Table Talk: Of Bonbons and Bon Mots

Harken back to a glorious bygone era when conversation sparkled. When the lure of lively repartee drew patrons aplenty to amber-lit saloons and bistros. Clever witticisms were collected like pearls. A snarky rejoinder was exactly that—and sometimes more. Amid the din of voices, you could glance into the rheumy eyes of a foul-smelling coot across from you—an unshaven scarecrow in a stained gray fedora—and ponder an inscrutable mystery. Was his sly chuckle a signal of real amusement? Or disdain? Or was it that the old bird, being nearly deaf, had missed the joke but was playing along rather than admit he hadn't heard you?

What I'm talking about, now sadly lamented, was a golden age of jousting grandiloquence. To many, its yammering focal point was a particular spot in the dining room of the Algonquin Hotel in New York. The so-called Algonquin Round Table sprang up as an informal klatch of intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals who sparred at noon luncheons while downing highballs and cheese-laden crackers. Members included a Who's Who of bon vivants drawn from the selfsame Who's Who list: the likes of George S. Kaufman, the playwright; Dorothy Parker, the droll poet and critic who was said to be capable of speaking a thousand words with a wink; and Alexander Woollcott, a vaunted journalist who, if he were alive today, surely would deny—with characteristic blunt outrage—that he devoted excessive amounts of time to carving tiny nudes out of pilfered bars of hotel soap. (To Woollcott's everlasting good fortune, he was never even accused of such a thing.)

The rhetorical pyrotechnics of the Algonquin regulars "sizzled and crackled," as one guest observed, "like flashing arcs of blue current from a Tesla coil." Reading the accounts, it's easy to take the notion one step further: those galvanizing insights, barbs, and riotous derisive hoots may have equaled, in their intensity, the sizzling and crackling of a malfunctioning electric chair. The blinding brilliance of each highly charged encounter "lit the skies and blew out the circuit breakers"—a poetic bit of metaphor you might be tempted to dismiss as nostalgic hyperbole, except it comes from one former member of the Round Table itself. These insiders never shied from brutal candor in branding themselves geniuses *nonpareil*.

Sadly, though, the Round Table dissolved after 1929; the Great Depression forced a generation of glib wiseacres to ingest humble pie and go out hawking pencils on Madison Avenue. It's well established that, for much of the ensuing century, scintillating banter fell to a low ebb. Public gathering spaces in America became somber, even morose. The drought was excruciating—millions suffered—but at last, thankfully, it is over. A worthy successor to the voluble Round Table has emerged in, of all places, Jerome, Arizona—a ramshackle ex-mining town reborn as an art colony

and tourist trap on a craggy mountainside west of Sedona.

The Jerome Cabal, as I've dubbed this wondrous band of unknowns, consists of about a dozen perspicacious wits who convene Wednesdays on a coffeehouse patio overlooking the bone-dry valley.

It can be stated, unequivocally, that when the Cabal is in action—especially if Becky Mobley shows up—the air itself takes on a glow like St. Elmo's Fire, ionized by the sort of effulgence—oh God, my skin tingles to think about it. It's magic unrestrained, lightning in a bottle, theater unrivaled by any group past or present, the Round Table included. How can I possibly do it justice? Imagine: a remark here or there triggers another remark or reply, and then another, until soon enough the various thrusts and parries transform the Cabal table into a great, swashbuckling swordfight—figuratively speaking—with blood everywhere, so to say, and even severed heads scattered around, though not literally, of course.

What I mean is, things get intense. Jokes are driven home with maniacal zeal. Every zinger finds the soft tissue of the cerebral cortex. It's a hailstorm of ideas, a jangling pinball machine of noisy quips and *ratta-tat-tat-tat, bing-badda-bing-bing-bing* retorts. Surely, before long, these prodigiously talented raconteurs will gain fame beyond the parched Arizona hinterlands. But until then, it's useful to introduce a few of the core members:

Becky Mobley — Founder and kingpin. "Beck" is a retired stenographer who attributes the perpetual squint in her vibrant green eyes to the fact she is always laughing. Plus, she suffers from glaucoma. Her morbid obesity can be blamed on her ravenous appetite for bonbons, but girth has held her back not one iota. Mobley is a crossword puzzle "devoted dabbler" who shares a single-wide trailer with her three-legged Pekinese, Dolly. Even when her dermatitis is acting up, Beck can say an unfunny word like *scissors* or *garibaldi* in such a way that everyone around goes into hysterics. Her riotous inflections are especially irresistible on words ending in *ark*—like *spark*, *dark*, and *aardvark*.

Wilford Polk — A gangly, affable old egg farmer, Polk is a sartorial throwback in ragged flannel shirts and coveralls. (He calls them "overalls," just to gauge how others react.) He is a dead ringer for Fred Ziffel of *Green Acres* fame and admits he is often mistaken for the proverbial country bumpkin—but be forewarned: Wilford possesses a steel-grate mind and a savant's knowledge of Mohawk history, model trains, collectible matchbook covers, and poultry. Wilford likes to punctuate the remarks of other Cabal members by observing brightly, "Just like my chickens!"

Rob Clark — This remarkable, thrice-convicted sexual predator reformed himself in prison, where he survived two shiv attacks and discovered a passion for knowledge. Against daunting odds, the erstwhile pervert sprang forth from the hellish depths of incarceration as an autodidact extraordinaire. Clark boasts of being an expert on wines, cigars (he smokes up to nine a day), free will versus determinism, existentialism, statutory rape law, and futures investing. At the gift shop he operates in Jerome, he amuses patrons by quoting from countless old reruns of *Get Smart*, *Dragnet*, and *The Andy Griffith Show*. Some customers say he looks and sounds exactly like a fifty-year-old version of Barney Fife.

Millie Alexander — Alluring yet refined, loquacious yet deeply taciturn, daring and yet timid in her own way, Millie is that ethereal spirit who seems to inhabit both the *this* and the *that*, fully embodying the yin and yang of universal oneness. Smart? Oh, my GAAAAWWWWWWD, what a head on that hunched, spindly frame! Witty? PUH-leeeeeeeaaaazzzze! This sharp-tongued housewife could certainly give Dorothy Parker a run for her money—and no doubt give Woollcott the what-for, too.

Chauncey Carmichael — A self-taught, self-aggrandizing polymath who eagerly devoted his younger self to becoming an astronaut, a satellite TV tycoon, a deep-sea explorer, and a wildcat oilman. It's rarely pointed out within the group that Chauncey failed at every last one of these endeavors, achieving none of his lofty aims—the pitiable fact being that no one would hire him for any job, anywhere. Somehow, though, he hoisted himself up from the canvas of brutally shattered dreams and discovered his true calling as a strutting dandy. His handlebar mustache, sheet-lightning grin, and inestimable charms are known from Alabama to Zimbabwe. "Unemployed yet unshaken," he likes to say of himself. Chauncey exploits his abundant free time boning up on useless facts for a planned TV game-show appearance.

Picture these Nimitz-class eccentrics—and six or seven more, equally gifted at verbal jiu-jitsu—engaged in a free-for-all on some intriguing topic of the day, such as gasoline prices or personal grooming. That is the essence of the Jerome Cabal. In the three years I've been showing up at meetings, I've come to expect—well, of course, I expect the expected, because expectations are part and parcel of what I expect in life—but all the while I half-expect the unexpected, too. It's so hard to predict. Most of the time, I really don't know what will happen.

Here's a moment: Millie glancing up to see Rob Clark arrive, his signature slick-as-Pennzoil mullet replaced by an austere new buzz cut.

"Rob, you finally got a haircut!" Millie exclaimed.

"Hell," he said, sneering, "I got 'em all cut."

You can't make this stuff up. Nothing is off-limits—no topic too obscure, too

high-falutin', or lowbrow for the twitching minds of these eclectic thinkers. One minute they're speculating about the nature of ice volcanoes on Pluto; the next, they're debating whether Harry Houdini could have escaped from a diving bell in the Challenger Deep.

More than a few rollicking discussions are inspired by the simple tableau of tourists strolling down the street out front.

"Look at the tuchus on that one!" Wilford Polk observed one day, his voice rising like a teakettle on the boil. "How does that human hippopotamus ever fit in a theater seat?"

"Maybe he streams movies at home instead of paying big bucks to sit in a theater," Rob said. "Ever think of that, Poindexter?"

"Whoa, Wilford's right—that is one substantial derriere!" Chauncey declared.

"Who are you to talk about appearances?" Beck challenged, eyeing Chauncey's mustache. "You've got a freakin' caterpillar on your lip! Another week and it'll be a cocoon."

A cocoon! How she delivered that one, in a fresh instant, is an oratorical miracle. Humor flows in a ceaseless torrent, like hail during a downpour or sludge from a broken sewer line. If one Cabal member doesn't come up with a crack, you can bet another one will.

Truly, I can count on one hand—or maybe two—the number of awkward silences when they all sat and tried to think of something clever to say but couldn't. Typically, free association reigns; meetings might be likened to a tumultuous group session in a psychiatric facility—but in a good way. Beck has a fondness for going after Chauncey, accusing him of all manner of picayune transgressions, from grammatical lapses to smelling like a donkey on hot days.

"You really mangled that verb agreement," she might say, causing Chauncey's head to jerk up, his dark eyes flashing fiery indignation.

"I did not!"

"You did."

"Did not."

"Did."

"Did not."

"Did."

"Did not."

They'll go back and forth fifteen, twenty times, while the others grin and guffaw and make derisive snorting noises.

As in New York, when the original Round Table was in its heyday, local gossip provides grist for much of the discussion. A recent subject was Miles Frantz, the head bartender at the Jerome Saloon. Frantz was rumored to be seeing a widow in town while also dating a waifish former nurse just down the highway in Sedona. Carmichael observed that it was hard to imagine even one woman interested in a man

such as Frantz, never mind two.

With the Cabal as tribunal, the hapless bartender was put on trial in absentia and essentially convicted of being a dolt, a heel, and a sorry-looking cuss who should shave his billy-goat beard and trim his fingernails once in a while.

When the subject of yoga came up, Beck didn't know what it was; however, the focus swiftly shifted from Tibetan yogis to Yogi Bear and then to Yosemite Sam and Bugs Bunny. Wilford's throaty imitation of Bugs's famous refrain, "What's up, doc?" caused Millie to grouse about her latest doctor visit:

"What was up?" she moaned. "My blood sugar. My goddamn type 2 diabetes." It was already causing numbness in her toes.

Plus, she said, "I rolled out of the sack yesterday and thought I'd stepped on a carpet tack. Come to realize it was only diabetic nerve pain."

"I did step on a carpet tack," Beck intoned. "Just last January. Put me in the ER."

Historians have pointed out that the Algonquin Round Table was far greater in *toto* than the mere sum of its parts. The same surely is true of the Cabal. I've filled seventeen steno books so far documenting their magic. My long-range hope is to compile a book—possibly a full archive—to memorialize the best of the best of the classic moments. Like when Millie pointed out that the Sedona High School cheerleaders had finished last in a team competition in Phoenix.

"Poor girls sure laid an egg," said Rob.

"Just like my chickens," Wilford added.

Oh my God! One time Beck described a mishap in her kitchen: In trying to re-ignite a pilot light, she touched off an explosion and fireball that singed off her eyebrows.

"It was the first hot flash I'd felt in twenty minutes," she cracked.

Oh, Jee-SUS Christ Lord God Almighty!

There was such uproarious laughter I can't even describe it. You'd have thought she'd just sat on a whoopee cushion.