

Alarms & Diversions

by James Thurber



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BY

James Thurber



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Diversions



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Most of the material in this book originally appeared in *The New Yorker*.

ALARMS AND DIVERSIONS

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for HELEN



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Foreword

THE PIECES IN PART I OF THIS COLLECTION APPEAR HERE IN book form for the first time. All of them but one were written in the past two years or so. The exception, "Two O'Clock at the Metropole," was written twenty years ago as one of a *New Yorker* series called "Where Are They Now?" This account of the Herman Rosenthal murder of 1912, like the story of the trial of Willie Stevens, "A Sort of Genius," has been rewritten to place it in proper perspective. There is no longer a question as to the mundane whereabouts of the principal figures in these cases, for most of them died some time ago, or disappeared from public view and the records of the police. The two murder stories seem to belong to the present period of journalistic journeys into the tragic American past.

Many of these pieces, new and old, have been rewritten to some extent, mainly to bring them into accord with the changes wrought by time, the accumulation of new material, and certain shifts of viewpoint due to experience and the fruits of meditation. The piece about my mother, "Lavender with a Difference," had to be put, sorrowfully, into the past tense. I have tampered with "Daguerreotype of a Lady" only to include the incident about Mrs. Detweiler's ghost, which I had unaccountably forgotten.

"The French Far West" was originally written for the old *New York Sunday World*, and done over later for *The New Yorker* under another title, "Wild Bird Hickok and His Friends," but I have restored the original title as being more suitable for my old and exciting adventure in the Gallic translation of American nickel and dime novels. The back-

ward glance at *Punch*, a stoutly durable weekly which has had its highs and lows, like any other, may serve one good purpose in proving that the friendship of Great Britain and the United States has survived more than one acrimonious family squabble. *Punch* and *The New Yorker* have exchanged parodies in the recent past, with no holds barred and no bones broken. I predict that the two weeklies, like the nations they represent, will continue more in amity than in dissension, but, I hope, always with the healthy give and take that marks a sound friendship.

"The Last Flower," originally published by Harper's as a book in itself, is included here in its entirety.

Most of the material in this book originally appeared in *The New Yorker*. "There's Something Out There!" and "The First Time I Saw Paris" were first published in *Holiday*, and "My Own Ten Rules for a Happy Marriage" is reprinted from the *Cosmopolitan*. In the two years I spent on the trail of the Loch Ness monster I got invaluable help from many British newspapermen. I especially want to thank William Hardcastle, of the London *Daily Mail*, who made constantly available to me his newspaper's voluminous files on the subject. A. R. MacElwain, Frank Rizza, and Nora Sayre were also of great assistance.

My grateful thanks go to Simon and Schuster and Harcourt, Brace for their gracious permission to let me reprint from their own books of mine much of the material that appears herein, and detailed acknowledgment of their kindness appears on another page.

J.T.

West Cornwall, Conn.
[1957]

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Alarms and Diversions



The Ladies of Orlon

SURGICAL SCIENCE, STILL ACHIEVING, STILL PURSUING, HAS SUCCESSFULLY replaced a section of the femoral artery in a human leg with a tube made of nylon, and the medical profession confidently prophesies for the near future a practicable aorta made of the fabric known as orlon. We are all so used to the heart as a lyrical organ, made of the stuff that breaks, that a metaphorical shift to a heart made of the stuff that tears, or rips, or has to be hemstitched, may have a strange and disastrous effect on writers and composers. It has already had its effect on me, getting into my daydreams and nightmares. In one of the latter, a bearded doctor, fiercely grinning, asked me, "Do you know how to tell your wife from the children's toys?" and startled me wide awake just before dawn. This fragment of dream was probably the associative product of the orlon surgical technique and Eugene Field's creatures of gingham and calico. (It wasn't until later that I heard about the new orlon-filled toys.) All I need to make a chaos out of my already tormented nights is a dream world of patchwork girls, indestructibly fabricated females with a disconcerting froufrou deep inside their organdie in place of the old-fashioned pulse beat.

One night, I dreamed I was at this party. A young lady had been carelessly flung onto the sofa beside me, her long legs loosely intertwined and her stuffing showing plainly at one shoulder seam. "You're losing your sawdust," I told her anxiously. "Nonsex," she said, and I suddenly realized that she and all the other women guests were dolls. Such a dream could be construed as meaning that I have reached the time of life when I seek to deny the actuality of the

American Woman and to reduce her to the level of an insentient plaything. Actually, the latent meaning of this dream goes far deeper than that, and consists of a profound anxiety on my part as to what would happen to our world if the stature of Woman decreased.

A lovely woman with a taffeta xiphisternum might conceivably make this artificiality a part of her mysterious allure—I have known the kind of lady whose charm could even take the ugliness out of a thrug sutured with silk to her thisbe—but a gentleman of like kidney, let us say, could surely never regain the position he held in our competitive society before his operation. Man is used to being repaired with silver plates and pins, and it is doubtful whether his ego could long sustain a body consisting largely, or in part, of dress material. It may be, then, that a gradual textilization of the human species is one of the desperate strategies of Nature in her ceaseless effort to save our self-destructive race from the extinction of which it seems so massively enamored. Nature and I have long felt that the hope of mankind is womankind, that the physically creative sex must eventually dominate the physically destructive sex if we are to survive on this planet. The simplest things last longest, the microbe outlives the mastodon, and the female's simple gift of creativity happily lacks the ornaments and handicaps of male artifice, pretension, power, and balderdash.

Nature (I do not say God, because I think protective Providence washed Its hands of us long ago) realizes that we have to be turned into something as durable as the toughest drygoods if we are to endure the wear and tear caused by the frightened tempo of our time. Men and women—the former because they think the Devil is after them, the latter merely to hold their own—make the revolving doors of our office buildings whirl at a dangerous and terrifying rate of speed as they rush lickety-split to their lunches, return hellbent to their desks, and fling themselves recklessly homeward at twilight to their separate sorrows. It is the men who are the casualties of this pell-mell, the men who are caught in the doors and flung to the floors, and it is the women who pick them up, or at least it is the women who pick *me* up. Once the ladies have become compounded largely of bland but durable textiles, they will outlive the once stronger sex even more easily than they do now. Nature, prefiguring the final disappearance of the male, has aided science in solving the problem of the continuation of

the human being with her usual foresight, by establishing the ingenious, if admittedly stuffy, technique of artificial insemination. It is only a question of time before the male factor in the perpetuation of the species becomes a matter of biological deep freeze, an everlasting laboratory culture, labelled, controlled, and supervised by women technicians.

The male, continuously preoccupied with his own devices and his own mythical destiny, polysyllabically boasting of his power and purpose, seems blithely unconscious of the conspiracy of Nature and women to do him in. He does not seem to know that he is doomed to go out like a light unless he abandons the weapons and the blueprints of annihilation. Woman says little about it, but she does not intend to be annihilated by Man, even if she has to get rid of him first to save herself. This is not going to be as difficult for her to face as one might think, for her ancient dependence on the male began slowly to turn into disdain about A.D. 135, according to Dr. Rudolph Horch, who makes the astounding statement that the female's sexual interest in her mate has decreased seventeen and two-tenths per cent since September, 1929. The female has greater viability than the male, Dr. Horch reminds us, and the male knows this when he puts his mind to it, which he naturally does not like to do. I once asked a distinguished obstetrician which he would rather be called upon to deliver, male quintuplets or female quintuplets. He began with the usual masculine circumlocutions, pointing out that there are no dependable statistics, on a large scale, dealing with the relative viability of the sexes. "Let me put it this way," I said. "Two women are about to give birth to quintuplets, and by means of some hypothetical prescience it has become known that one is going to have five boys and the other five girls. Which would you rather deliver if you were called upon to make a choice?" "The girls," he said.

It may come down, in the end, to a highly dramatic sex crisis. Man is forever discovering some new and magnificent miracle weapon or miracle drug, and it is possible that he may soon stumble upon an undreamed-of mineral, of which there will be just enough in the world to create a drug that could cure everybody of everything or to manufacture a bomb capable of blowing the planet into fragments the size of Cuba. The ultimate struggle for possession of the precious material would divide men and women into two warring camps. I have the confidence to believe that the

~~creative females would defeat the destructive males and gain control of the miracle substance.~~

I no longer see the faces of men and women at the parties I attend, or in the streets I walk along, or the hotel lobbies I sit in, but I hear their voices more clearly than ever. The voices of the women, it seems to me, have taken on a new and quiet quality—a secret conspiratorial tone, the hopeful and reassuring note of a sex firmly dedicated to the principle of not being blown into fragments. For centuries Woman has been quietly at work achieving her present identity. Not many years ago the Encyclopaedia Britannica listed nothing under “Woman,” but merely said “See Man.” The latest Oxford English Dictionary, however, gives woman twelve columns to man’s fifteen. The development of her name from Old English through Middle English to Modern English is fascinating to trace in the O.E.D. She began as “wife,” became “wifman” and underwent seventeen other changes until the word “woman” came into use about the year 1400. Most writers, glibly discussing the origin of the word over their brandy, contend that it derives from the derogatory phrase “with man” or the physiological “wombman.” They don’t know what they are talking about. Earlier male writers, equally mistaken, declared the word derived from “woe to man” or “wee man.” Some of them were serious, others merely kidding, in the immemorial manner of the superior male.

I’m glad to report that the feminist Flecknor took a fairer view in 1653 when he wrote: “Say of Woman worst ye can, what prolongs their woe, but man?” In the past three hundred years the importance of women has often been derided by men, from J. Clarke’s “A Woman, asse, and walnut-tree, the more you beat the better be” to Noel Coward’s “A woman should be struck regularly like a gong.” But there were wiser men who spoke of the female of the species with proper respect, and even fear. It was Congreve who wrote the almost invariably misquoted “Heav’n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn’d, Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorned,” and in 1835 Hook recognized the stature of the female with “A girl of seventeen is a woman, when a man of seventeen is a boy.” Thirty-two years later, English law under Queen Victoria formally defined the female: “Woman shall mean a Female of the Age of Eighteen Years or Upwards,” and twenty years after that, the British female legally became a woman at the age

of sixteen, while males of the same age were still regarded as schoolchildren.

It was in the 1890's that the old-fashioned dependent woman was scornfully rejected by her own sex as the "cow-woman," and "new woman" and even "new womandom" came into common and spirited use. Ninety years before that decade of the self-assertive woman, J. Brown had arrogantly written, "No ecclesiastical power can reside in a heathen, a woman, or a child." Fortunately for his peace of mind, he didn't live to see the female become the residence of practically any power you can name. She is now definitely here to stay, whereas the decline of the male, even the actual decadence of the insecure sex, has been observed by alarmed scientists in a score of other species. A certain scorpion, for example, disappears with his mate after a ritualistic courtship dance, and is never seen again. The female, though, emerges from the honeymoon, fit as a fiddle and fresh as a daisy. And there is a certain female fish in the waters of the sea who has reduced the male to the status of a mere accessory. She actually carries him about with her, for occasional biological use, in the casual way that a woman carries a compact or a cigarette lighter in her handbag. There are dozens of other significant instances of the dwindling of the male in the animal kingdom, but I am much too nervous to go into them here. Some twenty years ago, a gloomy scientist reported, "Man's day is done." Woman's day, on the other hand, is, by every sign and token, just beginning. It couldn't happen to a nicer sex.

In case you have always wondered why the *o* in women is pronounced differently from the *o* in woman, the Oxford Dictionary has a theory about that, as about everything else. The change is the result of the associative influence of certain other pairs of words, singular and plural, such as foot and feet, and tooth and teeth. The women will now please keep their seats until the men have left the auditorium. They need, God knows, a head start.

The First Time I Saw Paris

WHAT I SAW FIRST OF ALL WAS ONE OUTFLUNG HAND OF France as cold and limp as a dead man's. This was the sea-coast town of Saint-Nazaire, a long while ago. I know now that French towns don't die, that France has the durability of history itself, but I was only twenty-three then, and seasick, and I had never been so far from Ohio before. It was the dank, morose dawn of the 13th of November, 1918, and I had this first dismal glimpse of *France la Douce* from the deck of the U.S. Transport *Orizaba*, which had come from the wintry sea like a ship out of Coleridge, a painted ship in an unreal harbor. The moist, harsh light of breaking day gave the faces of the silent staring gobs on deck a weird look, but the unreality was shattered soon enough by the raucous voice of a boatswain bawling orders. I had first heard this voice, strong enough to outshout a storm, snarling commands at "abandon ship" drill: "Now, light all lanterns!" and "Now, lower all lifeboats!" I had been assigned to a life raft that was rusted to the deck and couldn't be budged. "Now, what's the matter with Life Raft Number Six?" the boatswain had roared. A sailor next to me said, "She's stuck to the deck, sir." The boatswain had to have the last word and he had it. "Now, leave her lay there!" he loudly decreed.

The *Orizaba* had taken a dozen days zigzagging across the North Atlantic, to elude the last submarines of the war, one of which we had sighted two days before, and Corcoran and I felt strange and uncertain on what seemed anything but solid land for a time. We were code clerks in the State Department, on our way to the Paris Embassy. Saint-Na-

zaire was, of course, neither dead nor dying, but I can still feel in my bones the gloom and tiredness of the old port after its four years of war. The first living things we saw were desolate men, a detachment of German prisoners being marched along a street, in mechanical step, without expression in their eyes, like men coming from no past and moving toward no future. Corcoran and I walked around the town to keep warm until the bistros opened. Then we had the first cognac of our lives, quite a lot of it, and the day brightened, and there was a sense of beginning as well as of ending, in the chilling weather. A young pink-cheeked French army officer got off his bicycle in front of a house and knocked on the door. It was opened by a young woman whose garb and greeting, even to our inexperienced eyes and ears, marked her as one of those females once described by a professor of the Harvard Law School as "the professionally indiscreet." Corcoran stared and then glanced at his wristwatch. "Good God!" he said. "It isn't even nine o'clock yet."

The train trip down to Paris was a night to remember. We shared a sleeping compartment with a thin, gloved, talkative Frenchman who said he was writing the history of the world and who covered his subject spasmodically through the night in English as snarled as a fisherman's net, waking us once to explain that Hannibal's elephants were not real, but merely fearful figments of Roman hallucination. I lay awake a long time thinking of the only Paris I knew, the tranquil, almost somnolent city of Henry James's turn-of-the-century novels, in which there was no hint of war, past or approaching, except that of the sexes.

Paris, when we finally got there, seemed to our depressed spirits like the veritable capital city of Beginning. Her heart was warm and gay, all right, but there was hysteria in its beat, and the kind of compulsive elation psychiatrists strive to cure. Girls snatched overseas caps and tunic buttons from American soldiers, paying for them in hugs and kisses, and even warmer coin. A frightened Negro dough-boy from Alabama said, "If this happened to me back home, they'd hang me." The Folies Bergères and the Casino de Paris, we found a few nights later, were headquarters of the New Elation, filled with generous ladies of joy, some offering their charms free to drinking, laughing and brawling Americans in what was left of their uniforms. At the Folies a quickly composed song called "*Finie la Guerre*" drew a dozen encores. Only the American MP's were grim,

as they moved among the crowds looking for men who were AWOL, telling roistering captains and majors to dress up their uniforms. Doughboy French, that wonderful hybrid, bloomed everywhere, "*Restez ici a minute,*" one private said to his French girl. "*Je returny après cet guy partirs.*" *Cet* guy was, of course, a big-jawed military policeman set on putting a stop to non-regulation hilarity.

"I do not understand the Americans," a Casino girl told me. "They fight at night with each other, they break mirrors, they become bloody, they say goddamn everybody, and the next day what do you think? They are in the Parc Monceau on all fours giving little French children a ride on their backs. They are marvelous. I love them."

The Americans have never been so loved in France, or anywhere else abroad, as they were in those weeks of merriment and wild abandon. When, late in 1919, most of our soldiers had sailed back home, *La Vie Parisienne* had a full-page color drawing of an American officer over whose full-length figure dozens of lovely miniature French girls were rapturously climbing, and the caption ruefully observed: "The hearts of our young ladies have gone home with the Americans."

My trunk had stayed on the *Orizaba*. Corcoran and I had been the only two civilians on board, and transports were not used to unloading non-military baggage. All I had was the clothes I wore—my hat had been claimed as a souvenir—and I set about the considerable task of buying a wardrobe, paying what amounted to five dollars for B.V.D.'s at the Galeries Lafayette. A suit I bought at a shop deceptively called "Jack, American Tailor" is packed away in the modest files of secret memory. It might have been made by the American Can Company. I tried on hats for an hour in a shop on the Avenue de l'Opéra, upon whose civilian stock the dust of four years of war had settled. There were narrow-brimmed hats, each with a feather stuck on one side, that made me look like Larry Semon, movie comic of the silent days, and some that would have delighted that great connoisseur of funny hats, Mr. Ed Wynn. They were all placed on my head with an excited "*Voilà!*" by the eager salesman, and they were all too small, as well as grotesque. In one of the famous black, broad-brimmed hats, long and lovingly associated with the painters and poets of Bohemian Paris, I looked like a baleful figure attending the funeral of Art. I nearly broke the salesman's heart when I turned down a ten-gallon white Stetson he had dug up out

of the cellar. So I went through that cold, dank Paris winter without a hat.

I had bought a cane, which in Columbus would have identified me as a lounge lizard of dubious morals, and I acquired enough boulevard French to say, "*Où est la Place de la Concorde?*" and to reply to "*Voulez-vous une petite caresse?*" My *tout ensemble* was strange, but not strange enough to deceive doughboys and gobs wandering along the Champs Elysées, homesick and disconsolate after the elation died down. I helped them decipher the small red-and-black French-English dictionaries they carried and told them that, contrary to their invariable conviction, they would not be stuck in "this godforsaken city" forever. Once I translated, for a puzzled demoiselle, a mysterious note she had got through the mails from a doughboy who had returned to her one day before *cet* guy had partired. It began, "I am in a place I cannot leave." I managed to explain to her that her boy had been jailed for being absent without leave. I gathered that he had been, when on the loose, a great lover, fighter and piggy-back rider, like the others. "I wish to cry on your shirt," his girl friend told me, and she cried on my shirt. That astonished shirt, stained with *Lacrimae Puellae 1919*, must have cost a lot, but all I remember is that the amazing French shirttail reached to my knees.

When I got to France, the franc was worth almost a quarter, but pretty soon you could get fourteen francs for your dollar, and since prices didn't rise as rapidly as the franc fell, the \$2,000 annual salary of a code clerk began to mean something. One amateur speculator among us, certain that the franc would come back with all the resilience of Paris, bought up francs and was wiped out when *la chute* continued. In my nearly forty years off and on in France I have seen this coin of a thousand values vary from 5.30 to 350. "It will be as worthless as dandelions," a dour concierge predicted in 1919, but she was wrong.

"Ah, *ces américains*," sighed a Folies girl one evening. "*Quels hommes!* They are such good bad boys. They wish to spend the night, even the weekend." She went on to explain how this complicated the economic structure of one in her profession. She was used, in the case of other foreigners, to a nightly transference of paid affections as neatly maneuvered as the changing of partners in a square dance. "These Americans are men born to marry," my informant went on. Many of them—thousands, I believe—

did marry French girls and took them home to an astonished Brooklyn, a disapproving Middle West, and occasionally more amiable regions. I read somewhere in 1928 that about 75 per cent of these wartime marriages had ended in the return of the brides to France. One of those who stayed wrote me a letter a quarter of a century ago in which she said, dolorously, "There is not the life in Detroit. It is not Paris. Can you send me some books in French?" She had married a great big good bad American Army lieutenant. I sent her, among other books in French, the poems of Mallarmé and the book Clemenceau wrote after the war. I often wonder what finally became of another girl who married a sailor and went to live in Iowa, and what they thought of her English out there. She had learned it all from the plays of Shakespeare and it was quaint and wonderful to hear, but definitely not for Iowa. "How goes the night?" she asked me once, straight out of *Macbeth*, to which I was proudly able to reply, "The moon is down. I have not heard the clock." This Gallic Elizabethan had given up working for a few francs a week in a garment factory for a more lucrative and less monotonous career. Once I met her by appointment, and in pursuit of my sociological studies, on the terrace of the Café de la Paix, where, over vermouth cassis, she explained that she was going to meet, in half an hour, an American captain whom she had comforted one night long ago when he didn't have a sou. It seems he had promised to meet her at the café and pay his debt of gratitude, and he had written her from somewhere and fixed an hour. "He will be here," she said confidently, and she was right. A quiet, almost shy good bad boy, he slipped her a sealed envelope while I studied the passing throng in which, true prophecy has it, you will see everybody you know if you sit at your table long enough. I still remember that what he ordered was chocolate ice cream.

The City of Light, during most of 1919, was costumed like a wide-screen Technicolor operetta, the uniforms of a score of nations forming a kind of restless, out-of-step finale. The first Bastille Day celebration after the war was a carnival that dazzled the eye and lifted the heart. Chairs at windows of buildings along the route of march cost as much as fifty dollars, and stepladders on the crowded sidewalks could be rented for fifteen dollars. At night, in a thousand "tin bars," as our men called bistros, and in more elaborate *boîtes de nuit*, the Americans often changed the

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