The Library of America • Story of the Week
From *James Thurber: Writings & Drawings* (LOA, 1996), pages 850–65.

The First Years

JAMES THURBER

I HAD never heard of the *New Yorker* when I sailed from New York on the *Leviathan* in May, 1925, for a year in France. My unawareness of Harold Ross's "little magazine" (as Sam Goldwyn has always called it, in spite of its increasing wealth and matronly girth) was not surprising. Only a dozen meager issues had then reached the stands, all of them nervous and peaked, and most of them pretty bad. ("There's that goddam 'pretty' again," Ross would say. The easy overuse of "pretty" and "little" exacerbated his uneasy mind. Once, to bedevil him, I used them both in a single sentence of a Talk piece: "The building is pretty ugly and a little big for its surroundings." After stumbling upon these deliberate oxymora, Ross poked his head into my office, made a pretty ugly sound with his tongue and lips, and withdrew. We had been discussing the goddam pretty-little problem earlier that same day.)

The *New Yorker* was the outstanding flop of 1925, a year of memorable successes in literature, music, and entertainment, and the only flop that kept on going. Its continued existence may accurately be called life after death. The *Leviathan* was still at sea on that eastward voyage of thirty-four years ago when the weekly was officially declared dead at an executive luncheon in New York, presided over by its chief backer, Raoul Fleischmann. Then miracle, in the form of chance encounter, resurrected the deceased. Several hours after the coroner's verdict, Ross ran into Fleischmann at the wedding of Franklin Pierce Adams, and, in that atmosphere of hope, beginning, and champagne, they decided to have another go at it. It was hard for the F and the R of the F-R Publishing Company to believe that their cherished infant could die in such a season of viability.

In 1925, the greatest of war plays, *What Price Glory?*, was still running at the Plymouth, and two young men named Rodgers and Hart wrote the music and lyrics for the unforgettable *Garrick Gaieties*, whose big song hit, "Manhattan," still gaily rides the national airwaves. It was the year of *The*

Great Gatsby and of *Arrowsmith* and *An American Tragedy.* In 1925, the new Madison Square Garden was opened, and presented its popular monstrosities to an eager public: the six-day bike race, the marathon dance, an indoor flagpole sitter, and strange men and women who took part in rocking-chair and gum-chewing contests, indefatigably entertaining the insatiable addicts of endlessness. *The Poor Nut*, starring its co-author Elliott Nugent, was a hit at the Henry Miller. Elliott came down to the ship to see me off. He was then making, we figured the other day, approximately a hundred times as much money as the twelve dollars a week I was going to get on the Paris edition of the Chicago *Tribune.*

Meanwhile, the *New Yorker* kept going downhill. From an original runoff of fifteen thousand copies in February, its circulation fell to a pernicious-anemia low of twenty-seven hundred copies in August. One evening, during that summer of Harold Ross's greatest discontent, the harried editor ran into Dorothy Parker somewhere. "I thought you were coming into the office to write a piece last week," he said. "What happened?" Mrs. Parker turned upon him the eloquent magic of her dark and lovely eyes. "Somebody was using the pencil," she explained sorrowfully. It gave a fair enough picture of the goings on in West 45th Street, where a small inexperienced staff strained to bring out a magazine every Thursday.

This is a memoir of my years with Ross, and so I shall take up, as tenderly and as briefly as may be, the troubles that beset the founder of the *New Yorker* before I became a party to his predicament and a witness of his woe. Ross could never have seriously believed his constantly reiterated "Writers are a dime a dozen." A great many writers were in Hollywood during his early struggles, others were in Paris—among them two future *New Yorker* authors, Robert Coates and Joel Sayre (Sid Perelman joined them in 1926)—and most of those he knew personally in New York were a million dollars a dozen and more amused by the *New Yorker*'s flounderings than by its contents.

There is little doubt that Ross's famous and busy writer friends of the Algonquin Round Table and its fringes took his fond enterprise lightly, as a kind of joke on him and Fleischmann. A few of them helped now and then, with left hand,

and tongue in cheek. "The part-time help of wits is no better than the full-time help of half-wits," a great wit named Herman Mankiewicz is reported to have said at the time. When I reminded Ross of this line years later, all he said was, "God knows I had both kinds."

He couldn't pay anybody much money, in an era when magazine word rates were extremely high. (Nunnally Johnson got ten times as much for his humorous stories in the *Saturday Evening Post* as Ross could have paid him.) When Elwyn Brooks White came to work for the *New Yorker*, part-time, in 1926, he got thirty dollars a week, with an additional five dollars for each of his first-page comments, which were soon to become one of the *New Yorker*'s best-known contributions to American letters.

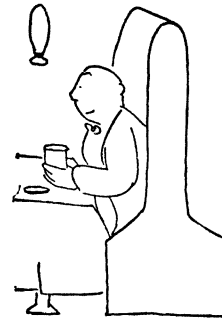
The record of contributions by the men and women Ross must have expected to help him, out of the goodness of their hearts, during the first year is disheartening to look back upon. In 1925, Dorothy Parker turned in only one piece and two poems, and her celebrated book reviews, signed "Constant Reader," did not begin until October, 1927.

Robert Benchley waited ten months to lend a hand, and his first casual was printed in December, 1925. He didn't take over the *New Yorker*'s theater criticism until 1929, the same year that Ross's close friend Alexander Woollcott started his page called "Shouts and Murmurs." Ross's good friend Ring Lardner sent in one piece in 1925 and was not heard from again for two years. Marc Connelly and Arthur Kober got around to writing for Ross in 1926, and George Kaufman's name was first signed to a *New Yorker* casual as late as 1935.

It wasn't until 1930 that the names of Perelman and Ogden Nash showed up in the magazine's pages; Sally Benson's first story had been printed the year before. Clarence Day's reminiscences of a New York life were published in 1933. "If I had never printed anything but Clarence Day's stuff, it would have been enough," Ross once told Frank Sullivan, who, incidentally, wrote only three pieces for Ross in 1925; it would be ten years before his Cliché Expert first took the witness stand.

The *New Yorker* was a year old before Gluyas Williams began drawing for it. Peter Arno, who had sold Ross a spot in June, 1925, was first represented by a captioned drawing in

September of that year of ordeal. Helen Hokinson's first captioned drawing brightened the *New Yorker* in November, 1925. It showed a saleslady at a perfume counter holding up a small phial to a woman customer and saying, "It's *N'Aimez Que Moi*, madam—don't love nobody but me." The woman customer, glory be, was the original garden club dowager whose hilarious ilk became before long one of the ornaments of *New Yorker* humor. This first Hokinson was, it seems to some of us now, the funniest thing that Ross's tremulous magazine printed in the year of our Lord 1925. The little magazine that died and came to life in the same day had the invaluable help and guidance of Rea Irvin from the start. He was responsible for its format, its special type that bears his name, and the famous figure that adorned its first issue and



every succeeding anniversary number, that of the nineteenth-century dandy inspecting a butterfly through his haughty monocle.

Nothing is so dated as an old prospectus, unless it be a faded love letter to a lady who many years later divorced its author, so I shall spare you the *New Yorker*'s prospectus, drawn up in the chill winter of 1924, except for a couple of sentences that are pertinent here: "There will be a personal mention column—a jotting down in the small-town newspaper style of the comings, goings and doings in the village of New York. This will contain some josh and some news value."

The word "josh," smelling remarkably of Ross's old-fash-

ioned vocabulary, and the phrase "the small-town newspaper style" were unhappily lifted out of context and magnified into motto by Ross and his helpers. They got the young magazine off on the wrong foot, wearing the wrong shoe. Its early issues went in for a frivolous and curiously small-town kind of joke, an almost subcollegiate flippancy, and a self-conscious, intramural urbanality, all of which show up bleakly now in an old *New Yorker* folder labeled "Office Gazette," kept in a secret vault in the present offices and accessible only to those of us who are going on a hundred.

The contents of the Office Gazette consist of fragile and yellowing notes, suggestions, letters, and interoffice memos, stained with sweat and blood, mainly Ross's. Herein we encounter a great deal of tittering about the Optimist Joke, a two-line joke that was accidentally printed like this:

> "A man who thinks he can make it in par."
> "What is an optimist, Pop?"

This sentimental souvenir of the old days was reprinted in every anniversary issue of the *New Yorker* for twenty-five years before it was abandoned. Even right side up it shows what was the matter—a kind of youthful lack of loving care. One poem was accidentally printed in two different issues in 1925; a building located by the *New Yorker* at Sixth Avenue and 55th Street was actually at Sixth Avenue and 54th Street; the name of George Eliot was spelled with two *l*'s, and Carolyn Wells was called Caroline, two mistakes that were pointed out by that old precisionist, F.P.A., whose hawk eye was ever alert for inaccuracies. When a verse of Philip G. Wylie's, signed with his initials, was reprinted in the New York Sunday *World*, it was credited to Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, and the Gazette had much rueful fun with this.

Among the notes in the old folder is one beginning "At a mass meeting of the two contributors to this magazine" and another reads "The magazine for people who cannot read." The intramural joshing turns up everywhere in the crumbling documents. Someone suggested a drawing showing "Harold Ross calling at the Martha Washington Hotel on his aunt from Dubuque." There is a lot of high school levity about the idea of using the face of Ben Turpin in burlesque reproductions of

famous paintings, or to replace the countenance of Jimmy Walker, Calvin Coolidge, and others, in a series of cartoons. The Gazette reveals that *New Yorker* readers were instructed, in one issue, how to pronounce Rea Irvin's first name and Helen Hokinson's last name.

One 1927 item is worth reprinting in full, since it deals with two *New Yorker* immortals who soon rose above all the joshing:

> Lois Long, who writes under the name "Lipstick," was married to Peter Arno, creator of the Whoops sisters, last Friday. The bride wore some things the department stores had given her from time to time, and Mr. Arno wore whatever remained after his having given all his dirty clothes to a man who posed as a laundry driver last week. The romance had its beginning in The New Yorker office, and was greatly advanced by a summer spent abroad, the contrast between the two places being noticeable. Immediately after the wedding the couple left for 25 West 45th Street, where they will spend their honeymoon trying to earn enough money to pay for Mr. Arno's little automobile.

My own favorite item in the ancient collection is a suggestion from a reader, which goes like this:

> March 20, 1927
>
> THE NEW YORKER
>
> I have an idea for a cartoon. The cartoon is entitled, "Pouring over his Books." This is a pun. Have a student sit by a desk with a stack of books before him and reading out of one book. In the meantime have him pour some gin in a glass and is ready to drink it. All about him on the floor have bottles thrown about.
>
> The humor in this cartoon is in the words "pour" and "poir" one means to drink and the other means to study careful.

In the margin of this wondrous note, Ross had written "Too subtle."

Ross's sweating and straining to keep his faltering magazine above the level of Dubuque and in the sophisticated tonality

of cosmopolitan New York both puzzled and annoyed some readers. One of them, objecting to a facetious piece about the Barnard Cloisters, wrote testily, "Flippancy in an elephant might be amusing, but flippancy in a flea doesn't even amuse its canine host." Ross's agitated reply to this began, "We are young." And young they were. Every effort to sound metropolitan in viewpoint and background brought the breath of Aspen, Colorado, to the journal's perspiring pages.

Ross was apparently intensely devoted to a continuing department called "Are You a New Yorker?", a series of questions such as "Where is the morgue?" and "On what days is admission charged to the Bronx Zoo?" Clipped to this particular questionnaire was a tart note from a male subscriber which read, simply, "Who gives a damn?"

But it was in this turgid area of odds and ends and beginnings that I found a refreshing letter to Ross from Elmer Davis, dated May 19, 1926. After a decade on the New York *Times*, Mr. Davis had resigned in 1924 to free lance and to write books. He sold the *New Yorker*, in its first three years, some twenty-five pieces, and in this letter he enclosed a contribution for "Are You a New Yorker?" In it there were ten questions, of which the ninth went like this: "Who was Josh DeVore? Bridgie Webber? James A. O'Gorman? Pat Kyne? Hugh McAtamney? Anna Aumuller? Lieutenant Percy Richards?" Mr. Davis's tenth question made my heart leap up. It said, simply, "Where Are They Now?" That was to be the standing title, ten years later, of a series of twenty-five pieces I wrote for the magazine under the name Jared L. Manley. For a whole decade Ross had fretted and fussed about this project, excited by the idea but dissatisfied with the title, as he was usually dissatisfied with everything, sometimes for weeks, sometimes for years. In the end, of course, he came back, as he often did, to the original suggestion, but I doubt that Elmer Davis was remembered as the originator of the idea for "Where Are They Now?" or that Ross's debt to him was ever acknowledged. The editor was always conscientious about giving credit where credit was due, but his head continually buzzed with a thousand different ideas, and in the flutter the Davis letter must have been forgotten.

The carelessness and confusion of the first two years, echoed

and reflected in the Office Gazette, are undoubtedly responsible for Ross's later intense dedication to precision, order, and system. He studied the New York Telephone Company's system of verifying names and numbers in its directories, and used to say that, despite the company's careful checking, it had never got out a phone book with fewer than three mistakes. He found out about the *Saturday Evening Post*'s checking department, which he said consisted of seven women who checked in turn every fact, name, and date. He must have set up a dozen different systems, during my years with him, for keeping track of manuscripts and verifying facts. If the slightest thing went wrong, he would bawl, "The system's fallen down!"

He lived always in the wistful hope of getting out a magazine each week without a single mistake. His checking department became famous, in the trade, for a precision that sometimes leaned over backward. A checker once said to me, "If you mention the Empire State Building in a Talk piece, Ross isn't satisfied it's still there until we call up and verify it." When Robert Coates, in a book review, said that Faulkner sometimes seemed to write about the woodland of Weir instead of the American South, checkers ransacked postal guides, maps, and other sources looking for the Weir that existed only in the imagination of Edgar Allan Poe. When, in a piece I sent in from the French Riviera in 1938, I mentioned the Hotel Ruhl, the checkers found out that it was actually the Hotel Ruhl et des Anglais, and changed it to that in my copy. I wrote Ross a sharp note saying, "Where shall we meet for five o'clock tea—at the Waldorf-Astoria or the Ritz-Carlton?"

But overchecking was better than underchecking, in his opinion, even if it did sometimes lead to the gaucherie of inflexibility. Ross's checkers once informed Mencken that he couldn't have eaten dinner at a certain European restaurant he had mentioned in one of his *New Yorker* articles, because there wasn't any restaurant at the address he had given. Mencken brought home a menu with him to prove that he was right, but he was pleased rather than annoyed. "Ross has the most astute goons of any editor in the country," he said.

While Ross was sweating blood and baying the moon

during that awful summer of 1925, I was in a farmhouse in Normandy trying to write a novel. It didn't work out because I got tired of the characters at the end of five thousand words, and bade them and novel-writing farewell forever. In September I got my job as a rewrite man on the Paris *Tribune.*

"I got thirty men ahead of you who want jobs," the city editor said when I went to see him. "What are you, by the way, a poet, or a painter, or a novelist?"

I told him I was a newspaperman with five years' experience, and knew how to get it and write it and put a headline on it, and he hired me on the spot. That first month I wrote about the crash of the dirigible *Shenandoah* in Ohio, and in October the editor handed me six words of cable from America and said, "Write a column about that." The six words were "Christy Mathewson died today at Saranac," and I wrote a column about it.

It wasn't until the following month, November, 1925, that I first heard of the existence of a magazine called the *New Yorker.* I was sitting on the *terrasse* of the Café Dôme, reading our rival paper, the Paris *Herald* (which had wanted no part of my services), when I came upon a first-page story about a flutter in the dovecotes of Park Avenue. The story said that Ellin Mackay, daughter of the millionaire head of Postal Telegraph, and later Mrs. Irving Berlin (he dedicated two songs to her that year, *Always* and *Remember*) had written an "exposé" of Park Avenue society for a weekly magazine called the *New Yorker.* Miss Mackay's short article, called "Why We Go to Cabarets" and subtitled "A Post-Debutante Explains," seems as quaint and dated now as its title, but it got the *New Yorker* on the front pages of New York newspapers and gave it its first big shot in the arm circulationwise, as they say in American business circles. Miss Mackay slapped with her fan the wrists of all the sad young men in the Park Avenue staglines, whose dullness drove American society girls with stars in their eyes to cabarets, where they danced to jazz music on the same floor with "drummers" and other interesting barbarians from the hinterland.

After thirty-four years, the dusty pages of Miss Mackay's once vital prose seem less a souvenir of the Jazz Age than a dying echo of the days of silent movies and the era of Rudolph

Valentino. That great matinee idol, incidentally, was to collapse outside a New York cabaret in 1926 with an agony in his stomach that turned out to be a fatal perforating ulcer. When he fell, his opera hat rolled into the street, and was rescued by one of those who rushed to his aid, none other than Harold Ross, the young editor of the *New Yorker*. Several months before Valentino's collapse in New York, I had interviewed him at the Hotel Ruhl (et des Anglais) in Nice, where I had gone from Paris in the winter of 1925 to be assistant editor of the *Tribune*'s Riviera edition. I remember that Valentino proudly showed me the hundred pairs of shoes he always took with him on his travels, or it may even have been two hundred. Ross kept his opera hat, intending to return it to him when he left the hospital, which he never did alive. The hat was accidentally thrown out when Ross and his first wife moved from their house on West 47th Street in 1928. "I thought it was an old hat of Aleck's," Jane Grant, Ross's first wife, told me. Alexander Woollcott had shared the coöperative house in the West Forties.

The loss of Rudolph Valentino's opera hat might well stand as a kind of symbol of the ending of the *New Yorker*'s infancy and the beginning of its maturity. In 1928 Oliver Wolcott Gibbs joined the staff of the magazine, and in one issue of that year a short first piece, called "Alumnae Bulletin," appeared away back on page 101. It was written by a young man named John O'Hara, who was then twenty-three years old and whose short stories were to help set up a lasting literary barrier between the town of Dubuque and the city of New York.

I got back to New York in early June, 1926, with ten dollars, borrowed enough to hold on until July in a rented room on West 13th Street, and began sending short pieces to the *New Yorker*, eating in doughnut shops, occasionally pilfering canapés at cocktail parties (anchovies, in case you don't know, are not good for breakfast). My pieces came back so fast I began to believe the *New Yorker* must have a rejection machine. It did have one, too. His name was John Chapin Mosher, a witty writer, a charming man, and one of the most entertaining companions I have ever met, but an editor whose prejudices were a mile high and who had only a few enthu-

siasms. It was in the always slightly lunatic tradition of the *New Yorker* that he had been made first reader of the manuscripts of unknown writers. In the years that followed, we became friends, but I never had lunch with him that he didn't say, over his coffee, "I must get back to the office and reject."

In 1943 he rejected a story by Astrid Peters (then known as Astrid Meighan), called "Shoe the Horse and Shoe the Mare," which its author later read aloud to me one day. I sent it to Ross with a note saying it should have been bought, and he bought it. It was one of the stories included in *The Best American Short Stories 1944*. Mosher's only comment on it had been a characteristic "A tedious bit about an adolescent female." I sometimes wonder what Mosher would say, if he were alive now, about the *New Yorker*'s flux of stories by women writers dealing with the infancy, childhood, and young womanhood of females. "We are in a velvet rut," Ross once said many years ago, and this was amended not long ago by a sardonic male writer to read, "We are now in a tulle and taffeta rut."

I first called at the *New Yorker* office late in June, 1926, to find out what had happened to the only piece of mine that had not been returned like a serve in tennis. It was about a man named Alfred Goullet, the greatest of all six-day bike riders, with whom I had shared a stateroom on a liner returning from France in 1920. (I had been a code clerk in the American Embassy for two years.) Mosher came out into the reception room, looking like a professor of English literature who has not approved of the writing of anybody since Sir Thomas Browne. He returned my manuscript saying that it had got under something, and apologizing for the tardy rejection. "You see," he said, "I regard Madison Square Garden as one of the blots on our culture."

I didn't ask to meet Ross that day, but I did inquire if Mr. White was in. On the *Leviathan* going to France, I had met a married sister of White's with the lilting name of Lillian Illian. She had often talked about her talented brother, whose name I remembered as Elton Brooks White. His real first name, of course, is Elwyn, but he had been lucky enough to go to Cornell, where every male student named White is nicknamed Andy, after Andrew White, the university's first presi-

dent. White wasn't in that day, and so nearly eight months went by before I met him and Ross. I must have seen him, however, without recognizing him, for he also lived on West 13th Street then, sharing an apartment with three other Cornell graduates. One of them, Gustave Stubbs Lobrano, later became an editor of the *New Yorker*.

By July first my money had run out again, but I didn't take the reporting job on the *Evening Post* that had been offered me by its city editor, whom I had met in Paris while he was on vacation. I had an idea for a parody of current best sellers, to be called "Why We Behave Like Microbe Hunters," and to finish it I threw myself upon the hospitality of Clare Victor Dwiggins, called Dwig, a well-known comic-strip artist, who was spending the summer at Green Lake, New York, with his family. (I had met him in Nice.) The wonderful Dwigginses took me in, and I finished the twenty-five thousand words of the book by the end of August. In September I peddled it about New York. It was rejected suavely by Harper's, and without a word by Farrar and Rinehart, unless you can count the "Here" of the secretary who handed me the manuscript when I called at the office. Herschel Brickell, rest his soul, almost persuaded Henry Holt to take the parody, but was overruled by the sales department: "We can't publish a first book of humor by an unknown writer." I sent the six chapters of the book piecemeal to the *New Yorker* and got them all back. Then I went to work on the *Evening Post*, but still kept trying to sell something to Ross's magazine.

In December I had about given up, and was thinking of going back to Columbus, when I sent one of my many rejections to F.P.A. on the *World*. It was the story of Hero and Leander done in newspaper headlines, and Mr. Adams printed it. It filled up one whole column of "The Conning Tower." I think it was ten years later that I told the conductor of "The Conning Tower" that I had written the thing. He had no way of knowing because I had signed it, for reasons too obscure to remember, Jamie Machree.

I now lived in a basement apartment on Horatio Street, near the Ninth Avenue El, with my first wife, who has somehow got lost in the shuffle of these reminiscences. She was convinced I spent too much time on my *New Yorker* efforts,

and so one night I grimly set the alarm clock to ring in forty-five minutes and began writing a piece about a little man going round and round and round in a revolving door, attracting crowds and the police, setting a world's record for this endurance event, winning fame and fortune. This burlesque of Channel swimming and the like ran to fewer than a thousand words, and was instantly bought by the *New Yorker*. For the first time out of twenty tries I got a check instead of a rejection slip.

With the money we bought a Scottie, the same Jeannie that was later to be lost in Columbus and to cause the dog fight between Ross and me. The proof that no permanent scars resulted from that brief snarling and fateful encounter lies in an old incident I like to remember. In 1929 my wife began raising Scotties and poodles in Silvermine, and one day Ross asked me if he could buy one of her Scottie pups. "I don't want it myself, for God's sake," he explained hastily, "but Helen Hokinson said the other day that she would like to have a Scottie, and I thought I'd give her one for Christmas." Ross did countless thoughtful and generous things for the men and women he loved, often going far out of his way and spending a great deal of time hunting for gifts, arranging introductions, smoothing paths, and lightening personal burdens.

One of Jeannie's male offspring, three months old, was selected by my wife and, with a wide red ribbon around its neck and a card attached, was delivered by messenger to Miss Hokinson on Christmas Day. She loved the dog but said she couldn't possibly keep it in town, where she was then living, and returned it sadly to my wife. It had cost Ross seventy-five dollars, and my wife made out a check for this amount. He flatly refused to take it and promptly sent it back. Thus the strange story of Ross and Jeannie and me came, in its curious and somehow satisfying way, full circle.

It was easy for me to sell things to the *New Yorker* after the first one was taken, although, in rereading some of the earliest ones, I marvel that Ross put his approving R on "Villanelle of Horatio Street, Manhattan" and a short parody called "More Authors Cover the Snyder Trial." In this last I tried to imitate the style of James Joyce and that of Gertrude Stein,

and Ross could never have read a single line of either author. The Stein part went like this:

> This is a trial. This is quite a trial. I am on trial. They are on trial. Who is on trial?
>
> I can tell you how it is. I can tell you have told you will tell you how it is.
>
> There is a man. There is a woman. There is not a man. There would have been a man. There was a man. There were two men. There is one man. There is a woman where is a woman is a man.
>
> He says he did. He says he did not. She says she did. She says she did not. She says he did. He says she did. She says they did. He says they did. He says they did not. She says they did not. I'll say they did.

In gritting his teeth, swallowing hard, and buying that, Ross must have depended upon the counsel of his literary editor, Mrs. Katharine Angell, graduate of Bryn Mawr, wife of a lawyer, and the author of articles and reviews for the *New Republic*, the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and other magazines before she was hired in 1925 as assistant to Fillmore Hyde, the magazine's first literary editor. Mrs. Angell, who hired Andy White in 1926 and was later married to him, was one of the pillars upon which Ross could lean in his hours of uncertainty about his own limitations. "She knows the Bible, and literature, and foreign languages," he told me the day I first met him, "and she has taste."

That day in February, 1927, when I first saw Ross plain and talked to him, I had been brought to his office by White. Andy had called me on the phone one day to say that his sister had mentioned meeting me on the *Leviathan* and that he was, like myself, a friend of Russell Lord, a man who had gone to both Ohio State and Cornell, later wrote *The Wallaces of Iowa*, and somewhere in between, like practically everybody else, took his turn as managing editor of the *New Yorker*. I didn't meet White until five minutes before he took me in to see Ross, but Ross always believed that White and I had been friends for years.

When he got an idea fixed in his head, it usually stayed

fixed, and time and truth could not dislodge it. He had decided thirty years ago that Wolcott Gibbs was Alice Duer Miller's nephew, and the fact that Gibbs was actually her cousin never registered in Ross's mind, although he was told this fact a dozen times. Gus Lobrano had worked for *Town and Country* before coming to the *New Yorker*, but Ross got the notion that he had been on *Harper's Bazaar*, and nothing Lobrano said through the years could correct this misconception. Ten years before Lobrano died in 1956, Ross said to him about something, "I suppose you learned that on *Harper's Bazaar*." Gus sighed resignedly and said, "Yes, and it wasn't easy."

Harold Ross had an exasperating way of pinning quick tags and labels on people he met, getting them cozily pigeonholed, and sometimes completely wrong. Ben Hecht, for example, was a police reporter at heart, Elmer Davis a corn-belt intellectual, Alan Dunn "the only recluse about town I know." When Morris Markey, the *New Yorker*'s first reporter-at-large, was assigned to write a piece about what goes on behind the gates at Grand Central, he had to postpone his visit because of the illness of the station master, but for ten years Ross would say, when someone suggested an assignment for Morris, "He couldn't get into Grand Central."

After Ross found out, the hard way, that I was not an administrative editor, he had to think up a tag for me to make my task of writing the "Talk of the Town" department as hard as possible for both of us.

"Thurber's worked too long on newspapers," he told somebody. "He can't write Talk the way I want it. He'll always write journalese." I don't think Ross had ever read anything I had written outside the *New Yorker*. It wasn't much at the time, but I did have a scrapbook of unjournalese pieces I had sold to *Harper's* "Lion's Mouth," the *D.A.C. News*, *Sunset Magazine*, and the Sunday *World* and *Herald Tribune*. What stuck in Ross's head was that I had covered City Hall for the Columbus *Dispatch*, been central Ohio correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, worked for the Chicago *Tribune* in France and the *Evening Post* in New York, and once contributed weekly jottings on Ohio politics to the Wheeling *Intelligencer*. So it was that in the new Ross-Thurber relationship of editor and rewrite man there were several

months of another kind of ordeal, full of thrust and parry, doubt and despair, sound and fury. It wasn't until the issue of December 24, 1927, after three months of slavery, that a Talk piece of mine appeared which Ross had praised and not rewritten. It was a "personality" piece called "A Friend of Jimmy's," about William Seeman, intimate of Mayor Walker, brother-in-law of Rube Goldberg, canner of White Rose salmon, and crony of Harold Ross. It is no more worth bothering with than that old prospectus, and sticks in my mind only as the second turning point in my relationship with Ross.