.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

“Kids, I have started one thousand (1,000) letters to you, but they all through no will of mine got to sounding so gloomy and I was afraid of boring the combined tripe out of you, so I never sent them.” Thus starts a little-known and until now unpublished letter by Dorothy Parker from a Swiss mountaintop. Parker wrote the letter in September 1930 to Viking publishers Harold Guinzburg and George Oppenheimer – she went to France to write a novel for them and wound up in a TB colony in Switzerland. Parker refers to the letter as a “novelette,” yet there is nothing fictional about it. More accurately, the biting composition reads like a gossipy diary entry, typed out on Parker’s beautiful new German typewriter. She namedrops notable figures like Ernest Hemingway and Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald while covering topics running from her various accidents and health problems to her opinions on dogs, literary critics, and God. The writing is vintage Parker: uncensored, unedited, deliciously malicious, and certainly one of the most entertaining of her letters – or for that matter any letter – that you will ever read.

This edition features an introduction, notes, and annotations on notable figures by Parker biographer Marion Meade.

# **ALPINE GIGGLE WEEK**



How Dorothy Parker Set Out to Write  
the Great American Novel and Ended Up  
in a TB Colony Atop an Alpine Peak



**Dorothy  
Parker**

Introduction and Notes by **MARION MEADE**

**A PENGUIN SPECIAL**



PENGUIN BOOKS  
Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Group (USA) LLC  
375 Hudson Street  
New York, New York 10014



USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China  
[penguin.com](http://penguin.com)  
A Penguin Random House Company

First published in Penguin Books 2014

Copyright © 2014 by The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
Introduction and notes copyright © 2014 by Marion Meade  
Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

ISBN 978-0-698-15377-6

Version\_1

## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The following letter written by Dorothy Parker is entitled *Alpine Giggle Week* for this special edition and incorporates handwritten edits by the author. Misspellings and obvious errors have been silently corrected.

## INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Parker was beginning the new year cautiously jubilant. It was not only her escape from Hollywood after three months slaving for Cecil B. DeMille, but also the raves for “Big Blonde,” her just-published story that was to win the O. Henry prize for best short fiction of the year. When the thirty-five-year-old author sped home that January morning in 1929, she stepped off the 20th Century Limited at Grand Central Terminal and made straight for the Algonquin Hotel four blocks away. This redbrick and limestone building, on West Forty-fourth Street, was her home and her office; in fact, it was just about the center of her universe: two rooms for writing and having a few friends in for drinks. (“Please send up two bottles of White Rock and some ice.”)<sup>1</sup> Robert Benchley, sometimes, talking poker and Heywood Broun bemoaning IOUs, and randy John O’Hara looking to get lucky in Parker’s exclusive circle. Downstairs, parades of tourists hoping to lunch at the Round Table where the fast-talking, wisecracking literati once buzzed. Up the street, the Marx Brothers hyperventilating in a show called *Animal Crackers*. Around the corner, Ross driving poor Thurber mad at the *New Yorker*. Everywhere, illegal what-have-yous promising the real stuff. And in the midst of this hive fluttered Parker in her Hattie Carnegie cloches, the *New Yorker* thought to know everybody worth knowing, have everything worth having.

In the days that followed, the woman who had it all found herself being courted by a pair of wealthy young men offering the one thing she didn’t have: a published novel. Harold Guinzburg was twenty-nine, George Oppenheimer twenty-eight; both were charmers. Undeterred by limited experience in the book business, these privileged fledglings had founded the Viking Press with the lofty ambition of publishing works that would have “permanent importance rather than ephemeral popular interest.”<sup>2</sup> Parker could see that the “kids” (as she liked to call them)<sup>3</sup> were not merely engaging but exceptionally clever too. Already they had bought the illustrious B. W. Huebsch, consequently acquiring a backlist that numbered the early works of Joyce, Lawrence, and Anderson; next they launched a mail-order book club, the Literary Guild of America, to compete with the Book of the Month Club. Yet even so, after four years they remained a small house with an unremarkable track record, still shopping around or hustling for authors by practicing, whenever necessary, discreet poaching.

The intellectual of the team appeared to be Harold Guinzburg, bookish by nature, who was a family man and father of a little boy named Tommy. If Guinzburg’s tastes tended toward the highbrow, his partner’s interests were more attuned to the flash of show business. George Oppenheimer, known as “Georgie Opp,” swooped upon Parker in a rush of breathless “Dotty Darlings,” his effusive manner unusually close to the kinds of comic characters who sometimes appeared in her sketches.<sup>4</sup> Although the

dear boy could not have been sweeter, his maddening habit of tripping over himself to mention important people irritated her. One time, hearing a loud crash, she was overheard to say, “Pay no attention, it’s only George Oppenheimer dropping a name.”<sup>5</sup>

Around bowls of Fish House Punch at boozy publishing teas, at a Literary Guild party in the Viking office on Irving Place, the kids continued their pursuit. To entice a marquee author, who might well give them a best seller, they offered a contract with an advance against royalties to subsidize the writing. Bubbling with assurances, they confidently predicted that any novel coupling her literary gifts with her understanding of human complexities would command plenty of attention.

She naturally felt flattered as it was the age of the so-called Great American Novel (a story defining its era), and writing a GAN was the aspiration of practically every writer she knew. Anyway, short fiction was on its way out, she reported to readers of her *New Yorker* book column. People were likely to put down a volume of stories, sniffing “Oh, what’s this? Just a lot of those short things.”<sup>6</sup> A case in point was Ernest Hemingway, whose *In Our Time* stories had attracted as much curiosity as an “incompleted dog fight on upper Riverside Drive.”<sup>7</sup> His next works, however, *The Torrents of Spring* novella followed by *The Sun Also Rises*, rocketed him into the major leagues. Parker believed that any ambitious writer must graduate to long-form fiction.

Temptation aside, she nevertheless hesitated because it would mean leaving her current publisher, the imaginative showman Horace Liveright. Known as the house of Dreiser and Anderson, Boni & Liveright had released two collections of her verse, and both had become best sellers, always an impressive achievement for poetry. Besides, she was at the top of her game, and if she were to switch, a wiser choice might be Scribner’s, which was publishing some of her friends. F. Scott Fitzgerald urged his editor Maxwell Perkins to sign Parker while she was riding a hot streak: “I wouldn’t lose any time about this.”<sup>8</sup>

As it happened, Viking’s proposition had stirred up some old ambitions; above all else, her heart’s desire was to write a novel. In 1925, the year Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby*, she had attempted one that drew on her early years as the daughter of a New York cloak and suit manufacturer, but discovered it was trickier than she thought. Subsequently, the material was revised and appeared as magazine stories. The kids’ enthusiasm, however, began to eat at her self-doubts. Could she really pass up this opportunity to reshape her career and to make critics take her seriously?

And so, inspired, she succumbed. In short order, Viking drew up a contract for a book with the tantalizing title *Sonnets in Suicide, or the Life of John Knox* (a sixteenth-century firebrand of a cleric who overthrew the Roman Catholic church in Scotland). Of greatest significance is not the curious title but a clause expecting delivery of the manuscript in under a year. Such a timetable, if unusual, was not totally unknown because John O’Hara several years later would write *Appointment in Samarra* in just four months. Parker, however, who was known to slap together one of her *New Yorker* columns over a weekend, wrote fiction at glacial speed. In her restrained, cut-to-the-bone style, she was a particularly fastidious writer whose method, she famously joked, was to set down five words and erase seven.

Which isn’t to say she was kidding. She had completed a draft of “Big Blonde” in a

month, while housebound after an appendectomy, but then tinkered with it for another six months. The notion of her producing a full-blown book in a year was laughable, but this apparently did not occur to Harold and George.

Armed thus with the advance, soon Parker was on her way to France, which in 1929 continued to be the mecca for expatriate writers.<sup>9</sup> Living abroad was not only a lot cheaper but would allow her to leave behind the hustle and bustle of Manhattan, those aimless parties and toxic love affairs that became so distracting. After a ruinous affair with an investment banker, whose dirty tricks had inspired some of her sharpest verses, she resolved to spend the rest of the year free from diversions. It was not too late for reform.

In the company of friends, the painter Allen Saalburg and his fashion designer wife Muriel King, she made a brief stopover in London where she couldn't resist buying a fourteen-month-old Dandie Dinmont terrier named Timothy. In Paris, however, work on *Sonnets* had to be postponed due to illness, her ailment diagnosed as an enlarged liver (hepatomegaly) probably brought on by alcohol use. Just about all of June, "rotten sick," she could hardly move from her hotel room.<sup>10</sup> All she could do was see Ernest and Pauline Hemingway and mosey out to shop for chemises and panties every once in a while. To cheer herself up, she bought the most useless delight imaginable, a summer fur coat made of creamy unborn lamb, having "all the warmth and durability of a sheet of toilet paper."<sup>11</sup>

Toward the end of June, though, her steadfast pal Robert Benchley showed up with his wife and sons. Bound for the French Riviera, the family planned to spend the summer with Sara and Gerald Murphy, a well-to-do American couple in their early forties who owned a villa in Cap d'Antibes, and Parker, knowing the Murphys slightly, needed no urging to join them.

Tucked away in the garden of Villa America was a guesthouse that became her home for the summer. The *bastide*, a tiny Provençal cottage with electricity and plumbing, was a sort of writer's tree house, and it was in this sweet-scented retreat, within shouting distance of a busy household, that she discovered the perfect conditions for work. Typically an Olympian fussbudget, she could find nothing to complain about at Villa America, except the ripe purple fruit outside her window. She hated figs in any form.

Sara and Gerald Murphy were an enormously attractive couple full of panache and positive attitudes completely unlike Parker's own cynical views. In their villa above the sea, set amid the Aleppo pines and shrubby eucalyptus, life was full of sugar. According to their philosophy, each day ought to be celebrated as special, each detail deserving of attention; it was the artistic, made-up part of life, and the imagination to live well, that truly had meaning, as Gerald later said. Inside their lollipop kingdom, whose simplicity was naturally built on a foundation of leisure and money, they appeared to be living very well indeed.

Not previously known for advocacy of childbearing or domesticity, Parker was nonetheless drawn into this odd, unconventional family in which caring parents put everything into bringing up their offspring. At La Garoupe beach, Sara (a string of pearls dribbling down her back) worked on her household accounts under a roof of umbrellas and Gerald calmly raked the sand of dead seaweed as their three sunny-

haired, Botticelli-faced children played in the water. Interestingly, Parker seemed to draw a great deal of pleasure from the various activities of the youngsters who owned a menagerie of dogs, rabbits, turtles, and pigeons and demonstrated an unexpected sense of humor by naming a chicken after her.

So far she had written hardly a thing, but sanctuary in the *bastide* filled her with energy and she quickly made up for lost time. In July and August, her daily regimen included a dip in the freezing Mediterranean, keeping tabs on local crime news, and occasionally a jaunt to Antibes's crowded watering holes, but mostly it was sitting at the typewriter and reminding herself that the important thing was to keep going. After a few weeks, continuing to pick up speed, she had a stack of finished pages and was sputtering comical prayers: "Dear God, please make me stop writing like a woman."<sup>12</sup> When Harold and his wife, Alice, turned up on vacation in Paris, she took a break to see them and to ask Viking for more cash. Soon afterward she returned to interview Hemingway, whose *A Farewell to Arms* had just been published, for a *New Yorker* profile.<sup>13</sup> Otherwise there were no interruptions, and she celebrated her thirty-sixth birthday believing herself on the road to a reformed life of self-discipline.



Next door someone died during the night.

A short while ago, she had been rattling along on *Sonnets*, snug in the *bastide* amongst the fig trees, when the Murphys' youngest boy was diagnosed with tuberculosis, the dread disease for which there was no cure in those days. Suddenly, they were shuttering Villa America and moving their household to Montana-Vermala, a health resort in Switzerland, for eight-year-old Patrick's treatment.

She was packing for the journey home when, much to her surprise, Sara implored her to come along with them. At first, Parker could think of nothing to say. Aside from her unfinished book, she was not fond of mountains, which always made her feel "a little yippy."<sup>14</sup> Seeking advice, she wired Benchley who had been her confidant for a dozen years, but the "big shit" didn't answer.<sup>15</sup> Evidently, he wasn't going to get involved.

Before she knew it, she was somehow living on top of an Alp, in a crowded, freezing sanatorium, listening to people die. For anyone rattled by death, Montana-Vermala was an eerie place. It was, she supposed, slightly better than the year before, the three months of 1928 when she had been stranded in Hollywood, but not much. Lacking entertainment of any kind, the former party girl had to settle for sensible shoes, sobriety, and a nine o'clock bedtime huddled together with Timothy for warmth.

If meeting Harold and George marked a watershed moment, even more pivotal was her decision to join the Murphy family as an unpaid companion because it would have consequences for the rest of her life. Had she gone home as planned, she would have forced herself to honor the Viking contract, perhaps not with a blockbuster, not even with a book that satisfied her, but at the very least with a work reflecting effort and boosting her self-respect as a writer.

Death-infested Montana-Vermala plunged her into depression, a paralysis so severe

that she could not write and even reading was a struggle. “Write novels, write novels, write novels – that’s all they can say,” she wrote to Benchley, then added, “Oh, I do get so sick and tired, sometimes.”<sup>16</sup> To her sister Helen, she admitted hating Switzerland but offered no regrets about her loyalty to “my best friends in bad trouble.”<sup>17</sup> More than anything she wanted to finish “that Goddamn book,” but it was “terribly hard.”

Words refused to come; meanwhile, what she had done over the summer suddenly looked horrible, and before long she began tearing up pages. Despite her desperation, none of it shared with Viking, she lied to Harold and said that she was hard at work. His reply simply reinforced her guilt. Mail the manuscript special delivery, he told her, and remember to include a bio for the dust jacket. He persisted in calling the book a best seller.

At Christmas, feeling practically catatonic after two months in Montana-Vermala, she was able to escape her misery for a few days. Making their way to the mountain came some of the old gang: Ernest and Pauline Hemingway and Pauline’s sister, Jinny Pfeiffer; John Dos Passos and his new wife, Katy. This was 1929, the year when Wall Street fell apart and who knew what that was going to mean, perhaps merely a footnote of history, perhaps not. As in better days, there was laughter again as everybody gathered around singing carols and drinking the local Riesling, their holiday supper complete with a plum pudding and a handsome goose shot by Ernest. But not long afterward an agitated wire from Viking warned Parker that the spring catalog was closing. Where was the manuscript?

The honorable resolution to this ugly situation, she decided, would be to make a fast trip home and confess to the kids that her life had temporarily come apart and she needed more time to meet her obligations. February 1930 found her at the New Weston hotel in New York, being interviewed by a herd of reporters fishing for colorful observations on the state of the union. Over martinis in her suite, she plopped on a sofa and insisted that she was a writer, not a comedian. Her stay would be brief in that she was rushing back to Switzerland to finish a novel.

Did Mrs. Parker care to reveal the subject?

She did not. Honestly, she hated writing “more than anything else in the world.”<sup>18</sup> Brushing off the dumb questions people were always asking her, she hastily turned into a prima donna. Raising a glass, she burst out “put a little more gin in mine,” before losing patience and shooing everyone out the door.

Numbed by shame, she never did manage to level with the kids. They had been kind to her, but she had let them down in the most disgraceful way – she had no illusions about that – and all she could do now was shrink away from the unbearable truth. Lacking proper equipment for cutting a vein or two, with no access to arsenic either, she instead turned to a commodity close to hand and tried to poison herself by drinking a bottle of shoe polish (at the time containing the highly toxic chemical nitrobenzene). Ingestion of polish could be, and often was, fatal, but Parker, while going too far, did not go far enough. Extremely ill during the winter of 1930, she was hospitalized and recovered, though the story went around that what she *really* drank was silver polish, as if that would have made a difference.

Shocked, facing an unheard-of predicament, an author who had tried to self-destruct over a late manuscript, George and Harold came up with a plan to postpone

*Sonnets* and substitute for its spring 1930 list a collection of her published short stories and sketches. *Laments for the Living* tied together some of her most gripping work: daring tales like “Arrangement in Black and White” that presaged the convictions of a person who one day would bequeath her estate to a civil rights organization; two stories (“Little Curtis” and “The Wonderful Old Gentleman”) salvaged from her abandoned 1925 novel; and the beautifully wrought “Big Blonde.”

In the winter of 1930, Viking Press had no reason to doubt that it would ultimately publish her novel. (She must have known better.) Certainly, she was not ready to begin writing again anytime soon. Out of some wildly misguided notion that the Murphys could not get along without her, magnified by her own reluctance to address her difficulties, both personal and professional, she made plans for returning to Montana-Vermala. The family, meanwhile, had left the sanitarium once their son’s condition improved and were living in a chalet; Dottie would find lodging in a nearby pension.

The subject of *Sonnets in Suicide*? There’s no way of knowing, but it would seem to be the messy lives of single women who drink too much and seek love from jerks, with the main character recognizable as Parker herself, the most autobiographical of writers. Presumably, it would revisit themes of importance to her, the bigger picture of female independence and the routine tension between the sexes. As the title implies, the narrative probably detailed the complex inner life of a misfit poet who had not yet come to terms with existence, whose fantasies of suicide lay curled inside each lyric, her head throbbing with the fury of a modern-day John Knox. Certainly, *Sonnets* would have reflected the world as Parker knew it, reckless, money-mad New York in the 1920s, whose excesses Fitzgerald had examined in *The Great Gatsby* but here viewed from the unique viewpoint of a Dorothy Parker character instead of a sexually uncertain bond salesman. Parker’s big blonde, Hazel Morse, could easily have been a convincing character in *Gatsby*.<sup>19</sup>

By June, Parker was back in Switzerland observing the fate of *Laments for the Living* from a distance. Although the book became an immediate success and went through four editions the first month, sales failed to interest Parker whose expectations had risen to unrealistic heights. She needed praise. Reviews were generally positive, but a few panned the stories as slight. “Sharply keen in so far as it goes,” the *New York Times* reported, adding that its range of subjects was limited, which seems a peculiar put-down for a collection that includes “Big Blonde” and “Arrangement in Black and White.”<sup>20</sup>

Parker told herself that the notices were “beyond words awful.”<sup>21</sup> On the heels of her failure to complete *Sonnets in Suicide*, any nasty comments added to her pain. “You think you’re not going to care, but you do, somehow.”<sup>22</sup> When she wrote George Oppenheimer that she felt sickened (actually, enraged), he refused to sympathize. For shame, he scolded, because readers were “drinking magnums of champagne in your honor.”<sup>23</sup> After that she retreated into silence and sent no further personal letters until one day during the first week of September 1930, when she rolled a sheet of paper into her new German typewriter and typed, “Kids, I have started one thousand (1,000) letters to you” and tore them up because her life was so dull.<sup>24</sup> But in honor of what she cheerfully called “Alpine Giggle Week,” she was going to give it another try.

Her rambling saga of that summer is addressed to George and Harold along with

several mutual friends (Muriel King, Allen Saalburg, and Marc Connelly) and is a rare example of her unbuttoned humor. The longest letter she ever wrote, probably the funniest, and surely the bitchiest, it is vintage Parker that demonstrates what her friend S. J. Perelman meant when he said she was hard to quote because so much of her humor, while irresistible, was almost religiously offensive. Parker would forever cherish the Murphys, but damn near everyone else in *Alpine Giggle Week* is not so fortunate.

During her first visit to Montana-Vermala, the TB patients had aroused every iota of her natural sympathy. Nine months later, however, her pity for “the sick” had hopelessly curdled, and she makes fun of their posturing and sense of entitlement simply because they happen to be dying. Repeating one of their corny puns – “T.b., or not t.b., that is the question” – she loosens up and blasts a blitzkrieg of stink bombs against “the lung-ers.” Their names are freely offered, of course. (The baroness who shares her bed with men, women, dogs, or ducks, “with equal good-humor,” is a real person.)<sup>25</sup>

Projected against this morbid setting is not solely Parker’s own self-portrait but unsanitized sketches of her famous friends. There is Hemingway who has sent her a “lovely, lovely” letter about how much he likes *Laments for the Living*, which means a great deal to her coming from a writer whom she regards hugely in spite of his blood-and-guts machismo. There is Fitzgerald, who pops in after depositing his wife in a Swiss sanitarium and who evokes nostalgic memories of the couple at the time of their marriage along with sorrow over their recent circumstances (“Ah, hell,” she erupted. “If I were a God, I’d be a God.”)<sup>26</sup> She writes about Sara and Gerald Murphy, intimate observations revealing the impossible burdens their son’s illness has placed on their lives, and there are glimpses of the healthy son, eleven-year-old Baoth, who has managed to annoy Parker to the point where she feels like shoving him off an Alp. “Oh kids, kids, have I got a bellyful of Baoth!”<sup>27</sup> She shows no remorse about unmasking him, only partly in jest, as “a thief, a liar, a bully.” Neither can she resist a cheeky aside that the curriculum of a certain Lausanne boarding school, where it turns out Baoth won’t be going after all, is said to include sodomy.

The summer’s high point is the arrival of Robert Benchley. His first night in Montana-Vermala the two of them get drunk (on champagne with shots of cognac) and stroll through the streets shouting Harvard fight songs. With Sara and Gerald, they spend a grand week in Venice before continuing on to Munich, where she buys the typewriter and another dog, this one an aristocratic dachshund puppy she names Robinson.

*Alpine Giggle Week* ends on a pleading note: please write, she says, because “any news is big news here.”



In September melancholy hung over Montana-Vermala. No more visitors appeared and everybody’s health began to unravel, with a frazzled Sara developing jaundice and rheumatism, and Parker shattering a kneecap and dislocating a thumb. Gerald, sliding into one of his hopeless moods, departed abruptly on a trip to the States, and when he

got back he consulted a Jungian analyst. Two months went by. Feeling more miserable each day, Parker finally sent a telegram to Benchley: she was sailing from Cannes on November 15, “and will I be glad to see you dearest Fred.”<sup>28</sup>

Immediately upon her return, Viking Press threw a home-coming party that brought out practically everybody she had ever known. To get her back they’d had to wire \$2,000 for her bills and passage, but it was worth every penny because six months later they were to release her third best-selling volume of verse, *Death and Taxes*. In January 1931, when her *New Yorker* column appeared for the first time in twenty months, she sprayed readers with a volley of jokes. “Maybe you think I was just out in the ladies’ room all this time.”<sup>29</sup> God help her if it sounded chauvinistic, but after immaculate Switzerland, where nobody was under the age of seventy-five, swarming, polluted New York seemed heavenly. “Oh, this is a lovely city you have here!”

Lovely perhaps, but once that initial euphoria wore off, it was a struggle to rebound, and she backslid to the sort of madcap life she used to lead. She never got over her failure to complete *Sonnets*, indeed the fiasco permanently eroded her self-confidence as a serious writer. The most chaotic year was 1932, when the Great Depression was enveloping the wider world, and a foolish romance led to another suicide attempt. But soon came a dramatic turn that set her life whirling in a different direction altogether: she fell in love with a handsome actor eleven years her junior. After their marriage, Parker and Alan Campbell decamped to Hollywood where they became a fabulously paid, Oscar-nominated screenwriting team. Thanks to a brand-new career, she could own a Picasso and a farm in Pennsylvania while also engaging in work on behalf of the Communist Party. Never again would she attempt to end her life, despite a future that held as many thorns as roses. Even if her ambition to do a novel ended in failure, she succeeded as a writer of pretty near everything else: screenplays, short fiction, verse, song lyrics, criticism, stage plays – all told an impressive résumé.

For the Murphy family, who felt safe leaving Montana-Vermala but never returned to their fairy-tale life at Villa America, the 1930s brought additional suffering. In the real America, they settled in Saranac Lake, New York, and Gerald took charge of his family’s leather goods business, but they were fated to bear the crushing blows that Hemingway would describe as “the very worst end that all bad lucks could go.”<sup>30</sup> In 1936, Baoth died suddenly of meningitis, and his brother finally succumbed to tuberculosis a year later.

The young go-getters at Viking, meanwhile, had turned thirty. As their firm continued to thrive, Guinzburg and Oppenheimer remained hopeful, in spite of everything, that Mrs. Parker would complete *Sonnets in Suicide*.

Viking Press over the years went on to become a distinguished house that remained true to its original creed (fiction of “permanent importance”) and whose history would subsequently include five Nobel Prizes for Literature, numerous Pulitzers and National Book Awards, and the publication of major writers such as John Steinbeck, Saul Bellow, and J. M. Coetzee. For the last eighty-four years, Viking has continued to publish the work of Dorothy Parker.

George Oppenheimer, dissatisfied with book publishing, left the company in 1933 for a screenwriting career. But before his departure he wrote a Broadway comedy

featuring a character whose mannerisms, quite obviously, suggested Parker's. Her friend Bennett Cerf, who escorted Parker to the opening of *Here Today*, was expecting fireworks. Backstage, he recalled, she hugged Georgie Opp: what a wonderful show; how cleverly the dear boy had captured her foibles. Moments earlier, however, she had been ready to skin him alive.

Regrettably, everything connected with Parker's ambition to write a Great American Novel has evaporated. Not so much as a paragraph of the mysterious manuscript survived. In the 1970s, Harold Guinzburg's son and successor, Thomas, reported that *Sonnets in Suicide* remained the longest unfulfilled contract in the company's history. By 2013, a search by Viking's contracts department was unable to locate the agreement, so deep had it sunk into the Sargasso Sea of publishing.

—Marion Meade

# ALPINE GIGGLE WEEK

Châlet La Bruyère  
Montana-Vermala  
(and not, as Tzortzie so invitingly puts it, Vermala, Montana)  
Switzerland, or some such place

Kids, I have started one thousand (1,000) letters to you, but they all through no will of mine got to sounding so gloomy I was afraid of boring the combined tripe out of you, so I never sent them. Now, however, it seems just the ripe time to pen these few poor scraps, for we are having what is known as Alpine Giggle Week. Gerald left hastily for America to catch what is doubtless a last glimpse of his dear old mother, whose blood-pressure is so high there is snow on it; Sara is in bed with a pretty attack of jaundice, and rheumatism, than which nothing makes you feel heartier; the Russian trained nurse who takes care of little Patrick has gone completely Muscovite and after a week of strained silence has shut herself in her room and cannot be coaxed out; the pet monkey bit one of the townsfolk so badly that both blood-poison and a law suit set in; and I, in my role of the old family friend always right there in time of trouble, fell off an unnamed Alp, cracked my right knee-cap and ripped all the ligaments free, and it will be many a bright September day before I will be able to walk the length of the room. And how are all of you?

However, there is always this, my beautiful, fairly new typewriter – hey look, will you? Can't you LOOK? It is of German make but has a French keyboard, so that I can do è or é or ù or à or even ç, whenever I want to. This, up till a few days ago, took the place of sex life. And now I have my smashed knee.

Well, well, it is certainly horrible here, but I would be a fine louse to complain, for only last month occurred nearly three of the swellest weeks I have ever had; and Goethe says that three weeks' fun was all he ever had in his life. (Oh, I've been reading and reading!) A man calling himself Benchley, an alleged American, although nothing was known of him at the Embassy at Geneva, came and visited here for a few days – during which, of course, he discovered that he had tuberculosis in all the most advanced forms. There just isn't any way to say what a blessing he was. He and I got to laughing a good deal about what the hell were we doing up here on an Alp in a last-resort t.b. colony, and a pretty long way had we come from that little three-cornered office in the Metropolitan Opera House. He also got many a hearty giggle out of the resident consumptives, who ARE pretty funny at that, and God help you if you don't

take them that way.

There was one young man, I recall, with a cough that was a real museum piece. Mr. B. heard him going really good one afternoon, and that same night, much to his amazement, saw him dancing assiduously, clad in immaculate evening dress. “Well, well, well,” was the comment of Our Fred. “I certainly never thought he’d wear a stiff shirt again until they put it on him with thumb-tacks.”

There was also the evening when we built ourselves up a little beauty on champagne with hookers of cognac poured into it, and marched single file through the dark and silent street, singing “With the Crimson in Triumph Flashing.” This was done in deference to Mr. B.’s romantic notion of “Here’s a thing. Suppose you were an old Harvard man, lying dying on your back in a sanatorium on top of an Alp, and you suddenly heard a Harvard song roared out at midnight in the village street – wouldn’t that be the strangest thing that could happen to you?” . . . . Although I am unable to devise such fantasies, I can at least fall in with them; and so from twelve to two, in the pouring rain and the cold dark, we marched in the pouring rain and the cold dark, and FOUGHT for the NAME of HAR-vard till the LAST white LINE was PASSED – all in order to bring one flicker of romance to an old dying Harvard man. Bobby in Edelweiss-Land: or Fun among Life’s Misfits.

I forgot to say that there are but three ill adult Americans in Montana. Two of these are not college men, and the third, a woman, never even got through grammar school.

So the next day we were in great shape to motor to Italy with the Murphys, which is what we did, and was I splendid going over the Simplon Pass – a jaunt which I should like to bet is enough to scare a certain commodity out of even the best-balanced. (I have recently been afflicted, when I had the use of my knees, with sporadic attacks of a malady I had never quite believed: mountain sickness, or height-heeb. It hits you when you are in the middle of a narrow ledge, and you think before you can reach the other side the whole works is going to curve outward and roll down with you to the Rhone valley, two vertical miles below. I couldn’t remember whether it was up or down that you mustn’t look; but both are wrong. The thing to do is not look at all. . . . Even the hairiest of the mountaineers when they must use one of the little wooden, rail-less bridges flung like a spider’s thread across a mile-deep abyss, the guidebook advises, always cross it blindfolded; or am I boring you with Alpine lore? . . . . Anyway I found out that what you do is close your eyes, complete the passage on your hands and knees, irritate the hell out of Gerald by this confession of weakness, and give up mountain-climbing forever. It is the most horrible feeling I ever had. Please excuse me for a minute – I have to go be a little sick on account of thinking of it.)

Well. So anyway, we motored to Milan, and then took a train to Venice where we spent a simply lovely week. Why, it’s all true about Venice – there really is water in the streets! I had never taken it seriously for a minute. I hope to God Mr. B. has told you about it, for I am not the one who could ever report on Venice – and neither can Ruskin, the big stiff. All I can say is, anybody who goes anywhere else is fools. The only mitigating circumstance is that the Lido is horrible – just a great, ham [sic] public beach, backed up against shallow, soupy water, and populated with the horrors of both hemispheres. Well, when I tell you that J. P. McEvoy was present in a yellow peignoir, I think I have said all. . . . . But we had a truly beautiful time, and as Ernest

Hemingway said about a country bringing-up, it is something that nobody can ever take away from you. And who has seen Mr. Benchley in a gondola has Lived! I wish I wasn't such a pig about hating things to be over. I want to go right back and do it all over again – and maybe sometime I will, because you see, that night I got to doing a bit of drinking, I threw my shoe into the Grand Canal, so I could consider myself wedded to the Adriatic.

(I don't think this is such a hot typewriter. German, indeed! Who won the war?)

So then we came up through the Austrian Tyrol – which is the way mountains ought to be, and not like these big show-offs – to Munich; and let's all go live there pretty soon, and to hell with this nonsense. And there, somehow or other, I got a little black dachshund, and even if Mr. B. told you about him, he didn't say half enough, because he is the nicest little dog you ever knew. I had never done much about dachshunds, except to think they were pretty funny-looking, but after a little while, it's other dogs that look funny. And the German originals don't look like the great stuffed sofas I always have seen. This thing is very small, and almost degenerately long and attenuated. He looks like a Hunt Dietrich fire-screen. And is he a comfort in this lonely life!

Robinson, his name is. Only these Goddamn Swiss call it – as near as I can spell it – Rrrobe-an-song, or even, sometimes, Le Rrrobe-an-song, which you will admit is a far cry from his kennel title of Eiko von Blütenburg. (I knew I'd find a use for that umlaut yet.)

So then we went to Paris to put Mr. B. on the boat-train for the Bremen, which, as I scarcely need tell you, he just barely made. The one night we were there, we stopped at Florence's for a few minutes, and it was just as horrible as it was in the old country, except there aren't so many dusty imitation grape-leaves. And THAT was where I saw Lois Long, in the company of Townsend Martin, the Wickedest Woman in London – it's a darn good thing, I think, for Mrs. Arno to have sought solace in travel, which brings one into contact with so many new and different types and surroundings, and thus broadens the soul. Mr. Martin is ever one who draws out the best in me; I told him, for want of news and also in the first flush of mother-love, that I had a little dachshund, and he said, "Oh, they're always yapping." To which I replied, without a moment's hesitation, "So are you." ("Dorothy Parker's mordant wit has made her the toast of the town": *Milwaukee Sentinel*.) Lois was in admirable shape, making no sense and but little sound, and with her eyes, like quarrelsome lovers, rushing in different directions and then coming back to cross each other. . . . . Sometimes I think I'm not so damned homesick for New York, after all.

So then we came right back here the minute Fred left, because Paris was so full of his ghost we couldn't stand it. And it was even fuller of him here. It is awful, how we miss him.

And was it crisp to get back here after having had a good time, and did Dow-dow get into one of his real pretties, and did Sara take refuge in tears, and did I get to brooding, and did we thus beguile the time till the accidents started happening!

Scott Fitzgerald came up about ten days ago for a three-day visit, and I was so glad to see him that he misunderstood. I don't say he is the inevitable companion I would choose out of the entire world, but babies, in this place you would be glad to see Johnny Weaver. And Scott was moderately sober, and pretty darn nice. Poor kid, he is

living in Caux, near Montreux, and the little girl is in Brittany with a governess, and Zelda is in a sanatorium in Geneva. The sanatorium marks great progress – for a time, she was in an insane asylum. At first they thought it was hopeless, but now they think she can get out some time. Scott hasn't been allowed to see her for months. . . . I know they got to be awful pests and all that, but I always get sentimental about the Fitzgeralds. I can't help seeing them as they were when they first came to New York, ten years ago – when they were just married, and he had just had his crazy success with "This Side of Paradise," and they were the golden lad and the golden girl, if ever I saw them. And this is so damn dreary, for a conclusion. . . . Ah, hell. If I were a God, I'd be a God.

Well, let's see. Before I got my knee into shape, among those mentioned in Swiss social notes was my left thumb, which is nicely dislocated. It seems that about a month ago, I rose from my work – probably to vomit – slipped on a pair of mules which someone (it couldn't have been me!) had left lying in the middle of the floor, and landed on my thumb, full weight – which, incidentally, is far more serious than it was when I Went Away from It All. I didn't do anything about it, because I thought it might get to be all right (the Benchley school of thought). But when we got back from Paris, Gerald pushed me out to have a radiography – how is it you North Americans say? X-ray, is it not? At first they could discover nothing wrong, but that was traced to the fact that I had nervously put my right hand into the X-ray machine. (Dow-dow was nice about that.) So then they saw what it was, and I had to go every morning, and two doctors and a nurse got on the end of my thumb and pulled – I think they thought there was a paper cap in it. Then, just for luck, a folder of paper matches went off in my grasp, and fixed up the rest of the hand. Then I tripped over that root, and thus acquired my knee-trouble, and there you have the record of Baby's Summer in the Shadow of the Matterhorn. . . . The pulling and the burn are all over now, although there is still a welter (Oh, wait a second! I can use it! "Welter hell with the whole thing."), a welter of wet bandages on my thumb, covered with a red rubber apparatus that looks, if my memory serves me, startlingly like something intended to keep down the population. I think there is nothing like a rubber-capped thumb and a bandaged knee to render a woman practically irresistible. I will say, though, such matters pass here without comment. It is simply taken for granted that you have tuberculosis of the bone.

And speaking of such things, I must tell you the height of consideration, as expressed by Hoytie Wiborg, who recently favored the Murphys with a visit, on her way to Sweden or Salzburg or Poland or wherever it was that she landed, for she is one who decides en route. One night we were sitting in the Murphys' night-club, watching the lung-ers dance cautiously about, and it turned out that Hoytie didn't feel well. "I think I'll go home," she said. "I can feel a cold in the head coming on, and I shouldn't like to spread it around."

Dear kids, I am stricken when I think what a pig I have been about writing, but truly, truly it doesn't mean either lack of thought or decrease of love. Only it's damned near impossible to write from this place. It must be seen to be believed. It's so out of joint with any other form of life that you can't tell about it. "The Magic Mountain" is the nearest thing to it, and even that is an understatement. (Scott, by the way, is incensed that Thomas Mann has already done that book, because he wants to do one