

BREAKING CONVENTIONS

FIVE COUPLES IN SEARCH OF MARRIAGE-CAREER BALANCE AT THE TURN OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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3. Separate Careers, Separate Lives: Elsie Clews Parsons and Herbert Parsons

Alice Freeman Palmer and Grace Chisholm Young failed to maintain their professional careers because they were constrained by their traditional views of love and marriage. Elsie Clews Parsons shattered those barriers. Born in 1874, she became an avowed feminist and a determined rebel. Her early life was a rebellion against her mother; her later life was a rebellion against her husband. As a wife, mother of four, PhD in sociology, college teacher and social critic turned anthropologist, Elsie boldly rejected old-fashioned values and behavior and struggled to rewrite the terms of early twentieth-century marriage and gender relationships. Offering a bold critique of marriage customs, she championed a broad set of marital reforms that anticipated practices advanced by second wave feminism sixty years later. Her life-long journey of self-exploration and cultural discovery led her from the glittering society of Newport, Rhode Island to the earnest reformism of Progressive Manhattan and Washington, DC; then to the bohemian, avant-garde world of Greenwich Village; and finally to the indigenous cultures of the American Southwest, Mexico, and Peru.

After a crisis in her marriage to Herbert Parsons, a lawyer and politician who served three terms in the US House of Representatives, Elsie began to construct — sometimes haltingly, often painfully, but always deliberately — a lifestyle more in keeping with her beliefs about the way women and men ought to live. Her vision of companionate romance and marriage placed work — the woman's as well as the man's — at the core of a relationship. She expected each partner to support the other's career — not just to tolerate it, but to encourage it, share it,

and create the conditions that would allow it to flourish. When Herbert failed to provide the engagement and encouragement she desired in her work, she turned to other men for intellectual stimulation and emotional support. In her affairs, as well as her marriage, she strove to make her partner's engagement in her work a foundation for romance and passion. Carving out a new standard, living up to it herself, and finding a male partner who would live up to it was not easy for Elsie, despite the clarity of her vision and her fierce determination to lead the life she wanted rather than the life others expected of her. Shaping her personal life around her work, leading a separate life from her husband, and having affairs made it possible for her to remain married and continue to work — but these strategies were not wholly satisfactory solutions to her marriage-career dilemma.

A Rebel in the Making

Elsie was brought up in a world of wealth and ostentatious social display. Her father, Henry Clews, Sr., a Wall Street banker, was a self-made millionaire. Her mother, Lucy Madison Worthington Clews, a Southerner by birth, had social standing and political connections. Their marriage was more of a business arrangement than a romantic union.¹ The Clews family — which included Elsie's two younger brothers, one of whom died in 1890, at the age of thirteen — wintered in New York and summered in Newport with the Astors and the Vanderbilts. Lucy's parties were noted in the Newport newspaper columns and she was dubbed "Newport's best-dressed lady."²

Elsie's rebellion against social artifice and the idle lives of Society women was as much a rebellion against her mother as rejection of a social system. Pampered, protected, and passionately interested in high society and fashion, Lucy Clews was the epitome of all that Elsie disliked about traditional womanhood. She brought Elsie up to be a dutiful

1 Lissa Parsons Kennedy, "Reminiscences of Elsie Parsons Kennedy." Interview by Allen Nevins, November 11, 1962. Columbia University, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Oral History Archives at Columbia. Copies are in the American Philosophical Society Library, Elsie Clews Parsons Papers (APS) and the Rye Historical Society, Parsons Family Papers (RHS).

2 Peter H. Hare, *A Woman's Quest for Science: Portrait of Anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), pp. 27–28.

daughter and a decorative, compliant, and dependent lady like herself. "Adapt yourself [...] do not force any of your own ideas no matter how convinced you are of being right," Lucy admonished. "Be careful of your manners, & *your voice*."³ Henry Clews's views of womanhood were equally traditional. Believing that a woman found her "crowning glory in homemaking and domestic life," he publicly deplored the "modern woman" who focused her energies and ambitions outside the home.⁴

Actively rejecting parental strictures, Elsie got in trouble as a youngster for playing with boys and going on "wild rides" on her horse. As an adolescent she defied her mother by not wearing a veil or a corset.⁵ Offended by the hypocrisy of formal social life, she refused to exchange endearments, use affectionate greetings, or send thank you notes. When she insisted on going to college, she was condemned for being "selfish" for thinking about her own interests instead of "stay[ing] home [...] and be[ing] companionable to my mother."⁶ It was only after Elsie created "quite a ruckus" that her more indulgent father finally gave his consent.⁷

Elsie enrolled at Barnard College in 1892, three years after it opened, and continued to live at home and accompany her mother to Europe every summer. Elsie worked hard at Barnard and also sparkled at balls, dinners, receptions, and weekend house parties.⁸ Fearful that she would slip into a purposeless life, she reminded herself that an "intellectual life must be always of supreme importance" and her goal was "Accomplishment."⁹

3 APS, Lucy Clews to EC, August 28, 1888 and August 20, 1888. Emphasis in the original.

4 Quoted in Rosemary Levy Zumwalt, *Wealth and Rebellion: Elsie Clews Parsons, Anthropologist and Folklorist* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 36.

5 ECP, *The Journal of a Feminist* with a New Introduction and Notes by Margaret C. Jones (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), p. 86. ECP's typed manuscript, "The Journal of a Feminist" (1913–1914), is in APS and quoted later in this chapter. "Journal of a Feminist" was not published during Elsie's lifetime.

6 APS, ECP, "Selfishness". While it was becoming acceptable for the daughters of the middle class to go to college in the early 1890s, daughters of rich and prominent families rarely did. See Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 64.

7 Kennedy, "Reminiscences."

8 APS, EC to Sam Dexter, November 19 [1893] and December 13, 1893.

9 RHS, ECP, Journal 1893–1894.

During her sophomore year, Elsie enjoyed a close friendship with Sam Dexter, a twenty-six-year old Harvard graduate who shared her intellectual interests as well as her spirit of adventure and fun. The son of a wealthy and successful corporate lawyer in Chicago, he was pursuing a law career in Chicago when he met Elsie in the summer of 1893 in Newport. They maintained a lively correspondence, in which they discussed Elsie's "gay butterfly career", the books they were reading, and their views on women's suffrage.¹⁰ Elsie's mother encouraged the relationship, which she regarded as a budding romance. The two families planned to travel together in Europe during the summer of 1894. But Sam died suddenly and unexpectedly that May, after a very brief illness.¹¹

Scholarship, Courtship, and Civic Engagement: 1894–1900

Elsie mourned Sam but did not withdraw from her busy life. Returning to Barnard in the fall, she became more serious about her studies. She took up sociology, conducted field work in New York's immigrant communities, founded a chapter of the College Settlement Association at Barnard, and became active in the national organization.¹²

In late 1894, barely six months after Sam's death, she met Herbert Parsons at a weekend house party in Lenox, Massachusetts. A twenty-five-year-old lawyer with political aspirations, Herbert was instantly drawn to Elsie whom he found "charming, beautiful, and intelligent." More than twenty years later, he would recall that she was "regarded as a wonderful person because she was in college and enjoyed herself also."¹³ Like both Elsie and Sam, Herbert came from a privileged

10 APS, EC correspondence with Sam Dexter, October–December, 1893.

11 Elsie preserved a lock of Sam's baby hair along with his letters. She and Sam's mother maintained a correspondence until Elsie married. Elsie's friendship with Sam's sister, Katherine, continued for decades.

12 Adapted from the model of Toynbee Hall in London, the settlement house movement that took root in America in the 1890s prompted middle-class women and men to live in communal residences in inner city neighborhoods and provide classes and other supports to the immigrant populations who lived in the area. The settlements in the College Settlement Association network were supervised and staffed by college-educated women.

13 APS, enclosure "for the children" in HP to ECP, May 12, 1918.

background. The son of a prominent and wealthy New York attorney, he was educated at elite private schools — St. Paul's School, Yale University, Harvard Law School — and spent a year studying at the University of Berlin. Although the two families lived within blocks of each other in Manhattan, Elsie and Herbert moved in different social circles. The Episcopalian Clews summered in Newport; the Presbyterian Parsons summered in Lenox, Massachusetts.

Elsie and Herbert quickly developed a close friendship, but she had no interest in a traditional romance. He joined her in the vigorous outdoor activities that she liked — ice-skating, bicycling, horseback-riding, and sledding — and escorted her to the concerts and plays he enjoyed. A keen sense of humor added to his appeal. Walking a difficult line between companionship and courtship, he adapted himself to her rules. He learned not to send her flowers after an argument; he refrained from dropping in unexpectedly to see her; he arranged their dates to fit around her schedule (which meant having to go on very early bicycle rides around the city); he avoided taking a chaperone along whenever he could.¹⁴

Like many gifted, ambitious, career-minded women in the nineteenth century, Elsie was reluctant to marry, even after she fell in love with a man who loved her and admired her accomplishments. Throughout five years of friendship with Herbert, she distinguished herself in her academic work and made steady progress through graduate school. She was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and after graduating from Barnard in 1896, she enrolled (despite her mother's disapproval) in a master's program in sociology at Columbia University, two years after the school opened its graduate programs to women. She wrote her thesis on New York City's poor relief system after reviewing hundreds of case records, volunteered at New York's College Settlement, and became treasurer of the national College Settlement Association. In 1897, she was offered a paid position as headworker at the Friendly Aid Society's settlement house, but her parents objected so strenuously that she turned it down.¹⁵ Elsie shrewdly turned the situation to her advantage by getting her parents to agree that if she lived in their home, she could work for a PhD

14 RHS, HP to EC, November 8, 1895; HP to EC, November 11, 1895.

15 RHS, Mary Ashley to EC, July 2, 1897.

degree at Columbia and would no longer be required to accompany her mother to Europe every summer.¹⁶

Elsie and Herbert's mutual interest in municipal government, progressive reforms, and civic philanthropy strengthened the bond between them. Although Herbert did not share Elsie's iconoclastic views on social norms, and was often too reserved for her tastes, he was a self-described reformer who favored quick action. Like Elsie, he chafed against his family's values and strictures while remaining tightly enclosed within the family circle. He worked in his father's law firm, but devoted himself to politics, to his father's disapproval and disappointment. Herbert's decision to ally with the progressive wing of the Republican Party, work against the Democratic Tammany Hall machine, and root out municipal corruption shocked his male relatives, who traditionally voted Democratic. The only son in a family of four daughters (a fifth sister died young), Herbert was familiar with many of the gender constraints that grated on Elsie.

Herbert was reliable, dependable, and safe. As their relationship developed, Elsie indulged the more adventurous, thrill-seeking side of her personality in her friendship with the famed architect Stanford White. Married and twenty years older than Elsie, the cultured, sophisticated, and fun-loving White enjoyed the company of young women and was very fond of Elsie. Herbert was greatly affronted when Elsie's mother would not allow her to go camping with him, his married sister and husband, and another friend in 1897. Lucy Clews feared the Parsons family would not be adequate chaperones, but allowed Elsie to attend a house party at White's Long Island home instead. Earlier that summer Elsie had gone to Canada on a camping trip with White, his wife, and another young female friend.¹⁷

Herbert was not a social rebel or an iconoclast, but he sympathized with and supported Elsie's scholarly aspirations and civic activities when others poked fun at them.¹⁸ When she announced her plans to go

16 RHS, Lucy Clews to EC, September 21, 1897 and October 25, 1897.

17 RHS, HP to EC, July 28, 1897; Lucy Clews to HP, September 14 [1897]; HP to EC, September 1, 1897 and September 22, 1897.

18 One admirer who was given her graduate thesis to read commented, "P. H. D. Pretty Hard Drudgery!" (RHS, John Bost to EC, February 17 [1900]). Another told her it would take him longer to read it than it had taken her to write it (RHS, Henry Barbey to EC, December 13, 1899).

to graduate school, she was outraged by White's entreaty: "*Please* do not — why in the name of Heaven when you know you [are] young & lovely & intelligent and that everyone else knows it [...] — why must you go & waste any of it on a lot of musty-fusty & dusty old professors?"¹⁹ In contrast, Herbert asked to read Elsie's PhD thesis on education policy in colonial America because he was genuinely interested in the topic. He provided her with statistics on municipal trends, helped her when she was running a boys' history club at a settlement house, and invited her as his guest to the annual meeting of the Legal Aid Society of which he was a director.²⁰

Their relationship entered a new phase in the late spring of 1898, when Herbert, in an outpouring of patriotism, volunteered to fight in the Spanish American War. (He never saw action, but he was sent to a training camp.) While he was away, Elsie finally admitted that she was in love with him. "[N]o one has ever loved me the way I think you do, and it seems a wonderful thing," she wrote to Herbert.²¹ Years later, recalling the "freedom and joy" she experienced when she fell in love with Herbert, she confessed, "There is nothing in the world, in my world, like the happiness of that feeling."²² Nevertheless, she insisted she could never marry him. "You and I are both people of very firm ideals, I cannot marry you or it would be giving up my ideals [...] you must not go on loving me as you have done for it would be giving up your ideals," she explained.²³

Elsie was opposed to marriage, in principle, because she saw it as a social institution that cultivated undesirable traits in both men and women. In her view, marriage inevitably fostered dullness, possessiveness, and dependence; she wanted freedom and adventure, not staid domestic routines and constraints. Occasionally, she felt more hopeful about marriage. After visiting a married cousin, she wrote Herbert, "It has thrown new light for me on matrimonial possibilities. They have been married 12 years and the romance persists as I have

19 RHS, Stanford White to EC [undated]. Emphasis in the original. Similarly, Stanford White to EC, 12 July 1897. He too teased her about her scholarly initials.

20 RHS, HP to EC, February 2, 1898.

21 APS, EC to HP, June 19, 1898.

22 APS, ECP to HP, June 7, 1909.

23 APS, EC to HP [n.d., probably 1898].

never seen it before."²⁴ But dining with newly married friends depressed her. "If I could advocate matrimony it would be on very different lines from what I see these people are talking. They have no imagination and no humor." If she were to marry, she informed Herbert, she would do it "just to show people how" a marriage should be constructed.²⁵

Elsie feared that she and Herbert were too ill-matched to be happy together. Knowing that her "peculiar views" were too unconventional for him, she repeatedly expressed dismay at the thought she would "displease" or "disappoint" him.²⁶ She was equally conflicted about her own behavior. Her letters reveal a tension, for example, between her resistance to playing a "passive and receptive" role and her occasional, perhaps, unintentional, lapses into it. "I am feeling just now as dependent on you as ever you could wish me to be," she confessed in the fall of 1898.²⁷ The physical passion Herbert aroused in her made it hard for Elsie to assert her independence. She wanted Herbert to know she was "really hard and set." But she admitted, "I can't appear that way when you hold me in your arms. For I am not like that then."²⁸

Although the tensions were mounting, Elsie and Herbert maintained their unsettled relationship for another year and a half. At times, she urged him to break off their relationship and find a more suitable partner, but whenever he seemed inclined to do so, she was greatly distressed.²⁹ Elsie's post-graduate school plans provoked a very serious rift in April 1899, when she was unexpectedly offered a newly created Hartley House fellowship to supervise student field work in Franklin Giddings' sociology course at Barnard. Pressed to decide quickly, she accepted, without discussing it with Herbert. When he reacted with dismay — he must have seen this as yet another obstacle to their marriage — she admonished him, "Don't say again that 'our paths in life lie wide apart.' It is not true."³⁰ Nevertheless, she again asserted that she could not marry him. "I have not changed

24 APS, EC to HP, May 21 [1898].

25 APS, EC to HP [August 15, 1898].

26 APS, EC to HP [August 15, 1898]; EC to HP, June 28, 1898; EC to HP [November 25, 1898].

27 APS, EC to HP [September 26, 1898].

28 APS, EC to HP, [n.d.]; similarly, EC to HP, July 13, 1899.

29 APS, EC to HP [October 3, 1898] and November 3, 1898.

30 APS, EC to HP [April 1899]. RHS, Franklin Giddings to EC, April 17, 1899.

my aversion to matrimony; indeed, it is stronger than ever, or rather I am more convinced than ever I shall never marry. For, although I love you better than I love or can conceive of loving anybody else, — moreover, if I had to choose between you on one side and all my family and friends on the other I would choose you — yet I should let you go entirely out of my life rather than marry you.”³¹

Once again, Elsie announced that they should stop seeing each other, and urged Herbert to end the relationship.³² There was a break, but by the end of June, they were back together and talking about marrying. The obstacles still seemed overwhelming to Elsie, but she was looking for ways around the difficulties. She assured Herbert, for example, that she would respect his religious faith, but because she did not share it, she could not worship with him.³³ (A staunch Presbyterian, he had seriously considered becoming a minister; she was an avowed atheist.)

Elsie was still struggling to find the right balance between love and work, dependence and independence, separation and connection — issues that would bedevil her for decades. Rejecting the nineteenth-century ideal of marital “oneness”, she had warned Herbert not to become totally absorbed by her or by their joint life. “[D]on’t tell me ever again, even lightly, that I came between you and your work,” she protested. “In a high minded mood it would trouble me, and at other times it would give me a base satisfaction not good for me.”³⁴ When he now expressed unhappiness about being apart from her, she responded, “Sweetheart, many of the happiest days of your life you are to spend without my presence. I wish it so [...] I could not bear to shut you off from everything.”³⁵

As they wrestled with their personal relationship, both Elsie and Herbert reached new professional milestones. Elsie was awarded her PhD in sociology in June, 1899; she published an article about her approach to sociological field work in *The Educational Review* and was asked to present a paper at the American Association for the

31 APS, EC to HP, April 29, 1899.

32 APS, EC to HP, May 22, 1899; June 21, 1899.

33 APS, EC to HP [July 20, 1899].

34 APS, EC to HP, June 30, 1898.

35 APS, EC to HP, July 17, 1899.

Advancement of Science.³⁶ In the fall, she started her position as the Hartley House Fellow. In November, Herbert was elected to his first public office as a Manhattan alderman (the equivalent of today's city councilman).

In early November 1899, Elsie was still protesting, "I am not fit to be your wife."³⁷ But at the end of the month, she finally agreed to marry Herbert, after what she described as "an anguished night" of "some hysteria." She announced her decision in language that echoed the formulaic surrender imagery expected of nineteenth-century women. "You won last night, my hero. In my heart of hearts, if not in my mind of minds, I think you are entirely right — and that I am entirely wrong. But please have patience with me," she begged.³⁸

Elsie was not one to shrink from a challenge. Some years before, she had been upset when her brother accused her of being "afraid" to marry.³⁹ Giving up experiences was not part of her philosophy of living. Now she had the opportunity to show how marriage should be done, with Herbert a willing, if somewhat reluctant or dubious partner in the experiment. Herbert appealed to Elsie as an independent thinker who was knowledgeable about municipal affairs, an ambitious and hard worker, and a man of principle. It was reasonable to expect that marriage to him would keep her from sliding into the frivolous social life she wanted to avoid. He seemed to offer a promising blend of work and play, and appeared likely to be a companionate partner as well as a romantic lover.

But the primary reason Elsie married Herbert, it appears, is that, despite all their differences, she truly loved him and found it impossible to let him go. This was not a marriage of convenience or a pragmatic arrangement: it was a love match. But as Elsie understood only too well, it was a very risky undertaking. It is striking that, rather than breaking out of her wealthy and privileged world, as many of her career-minded compatriots did, the iconoclastic Elsie married someone from her own social class who was not entirely sympathetic to her unorthodox views and concerns.

36 RHS, William H. Hale to EC, June 7, 1899.

37 APS, EC to HP, November 1, 1899.

38 APS, EC to HP, November 27, 1899.

39 RHS, ECP Journal, 1893–1894.



Fig. 4 Elsie and Herbert on a camping trip with family and friends in 1900. Unknown photographer. American Philosophical Society Library, Elsie Clews Parsons Papers.

Elsie agreed to marry but not to give up her work. When their engagement was formally announced, her colleagues applauded her plans to continue with her professional and volunteer activities. The announcement in the *Herald Tribune* on May 30, 1900 described Elsie's activities and accomplishments in more detail than Herbert's. Barnard College trustee Annie Nathan Meyer enthusiastically assured her that the college would continue to pay her Hartley House Fellowship stipend.⁴⁰ However, some admirers feared she was backing away from what would have been a brilliant future. A Barnard faculty member lamented, "I am not going to congratulate you at all. You and Alice Duer were the two girls I had made up my mind would make great names for yourselves, and show women what they can do and now you just come down to the level of us ordinary mortals."⁴¹

40 RHS, Annie Nathan Meyer to EC, June 7 [1900].

41 RHS, A. R. Cross to EC, June 7 [1900]. Alice Duer, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Barnard College and friend of Elsie, married Henry Wise Miller in 1900, and moved with him to Costa Rica where his rubber business failed. After returning to New

Elsie spent the final weeks before her wedding in Newport. She was amused when her mother's staff gave her lessons in stocking and managing a house and taught her how to clean silver.⁴² Back in New York, Herbert, aided by his older sister, Mamie, was making many decisions about furnishing, decorating, and provisioning their new home. Herbert was fussy, and did not always agree with Elsie's choice of china and silver patterns, lamps, and dining room furniture. Often, he and Mamie chose something that was grander and more ornate than what Elsie favored.⁴³ She genuinely seemed not to mind, and expressed relief that she did not have to spend more of her time on domestic details.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the hard won balance of her world was shifting. Acknowledging her growing dependence on Herbert, Elsie wrote, "There is nothing to put in the scale against you now — not even the Hartley House fellowship."⁴⁵ (It had been extended for a second year.) He assured her that their partnership would focus on work and accomplishment as well as personal happiness. "I want to make you happy & in that way if no other help you to accomplish real purposes," he promised. "I also believe that what we now plan is a truer & a fuller life, not only in its pleasures but also in its responsibilities, than that you ever contemplated."⁴⁶

Elsie and Herbert were married at "The Rocks," the Clews's summer home in Newport, on September 1, 1900. Elsie was three months shy of twenty-five — too old to marry, according to her mother, who believed that a woman of twenty-five was likely to be "too set in her ways" to make a good wife.⁴⁷ Society notables, including the Astors and the Vanderbilts, attended the wedding breakfast, but the New York press

York in 1903 with their infant son, she became a successful poet, novelist, and screen writer. A feminist and a suffragist, she won fame for a collection of satirical poems entitled "Are Women People?", published in 1915. See Sue G. Walcutt, "Alice Duer Miller", in *Notable American Women 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. by Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1975), II, pp. 538–40.

42 APS, EC to HP, June 29, 1900; similarly, EC to HP, June 11 and June 14, 1900.

43 RHS, HP to EC, July 12, 1900; July 15, 1900; July 20, 1900; July 27, 1900; August 13, 1900.

44 RHS, Mary Parsons to HP, July 31, 1900.

45 APS, EC to HP, July 25, 1900.

46 RHS, HP to EC, July 28, 1900.

47 RHS, ECP Journal, 1893–1894

reported on Elsie's aversion to social display, interest in "serious" matters, and desire to keep the wedding "as simple as possible."⁴⁸ Elsie and Herbert had considered a honeymoon trip to Mexico but, knowing that Herbert might be nominated as a congressional candidate, they settled for a more sedate trip to New England. Their honeymoon ended abruptly when Herbert was nominated as the Republican Congressional candidate from a Democratic stronghold in Manhattan, a race he knew he could not win. They quickly returned to the city, where Herbert waged an exhausting but unsuccessful campaign.

Early Married Life, 1900–1904

Despite Elsie's reservations, the early years of the Parsons's marriage were very happy. Highly companionate, intense, and "accomplishful", their relationship fulfilled their vision of a marriage that incorporated meaningful work with personal pleasure. "Accomplishful" was the term Elsie and Herbert used to describe time spent in purposeful, productive endeavor that had good results. It was a touchstone by which they judged the value of their days; when they were apart, they kept each other informed about their accomplishful activities.

As she hoped, Elsie was showing others how marriage should be done. She broke through traditional constraints with gusto but tempered her iconoclasm with sympathetic consideration for Herbert. They avoided the dependence, possessiveness, and boredom that she feared marriage inevitably fostered.

Elsie began her second year as a Hartley Fellow a month after her wedding and was pregnant a few weeks later. Elsie and Herbert's reactions to the pregnancy and birth show the mutual support, easy camaraderie, and affectionate teasing that characterized their relationship. Both were delighted but sobered at the prospect of having a baby. Elsie seemed happier for Herbert than for herself. Informing him, she wrote, "This is very satisfying, isn't it? I want so much to help in bringing *everything* to you that you want, that I can't help being pleased."⁴⁹ Herbert expressed

48 *New York Herald*, September 2, 1900, quoted in Hare, p. 41.

49 APS, ECP to HP, December 4, 1900; emphasis in the original.

joy, but admitted, "I am so happy in the *e duobus unum* state that even a change to an *e tribus unum* seems to have perils."⁵⁰

Herbert had reservations about Elsie's intention to meet with her Barnard students during her pregnancy, but did not tell her to stop. Knowing that his cautious approach made him seem like a "pettifogger" unable to see the big issue, he proudly queried, "Was I not discreetly silent?"⁵¹ Undaunted, Elsie flouted the convention that kept pregnant women confined to the home, and, despite bouts of morning sickness, supervised her students' field work through the rest of the academic year.⁵²

While Elsie wanted a boy, Herbert hoped for a girl. A daughter might do more than a son to advance the feminist causes Elsie cared about, he noted.⁵³ After Lissa was born in early August 1901 (two weeks late), Elsie, possibly with Herbert's help, produced an account of her birth, written from the baby's point of view. The journal, which includes only a few entries, provides an intimate glimpse into their marriage. Lissa hails the new century of womanhood and vows, "I'll teach [mother] to be glad I came and I'll be to her the best companion she could have, barring, of course, father." Observing that her parents "seem to like each other a great deal" and her father kisses her mother often, although rarely in front of other people, the baby reflects, "Love must be a wonderful, splendid thing."⁵⁴

Elsie relished her new role. After visiting an unmarried friend in December 1901, she gushed to Herbert, "I wish that she had a *loving* husband and — a baby. But I naturally find myself wishing that for everyone to whom I wish well. A little bit of paradise on earth."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, she was back in the classroom at the start of the academic

50 RHS, HP to ECP, December 6, 1900; emphasis in the original.

51 Ibid.

52 RHS, ECP, 1900 Diary. RHS, Franklin Giddings to ECP, June 20, 1901.

53 RHS, HP to ECP, December 6, 1900.

54 RHS, "Diary of Elsie [Lissa] Parsons from the day of her birth, Tuesday August 6, 1901." The diary, which is in a box of Elsie's papers, has been attributed to Elsie. The handwriting appears to be Herbert's, although the style — text heavily annotated with footnotes — is characteristic of Elsie. The sentimental tone and language seem more like Herbert than Elsie. Possibly Elsie dictated it to Herbert, but he might have helped write it as a tribute to Elsie and Lissa and an expression of his love.

55 APS, ECP to HP, December 27, 1901. Emphasis in the original. Similarly, ECP to HP, January 29, 1903.

year, two months after Lissa's birth. For the next four years, she juggled motherhood, teaching, and volunteer work with aplomb.

Elsie was promoted to Lecturer in Sociology at Barnard and took over Giddings' class in the fall of 1902, just about the time she became pregnant again. Her translation of French sociologist Gabriel Tarde's *Laws of Imitation* was published a month after her son, John, was born in August 1903. Tarde's seminal work analyzed the ways societies absorb and adapt parts of outside cultures, a topic that Elsie would continue to explore throughout her professional life.⁵⁶ She missed the annual fall meeting of the College Settlement Association in Boston because she was nursing John, but she was teaching her class at Barnard in October 1903.⁵⁷

Elsie kept up a busy round of volunteer activities. She engaged in many of the causes and activities that college graduates of her day typically pursued, but she approached them in novel ways. She shocked co-workers at the College Settlement House with what they termed her "socialistic" views.⁵⁸ She raised money for and served as Treasurer of Greenwich House, the pioneering settlement founded by her friend Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch. It replaced the religious philanthropy of the "lady bountiful" tradition with a nonsectarian, more scientific approach to working with poor families.⁵⁹ The Tenement House Commissioner commended Elsie's efforts to protect the safety conditions required by law in tenement homes.⁶⁰ She tried to get herself appointed as the first woman on the New York City Board of Education, but when Mayor Seth Low was reluctant to appoint a woman, she had to settle for an appointment on her local school board.⁶¹ That experience was liberating: the evening Elsie attended her first school board meeting in 1902 was the first night she went out alone and unchaperoned, she would later write — a striking indication of how constrained the lives of upper-class unmarried women were in this period.⁶² As a married woman,

56 On Elsie's interest in Tarde, see Desley Deacon, *Elsie Clews Parsons: Inventing Modern Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 35–37.

57 RHS, Katherine Coman to ECP, November 5, 1903.

58 RHS, Florence Wardell to ECP, December 2, 1902.

59 C. C., "New Settlement Theory," *The New York Times*, August 24, 1902, p. 25.

60 RHS, Tenement House Commissioner to ECP, May 7, 1903.

61 RHS, Nicholas M. Butler to ECP, November 29, 1901; President of the Borough of Manhattan to ECP, March 6, 1902.

62 ECP, *Journal of a Feminist*, p. 94.

she enjoyed more freedom than she had as the sheltered daughter of a socially prominent and proper family.

Visiting her mother in Newport, Elsie took pride in the contrast between her busy life and her female relatives' lives of idle pleasure. "Mama and [cousin] Louise dress, i.e., bathe, curl, anoint, powder, manicure, etc., and think about dress all day long. Louise is incredible. She misses her adorable baby, & sews exquisitely, & she & Mama both play cards sometimes in the afternoon & off & on go out to lunch or dinner and that is absolutely all that happens to them [...]. It is an incomprehensible life to me and very sad," Elsie reported to Herbert.⁶³

Herbert was meanwhile emerging as a force to be reckoned with in municipal politics and the progressive wing of the Republican Party. He earned his living as a lawyer, working in the firm headed by his father and his uncle. But his real passion, the activity that brought excitement and adventure to his life, was his political work.⁶⁴ As a Manhattan alderman from 1901 to 1903, he worked to reform city contracting procedures and to break the power of the Democratic Tammany Hall machine. Idealistic but shrewd, he supervised door-to-door organizing to turn out Republican votes and helped to create coalitions between Republicans and anti-Tammany Hall Democrats.⁶⁵ He failed to win nomination as a congressional candidate in 1902, but two years later he became the Republican candidate for Manhattan's Thirteenth Congressional District and went on to win the election.

Elsie and Herbert's professional lives were quite separate, but their mutual commitment to a progressive agenda for political and social reform gave them a common frame of reference and overlapping social and professional circles. Nevertheless, Elsie and Herbert approached their work quite differently. Herbert embraced politics as an opportunity to serve others and advance the general good, not as a pathway for fulfilling personal ambition. Inspired by a deep religious faith, he believed that "the most important thing in the world is service and

63 APS, ECP to HP, September 20, 1905.

64 Kennedy, "Reminiscences."

65 Zumwalt, pp. 63–65; RHS, William Parsons, Jr., "The Progressive Politics of Herbert Parsons" (unpublished undergraduate thesis: Yale University, April 30, 1965). William Parsons is unrelated to Herbert's family.

not self-aggrandizement.”⁶⁶ When he failed to win the congressional nomination for his aldermanic district in 1902, he confessed to Elsie that he “had been suffering from too much Parsons” and was losing sight of his intention to serve but let others have the glory.⁶⁷ Throughout his political career, Herbert would win praise for his professional self-effacement, his willingness to remain in the background, and his ability to be “self-sacrificing and unselfish.”⁶⁸ These traits kept Herbert from adopting the aggressive stance that many politicians exhibited in public life; in private life, they undoubtedly helped him to support Elsie without feeling threatened or displaced from center stage.

Unlike Herbert and many of her female contemporaries, Elsie did not justify her interest in working by appealing to a sense of service or religious duty. She was passionate about improving women’s lives and liberating both men and women from outmoded constraints, but her major concern was self-fulfillment, not service to humanity. She worked because she had a personal need for occupation: research, writing, and teaching kept her busy and focused, and made her a happier and a more interesting person.⁶⁹ It also allowed her to escape from the household routines and conventional female activities that bored her. Far from shying away from personal notoriety, she welcomed and even cultivated it. At this point, her work ethic both impressed and puzzled Herbert. Later in their marriage, their different approaches to work would make for trouble.

In addition to her feminist views, a fortuitous set of circumstances helped Elsie to lead an “accomplishful” life and avoid the agonizing self-doubt that beset many well-to-do wives who worked outside the home. She was exceptionally fortunate in having an opportunity to teach at Barnard at a time when few colleges, including women’s colleges, employed married women faculty and even fewer employed married

66 HP to Charles H. Pankhurst, December 16, 1907, quoted in William Parsons, Jr., “Progressive”, p. 1. See also, Herbert’s speech in *Report of Addresses at a Dinner Tendered to the Honorable Herbert Parsons, Hotel Astor, March 22, 1910*, and his notes for a speech to be given at Yale in 1908. All in RHS.

67 RHS, HP to ECP, October 5, 1902.

68 RHS, speeches by Henry L. Stimson and others in *Report of Addresses at a Dinner Tendered to the Honorable Herbert Parsons, Hotel Astor, March 22, 1910*.

69 RHS, Dolly Potter to EC [March 1, 1895], quoting Elsie. RHS, EC to Percy R. Turwell, June 12 [1895]; APS, ECP to HP, August 4, 1909.

women with children.⁷⁰ She was also fortunate to have a close friend who was similarly combining marriage, motherhood, and career. Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, Elsie's colleague at Columbia University and the Friendly Aid Society settlement, was allowed to keep her live-in position as head resident at the settlement when she married Vladimir Simkhovitch in 1899; but she was required to leave when their son was born in 1902.⁷¹ When Mary founded and became the director of a new settlement, Greenwich House, later that year, she moved into it with her family.

Mary's exuberant correspondence with Elsie conveys the pleasure and pride both women took in forging new lifestyles that accommodated marriage, motherhood, and professional work. Sharing confidences about their pregnancies, husbands, children, and work, they encouraged and supported each other. Elsie was a generous friend who not only raised money for Greenwich House, but also helped Mary find a baby nurse, and arranged for Mary's children and nursemaid to stay at the Parsons residence in Lenox when Mary was feeling overwhelmed by work and childrearing.⁷²

Elsie also had the financial resources to hire lots of domestic help. The offspring of two very wealthy families, she and Herbert had considerable inherited wealth and lived a very privileged, upper class life although they deliberately abandoned the more lavish lifestyles of their parents. In 1904, Elsie was running her household on \$6,000 per year (around

70 For women faculty members, see Solomon, *Educated Women*, pp. 89–90. Barnard had a checkered history on this issue. Emily James Smith, Barnard's first dean, was allowed to retain the deanship after she married the publisher George Palmer Putnam in 1899. But she was forced to resign a year later when she became pregnant. In the summer of 1906, Harriet Brooks, a Barnard physics instructor, was asked to resign after she announced her engagement. Dean Laura Gill explained that the Barnard trustees expected a married woman to "dignify her homemaking into a profession, and not assume that she can carry on two full professions at a time." Quoted in Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America*, 3 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982–2012), I, p. 16. Elsie was informed in 1907 that Barnard did not hire married women after she had recommended Alice Duer Miller and Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch for positions (RHS, ECP to Nicholas Murray Butler, November 14, 1905; APS, S. B. Brownell to ECP, January 9, 1907).

71 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch" in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. by Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1980), pp. 648–50.

72 RHS, Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch to ECP, May 20 [1902]; October 17 [1905]; October 29 [n.d.]; and Friday [1902].

\$188,000 in today's money). Herbert gave her a personal allowance of \$1,800 (equivalent to about \$57,000 today), half of which she gave away. Her father provided her with an allowance of \$2,500 (\$79,000 today), which went into their savings. Elsie and Herbert gave away between a quarter and a third of their total income.⁷³

The Parsons lived in a five-story brownstone on East 35th Street in Manhattan, and had the use of Lounsberry, Herbert's father's thirty-acre estate in Harrison, New York which had a house with eight master bedrooms and ten servant bedrooms.⁷⁴ Elsie and the children spent summers in Newport, staying in the Clews's magnificent mansion perched on a rocky cliff above the ocean. In the late summer and early fall they stayed in a small house on the grounds of Stonover Farm, the Parsons family estate in Lenox, Massachusetts. (The main house had forty-five rooms.)⁷⁵ Herbert typically joined them on weekends. This schedule greatly reduced Elsie's housekeeping and hostessing responsibilities and gave her opportunities to sail, ride, and swim, activities which she loved. Their Manhattan household employed many servants, including several maids, a cook, a waitress, an occasional baby nurse, nursemaids, and other attendants for the children. Gardeners and chauffeurs were employed in other residences. In later years, Elsie would describe the moves between households as more complicated than the annual migrations of a native tribe.⁷⁶

Like most women of her class, including her own mother, Elsie entrusted much of her children's care to baby nurses, nursemaids, and housemaids. She delegated the routine work, but not the planning and oversight. She kept close tabs on the children's development and conscientiously applied the principles of "scientific" mothering that became fashionable around the turn of the century. She maintained a meticulous record of Lissa's health and growth during her first year,

73 RHS, ECP to Herbert's father, John E. Parsons, September 23, 1904. Current value was calculated by using the CPI inflation calculator at <https://www.officialdata.org/> to compare 1904 and 2021 values.

74 RHS, HP to Pease & Elliman, February 23, 1921.

75 Jennifer Huberdeau, "The Cottager: the Dismantling of Stonover Mansion", *The Berkshire Eagle*, July 25, 2018. https://www.berkshireeagle.com/archives/the-cottager-the-dismantling-of-stonover-mansion/article_87b1b558-c97b-5516-b128-5481972b8ba9.html. RHS, "Description of Stonover after Mary Parsons Died" [1940].

76 APS, ECP to her son, John E. Parsons, December 6, 1916.

documenting her daily intake of food and drink, size and weight, temperature and stool movements.⁷⁷ A handwritten “To Do” list offers a glimpse of Elsie’s balancing act: a list of the work-related tasks to be finished before an upcoming trip fills one side of a sheet of paper; the reverse side lists the baby clothes and accessories needed for the journey.⁷⁸ Elsie filled her letters to Herbert with accounts of the children’s activities. She could be a playful mother, pretending to be Lissa’s horse, building a miniature garden with her, reading her stories and acting them out.⁷⁹

Like other busy working mothers in the professional class who wanted to spend time with their children, Elsie found ways to work while a child played in the same room. When Lissa was four, Elsie was conscientiously training her to amuse herself while Elsie read or wrote by her side.⁸⁰ True to her feminist principles, Elsie was sorely disappointed when her children displayed the gender stereotyping she deplored. “John’s masculine sense is already too developed for my liking. He often says boys do this, girls do that, etc.,” she complained when John was three.⁸¹ She was even more disheartened by Lissa’s interest in clothes, makeup, jewelry, and “pretty things” — proclivities that Elsie blamed on Lucy Clews’s unfortunate influence on her granddaughter.⁸²

Elsie closely monitored the servants’ behavior with the children and intervened when she thought their care was inadequate or their service lax.⁸³ She could be a demanding and critical employer, but many of her staff worked for her for years, and some saw her as a friend and confidante.⁸⁴ She had the highest regard and gratitude for the staff members who made it possible for her to minimize her role but maintain a smoothly running household.⁸⁵

77 APS, Elsie’s Journal of Lissa’s health and growth.

78 RHS, ECP [n.d.].

79 APS, ECP to HP, June 19, 1905; June 25, 1906; July 10, 1906.

80 APS, ECP to HP, October 3, 1905.

81 APS, ECP to HP, October 16, 1906.

82 ECP, *Journal of a Feminist*, p. 86.

83 APS, ECP to HP, June 14, 1904; June 18, 1904; February 24, 1907.

84 APS, Lena Frankfort to ECP, July 10, 1908. Similarly, ECP to HP, October 16, 1906.

85 APS, ECP to HP, May 28, 1903; ECP to HP, May 9, 1917. She left an annual annuity of \$200 to Mary Carmody, who was employed periodically as a baby nurse and child care provider by Elsie over several decades (RHS, ECP’s Last Will and Testament, May 26, 1938).

Herbert's assistance was also critical. Elsie was fortunate to have a husband who was supportive and understanding, if not always enthusiastic, about her activities. She greatly appreciated the ways Herbert "simplifie[d]" domestic life for her.⁸⁶ Before they married, he had taken on much of the responsibility for decorating, furnishing, and staffing their new home, and he arranged for weekly deliveries of fresh food from Lenox. When Elsie was in Lenox, he returned library books for her in Manhattan. When they traveled, he thought about the multiple pieces of luggage that were needed, ensured that all the locks had keys, bought the tickets, and made the hotel reservations. Sometimes he took charge of hiring new staff. Carrying out Elsie's detailed instructions, he contacted employment agencies, reviewed resumes, interviewed candidates, and hired a nursemaid for the children. (The process dragged on because he sometimes forgot to make the necessary phone calls or was too busy to call.)⁸⁷ Herbert also "simplified" Elsie's life by shielding her from her mother's interference and criticisms, spending time with Lucy when Elsie was out of the city, and acting as a "point man" in dealing with her family.⁸⁸ She reciprocated by intervening on his behalf with his father.

Elsie's approach to wifehood was as unconventional as her approach to motherhood. She was unusually candid in informing Herbert that she did not intend to make him the sole focus of her life or adapt to all his tastes and preferences. Her admission, "I miss you *awfully*, Herbert. You have become a part of every bit of me," was balanced by the parenthetical qualification, "Perhaps I ought to except a still lingering fondness for studying the development of the family, etc.", a reference to the importance she continued to place on her teaching and writing.⁸⁹ Explaining that she would not give up smoking cigarettes despite Herbert's objections, she acknowledged, "Theoretically, I suppose I ought to put your moral, intellectual etc. welfare, that is as I see it, first; but as a matter of fact I don't, except sporadically and remorsefully."⁹⁰

86 APS, ECP to HP, May 28, 1903.

87 RHS, HP to ECP, June 20, 1904; June 22, 1904; September 28, 1905; September 30, 1905.

88 RHS, HP to ECP, October 4, 1905 and October 10, 1905.

89 APS, ECP to HP, June 16, 1902; emphasis in the original.

90 APS, ECP to HP, June 28, 1904.

Elsie tried to make Herbert happy, not because she felt her role as a wife required her to cater to and defer to him, but because she loved him.⁹¹

Despite their differences, Elsie and Herbert managed to maintain a delicate equilibrium in these early years together. There were disagreements, but no major stresses. For the most part, they treated each other with respect, sympathy, and understanding, even when they disagreed. Both displayed a strong sense of give and take, and an admirable ability to compromise. And both were highly appreciative of the efforts the other made.

For Herbert's sake, Elsie ran a household and took on a domestic role that did not appeal to her. She went through the motions of domesticity, and even signed a few letters to Herbert "your loving housewife" (undoubtedly with her tongue firmly planted in her cheek). But she made no effort to disguise the fact that she found the actual practice of homemaking tedious and boring.⁹² Religion was another area of compromise. Although Elsie had warned Herbert that she could not worship with him, she occasionally went to church with him, to his great delight.⁹³

On his side, Herbert tried to avoid being overly cautious and conventional. He gave Elsie freedom and space as well as affection and support. Despite his concerns, he did not try to stop her from teaching while she was pregnant. He preferred to have time alone with her on weekends, but realizing that he was being "selfish," he conceded, "Have your company if you will."⁹⁴ When they traveled in Europe in 1902, he acquiesced to her desire to ride in a "jaunty [public] cart" instead of waiting for a private conveyance to take them to their hotel.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, Herbert could be irritable and impatient with Elsie over what he admitted were "little things", such as her chronic lateness and her failure to pay bills on time.⁹⁶ When he was morally outraged, he could be imperious and unforgiving. After an apparently heated discussion with Elsie and a guest about the children's upbringing, he

91 APS, ECP to HP, July 24, 1906 and October 21, 1907.

92 APS, ECP to HP, June 19, 1904.

93 RHS, HP to ECP, October 5, 1902.

94 RHS, HP to ECP, May 26, 1902.

95 RHS, HP Diary of 1902 trip.

96 Little things: APS, HP to ECP, May 21, 1905. Bills: RHS, HP to ECP, June 20 1902 and June 16, 1902. Lateness: RHS, HP to ECP, June 4, 1905.

refused to apologize to the guest because he felt he had to exercise his “sacred” “rights and duties” and protect his home. He angrily explained to Elsie,

On the general proposition of what should go on in our own house I feel very strongly. I think we owe it to the children to have everything as happy, upright, clean, elevating & free from temptation as possible [...]. Much of their affection for & help from home will depend upon its having appeared moral in every way [...]. How you can hold your views I do not see for they are not the views of any educators and are condemned by the experience of ages.⁹⁷

Elsie and Herbert's efforts to construct a companionate relationship around leisure activities caused some friction at this early stage, but would become more contentious in future years. For Herbert, a quiet domestic life spent with Elsie and the children was the most appealing aspect of marriage. “Perhaps I too much like possessions, but I did delight Friday in having you & the babe return home,” he wrote Elsie. “Travel, & scenery & country & relatives are all very well but fail utterly when set over against our own house which is our home.”⁹⁸ He regretted the frequent absences required by his legal work.⁹⁹ When he failed to be nominated as a Congressional candidate in 1902, he consoled himself by noting that a campaign would have required him to spend too much time away from his family.¹⁰⁰

Elsie enjoyed their family life, but she also craved opportunities to escape from domestic routines and share more challenging activities and environments with Herbert. She delighted in the “invigorating life” they led for ten days of deer hunting in deep snow in the Adirondacks the first year they were married.¹⁰¹ When they went to Europe in the summer of 1902 for almost two months, Herbert regretted leaving eleven-month old Lissa behind in the care of servants and Elsie's mother. He vowed that Lissa would come with them on future trips but Elsie, backed by Mary Simkhovitch, was adamant about getting away by themselves.¹⁰²

97 RHS, HP to ECP, June 30, 1904.

98 RHS, HP to ECP, October 5, 1902.

99 RHS, HP to ECP, May 24, 1903.

100 RHS, HP to ECP, October 5, 1902.

101 RHS, ECP Diary, 1900.

102 RHS, HP Diary, 1902 trip. “I’m glad you are abandoning Lissa. Never too early to begin!” Mary encouraged Elsie (RHS, Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch to ECP, June 27

Three years later, when Elsie and Herbert went on a Congressional trip to the Far East, Herbert contemplated not going when he found out that Lissa and John would spend several days solely in the care of servants before Elsie's mother returned from Europe.¹⁰³ But Elsie prevailed and they went.

Elsie's work was part-time and generally done during the hours Herbert was working. But the long hours he devoted to his law practice and his political work took a toll on Elsie. She was not happy when his electoral campaigns or his volunteer work with the Brick Presbyterian Church in Manhattan kept him from joining his family on weekends. She candidly admitted in 1903 that she would "not feel disappointed at all" if he lost a campaign because the job entailed "too much of a personal sacrifice."¹⁰⁴ A year later, she expressed even more forcefully the resentment she felt when his work precluded his spending weekends with her and the children. "I think the cost of a political career would be too great, altho' not in the way you think. In my eyes and *for me* there is no compensation or justification for the kind of wear you seem to have planned for yourself this month. I consider it a wrong. Incidentally, a wrong done to me. But that I know I cannot make you understand."¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, a month later Elsie was encouraging Herbert to run for Congress and agreeing that he should give up his legal practice and devote himself full time to politics.¹⁰⁶ At Herbert's urging, she wrote to his father, explaining that the loss of income would be of no consequence because they already gave away so much of their money and had enough assured income to cover their expenses. Moreover, because she held "certain views" it would be "extremely distasteful" to her to increase their scale of living in the future. Noting how important it was to Herbert to have his father's blessing, Elsie encouraged him to support Herbert's desire to give up the law. John E. Parsons did so,

[1902]). Elsie's baby nurse, in contrast, did not approve. As Lissa's amanuensis, she wrote a heartbreaking letter describing the pain the baby felt in being separated from her parents and her fear that they had gotten another daughter to replace her (RHS, Lissa Clews to ECP and HP, August 10, 1902).

103 RHS, HP to ECP, June 12, 1905.

104 APS, ECP to HP, September 14, 1903.

105 APS, ECP to HP, August 15, 1904; emphasis in the original. Similarly, ECP to HP, August 29, 1904.

106 APS, ECP to HP, September 22, 1904.

although not enthusiastically, and not without advising Herbert that a man did not need to consult with his wife before making such a career decision.¹⁰⁷

Herbert gave up his law practice and ran for Congress. His victory in November 1904 opened a new era in their lives.

The Washington Years, 1905–1911

When Elsie and Herbert went to Washington, they were united and happy, full of promise and potential. When they left six years later, they were divided, depressed, defeated, and disillusioned.

Herbert's congressional term started in March 1905. Elsie finished her academic year at Barnard, and joined him on a two-month Congressional tour to the Far East before moving the family to Washington. Elsie seemed to take the move in stride and saw it as an opportunity to expand her work beyond sociology and settlement houses.¹⁰⁸ During her time in Washington, she studied the city's social rituals as an exercise in ethnography, read widely in ethnographic literature, and gathered ethnographic evidence about social mores and social taboos. Accompanying Herbert on official trips to Asia and the American West provided opportunities for her to learn firsthand about other societies and cultures.

As their world expanded, Elsie's vision grew. Herbert's stayed the same, but by comparison, seemed to shrink. As a public figure, he wanted and needed to play it safe. Increasingly, she shocked, embarrassed, and bewildered him. Increasingly, he disappointed her. The first hint of this came in the summer of 1905. Elsie described how he thwarted her ethnographic investigations as they traveled, first on their own to San Francisco, and then with the Congressional entourage in the Philippines, Japan, China, and Hong Kong.¹⁰⁹

107 RHS, ECP to John Edward Parsons, September 23, 1904; John Edward Parsons to HP, October 3, 1904.

108 RHS, ECP, "My Washington Journal," March 1, 1905.

109 The official party included Secretary of War William Howard Taft, who was a former US governor of the Philippines; Alice Roosevelt; seven senators and twenty-four representatives and their wives. Herbert was valued for his knowledge of sugar production and tariff policy. (RHS, HP's account of the trip.)

He squirmed under the cross questioning I sent our driver in Salt Lake City through for information about the fast vanishing architectural traces of Mormon polygamy [....]. He refused to go at all to the Sunday cockfighting at Manila, and his disquiet and distress was so formidable when I started to Kodak a crucified criminal on the little rubbish strewn *cul de sac* of the public execution place at Canton that I had to forego getting what would have been the most interesting ethnographic document of our trade.¹¹⁰

After their return, Elsie published several hard-hitting articles about her experiences in the Far East and criticized the “race prejudice” that infused American actions in the Philippines.¹¹¹ Turning her attention to US society, she touted the benefits of employment outside the home for middle-class wives and promoted reforms that would support married women’s work: flexible work schedules to accommodate childbearing, convenient opportunities for nursing, lifting the social taboos that confined pregnant and nursing women to the home, and more sex education.¹¹² Both Herbert and her editor suggested she tone her work down.¹¹³

Elsie’s reaction to Stanford White’s shocking murder in June 1906 was potentially more provocative. White was shot dead by the jealous husband of a former chorus girl with whom he had had an affair and had allegedly raped. The sensationalist press coverage soon reported lurid accounts of White’s involvements with underage chorus girls. But Elsie mourned her old friend and was quick to come to his defense. “Stanford was one of the noblest, most chivalrous & magnanimous men I have ever known, and I would like to say so on the witness stand [....] I could testify that I was never drugged in the tower room!” she asserted. Nothing came of her interest in testifying. But her past relationship with White and eagerness to speak on his behalf might have troubled the

110 RHS, ECP, “My Washington Journal”, 1905.

111 Elsie Clews Parsons, “American Snobbishness in the Philippines”, *Independent* 60 (8 February 1906), 332–33. Elsie Clews Parsons, “Remarks on Education in the Philippines”, *Charities and the Commons* 16 (1 September 1906), 564–65.

112 Elsie Clews Parsons, “Penalizing Marriage and Childbearing”, *Independent* 60 (18 January 1906), 146–47.

113 RHS, HP to ECP, October 2, 1905 and October 18, 1905. Hamilton Holt to ECP, June 13, 1906. Elsie sent a draft of “Penalizing Marriage and Childbearing” to Herbert, marking the direct references to birth control usage that the editor cut. See Deacon, p. 414, FN44.

more straight-laced Herbert, who had a public reputation to maintain as a member of Congress.¹¹⁴

The Storm over *The Family*

The publication of Elsie's first book in November 1906 — just a few weeks after Herbert was elected to a second Congressional term — certainly caused trouble for Herbert. Based on the lectures Elsie had given at Barnard College, *The Family: An Ethnographical and Historical Outline with Descriptive Notes, Planned as a Text-book for the Use of College Lecturers and of Directors of Home-reading Clubs* (New York: Putnam's, 1906) analyzed the evolution of the family as a social organization. Most of the 389-page book was a very dry, scientifically-grounded, footnote-laden compilation of information detailing the ways different cultures dealt with marriage, prostitution, rape, divorce, and related issues.

But in the final fifteen pages of the book, Elsie discussed “what ought to be” and advocated for “trial marriages” to give young couples an opportunity to live together before they contracted a legal relationship. Recognizing that most individuals reach sexual maturity before they acquire emotional maturity, confident that later marriages have a greater chance of happiness, and believing it was unrealistic to expect absolute chastity before marriage, Elsie supported “freedom of sexual intercourse for both sexes.” Trial marriages should be embarked on with the expectation that they would be permanent, but unhappy couples who had no children could end them by mutual agreement, without social condemnation, she argued. *The Family* endorsed monogamy and denounced promiscuity and prostitution, but also supported liberalized divorce laws, remarriage for divorcees, equality

114 APS, ECP to Lewis Chanler, June 30, 1906, enclosed in ECP to HP, July 2, 1906. See also, APS, ECP to HP and HP to ECP, June 26, 1906; HP to ECP, July 2, 1906, and July 24, 1906; ECP to HP, July 26, 1906. For White's murder, the revelations about his sexual practices, and the trial of his alleged murderer, see Simon Baatz, *The Girl on the Velvet Swing: Sex, Murder, and Madness at the Dawn of the 20th Century* (New York: Mulholland Books, 2018), and Mary Cummings, *Saving Sin City: William Travers Jerome, Stanford White and the Original Crime of the Century* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2018).

within marriage, and more sex education and sexual freedom for women. Elsie dedicated the book to her daughter and son.

The Family set off a firestorm of outraged horror. Elsie's endorsement of "trial marriage" was denounced in pulpits and the press, often by people who admitted they had not read the book. Protestant ministers in New York preached Thanksgiving Day sermons condemning trial marriage as a "disgusting theory" and a "danger to married life." The book was "a menace to morality and the stability of society," the clergy fulminated.¹¹⁵ The press coverage was vitriolic and inflammatory, and Elsie's identity as the wife of Congressman Herbert Parsons was always highlighted. Critics were offended that a woman with Elsie's education and social position could promote indecency and offer such "absurd, preposterous, diabolical" advice.¹¹⁶ An anonymous (male) reviewer was offended by her cold, unfeeling, "rigidly scientific" tone.¹¹⁷ One journalist advised Herbert to exercise more authority over Elsie, asserting, "If my wife were to advocate such principles as does Congressman Parsons' wife, she would have to choose another place to live pretty quickly."¹¹⁸ Elsie did find a champion for her views in the Socialist press, but that may not have helped her cause.¹¹⁹

The media frenzy continued for weeks. A cartoon about Trial Marriage was blazoned on the cover of *Life Magazine* in December 1906.¹²⁰ Biograph released a twelve-minute long silent film entitled *Trial Marriage* depicting the unhappy life of a man who was inspired by a newspaper report on the book to embark on a series of "trial marriages."¹²¹ A man on trial for seducing a fifteen-year-old girl defended his refusal to marry her by saying he believed in "Mrs.

115 *New York Daily Tribune*, November 30, 1906; *The New York Times*, November 30, 1906; *Evening Sun*, November 18, 1906, quoted in Hare, p. 11 and Zumwalt, p. 48. Clergy in Chicago also mounted a campaign against it. See William Kuby, *Conjugal Misconduct, Defying Marriage Law in the Twentieth-Century United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 151.

116 *Evening Sun*, November 18, 1906; *New York Herald*, November 18 and November 19, 1906. Quoted in Hare, pp. 11–12.

117 Quoted in Kuby, p. 152.

118 *World*, November 19, 1906. Quoted in Hare, p. 11.

119 *Daily People*, November 18, 1906.

120 Kuby, p. 155.

121 The film is intended to elicit sympathy for the unfortunate man who is reduced to tending babies, cooking meals, and doing housework by a succession of trial "wives." Popegrutch, *Century Film Project: "Trial Marriage (1907)"*, <https://>

Parsons' theories." The judge lambasted the book and said it did not excuse the man's behavior.¹²²

The scurrilous response to Elsie's book was a major political embarrassment for Herbert. Standing on the steps of their Washington home, he turned away a horde of reporters with a smile and the comment, "Mrs. Parsons has nothing to say, and will have nothing to say. Neither has Mr. Parsons."¹²³ We can only imagine what he said to Elsie in private.

Elsie enjoyed the attention her book attracted, but she was genuinely troubled about the potential damage to Herbert's political career. She wrote apologetically from New York, "I am afraid you have been having very disagreeable experiences on my account. The only thing that really pains me in the situation is the idea that I have interfered with your work, and that grieves me more than I can say."¹²⁴ As the chair of the New York County Republican Committee, Herbert had worked with President Theodore Roosevelt on electoral campaigns and won his trust and liking. Anxious to protect that relationship, Elsie sent a copy of her "unhappily notorious book" to Roosevelt, so he would know what the book was really like. "The public reception of the book has shown me that a writing wife is a distinct handicap to a politician and so henceforward in our family authorship is going to yield to statesmanship after as well as before elections," she assured Roosevelt, alluding to her decision to publish anonymously while Herbert remained in public office.¹²⁵

It is not clear whether Elsie volunteered to stop publishing under her own name or whether Herbert asked — or told — her to stop. Publishing anonymously or pseudonymously was an obvious handicap for an emerging scholar and essayist, but Elsie never expressed regret or resentment about the decision.¹²⁶ There is a gaping hole in her

centuryfilmproject.org/2017/12/13/trial-marriages-1907. Elsie's picture and married name can be clearly seen in the shot of the newspaper in the film.

122 *World*, November 22, 1906. Quoted in Hare, p. 12.

123 *New York Herald*, November 19, 1906. Quoted in Hare, p. 13. Herbert was notorious for having nothing to say to the press. See "President Not to Interfere in States," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1908, p. 3.

124 APS, ECP to HP, November 21, 1906; ECP to HP, November 23, 1906.

125 RHS, ECP to President Theodore Roosevelt, December 22, 1906.

126 Elsie's mentor, Franklin Giddings, urged her not to make the "sacrifice" of ceasing to publish under her own name (APS, Franklin Giddings to ECP, December 10, 1906).

bibliography during the remainder of her time in Washington, but she read widely, observed carefully, and ruminated about the origins of social mores and the ways societies constrain their members. After Herbert left Congress, she published several books and many articles that drew on this material.

In the meantime, Elsie was more careful about publicly expressing her views but did not censor herself entirely. Enjoying a tête-à-tête with President Theodore Roosevelt at a White House dinner in March 1908, she engaged him in a one-hour conversation about prostitution, birth control, abortion, and divorce — a discussion many people would think “most immoral,” Roosevelt noted.¹²⁷ Attending a meeting of the American Sociology Association in December 1908, Elsie proudly informed Herbert that her remarks on women’s employment were well-received but did not get into any newspapers because she had “found a way to outwit the reporter.”¹²⁸ This was fortunate, since the press might have had a lot to say about her assertion that economic dependence on her husband made a wife “approximate to the harem type.”¹²⁹

Elsie and Herbert weathered the public storm caused by *The Family*, but the contretemps took a heavy toll on their personal relationship. *The Family* exposed a side of Elsie that Herbert preferred to ignore. A deeply religious man, he did not read it because he feared he would find it offensive.¹³⁰ At the time Elsie did not complain, but years later, she would tell Herbert how hurt she was by his refusal to read and discuss the books she wrote.

Hamilton Holt, the *Independent* editor who had eagerly sought Elsie’s articles, had no interest in publishing them without her byline. Her views were most valuable because of her “position” in society, he explained (APS, Hamilton Holt to ECP, November 22, 1906 and November 28, 1906).

127 RHS, ECP, “My Washington Journal”, March 3 [1908].

128 APS, ECP to HP, December 29, 1908.

129 Elsie Clews Parsons, “Higher Education of Women and the Family”, *American Journal of Sociology* 14 (May 1909), 758–63. This is the only work published under Elsie’s name during the remainder of Herbert’s Congressional career. Her second book, written while he was still in office, was published under a pseudonym in 1913: [John Main, pseud.], *Religious Chastity: An Ethnological Study* (New York: [n.p.], 1913).

130 APS, HP to ECP, August 7, 1912.

Political Wife

Personal tragedy added to Elsie and Herbert's troubles in Washington, when they lost two newborn sons in less than a year. The first boy died just two weeks after his birth, in April 1906; the second, born in February 1907, lived for less than two hours. In April 1907, Elsie was — unexpectedly — pregnant again. The pregnancy ended two months later, apparently terminated on the advice of her physician, who advised that a third pregnancy so soon after the previous two would be dangerous to her and the baby's health.¹³¹

Elsie was deeply depressed by the deaths of the two newborn boys. "[I]t seems to me that I shall never quite regain my old *joie de vivre* until I have, *we* have, a baby," she wrote Herbert four months after the death of the first child.¹³² She noted how hard it was to be "brave," but drew comfort from Herbert's loving support.¹³³ Having serious work to accomplish was also restorative in her view. Had she not been able to apply herself to scientific work on a daily basis, it would have taken her longer to get over the first baby's death, she maintained in notes she prepared for a talk to the American Sociology Association in December 1908. Her remedy contradicted standard medical procedures of the day that recommended rest cures and inactivity for women who were ill or depressed.¹³⁴

Throughout their Washington years, Elsie and Herbert were leading a more conventional married life than they did before or after. Without a teaching job, unable to publish under her own name, and often pregnant, Elsie had few professional outlets, while Herbert had a very

131 Elsie's doctor advised her how to bring on her menstrual flow, gave her pills, and recommended a curettage if necessary. It was scheduled for early May. In June, she was menstruating again. APS, ECP to HP, April 24, 1907 and June 25, 1907. APS, Dr. George Swift to ECP, April 26, 1907 and May 2, 1907.

132 APS, ECP to HP, August 20, 1906; emphasis in the original.

133 Brave: APS, ECP to HP, October 29, 1906. Comfort: APS, ECP to HP, September 1, 1909. When the second baby was born, Elsie was in New York and Herbert was in Washington. He talked to Elsie for forty minutes by phone, then took a train to New York. He returned to Washington by the noon train the following day (RHS, HP 1907 Diary, February 12 and 13, 1907).

134 APS, ECP's notes for her address, "Higher Education of Women and the Family", given to the American Sociology Society in December 1908. Both Elsie's doctor and Herbert recommended rest and relaxation rather than strenuous exercise and scholarly work when she went to the Adirondacks in the fall of 1908.

demanding job and worked very long hours. Such conditions were a recipe for marital disaster, she would later write.¹³⁵

As a feminist, Elsie objected to women being relegated to exercising “wifely backstair influence” and playing a helpmate role.¹³⁶ “The sooner people get rid of the helpful wife theory, the sooner we shall have woman suffrage,” she complained to Herbert in 1906.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, she was unhappy when she learned more about his political campaign from his co-workers than from him, and was hurt when he did not want her in the audience when he give a speech.¹³⁸ Whenever he did discuss his political work with her, Elsie’s comfort and support was a solace to him.¹³⁹

At a time when working very long hours was seen as a measure of masculinity, Herbert’s fellow workers admired him for working sixteen and seventeen hours a day when he was chairman of the New York County Republican Party.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the grueling political campaigns took a physical and emotional toll.¹⁴¹ Herbert acknowledged that his business, social, charitable, and family interests all suffered during the long months he spent organizing Republican campaigns.¹⁴² The final weeks of the 1907 campaign were so hectic that he advised Elsie not to join him in Manhattan because he would be too busy to see her. She came anyway, but on other occasions, she kept away when

135 Elsie Clews Parsons, *The Old Fashioned Woman: Primitive Fancies about the Sex* (New York: Putnam’s, 1913), pp. 48–49.

136 APS, ECP to HP, January 8, 1907.

137 APS, ECP to HP, October 3, 1906.

138 Co-workers: APS, ECP to HP, October 29, 1906; speech: ECP to HP, October 25, 1906.

139 APS, ECP to HP, September 20, 1906; similarly, ECP to HP, October 13, 1907. APS, HP to ECP, October 9, 1907.

140 Masculinity: E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood, Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 176–77, 267. Work hours: RHS, William S. Bennett speech in *Dinner to Herbert Parsons, April 21, 1911 by his Constituents*.

141 A colleague recalled how an exhausted Herbert fell asleep while signing letters at his desk. Another noted that, after collapsing in a restaurant and being told by his doctor to give up the campaign, Herbert was back at his desk a day and a half later. RHS, speeches by Lloyd C. Griscom and Henry L. Stimson in *Dinner to Herbert Parsons, April 21, 1911 by his Constituents*; Henry L. Stimson, “Memorandum of Conversation with Henry D. Sayer, January 21, 1926,” quoted in William Parsons, Jr., “Progressive Politics”, p. 83.

142 HP to Charles H. Pankhurst, December 16, 1907, quoted in William Parsons, Jr., “Progressive Politics”, p. 83.

he felt highly pressured.¹⁴³ In a touching demonstration of her love, she offered to adjust “my own time, the thing I most value” so he could enjoy more leisure time.¹⁴⁴

By cleaning up the voter rolls and eliminating tens of thousands of fraudulent votes, Herbert’s Republican organization scored major victories for the reform Republicans in the New York City municipal elections in 1906 and 1907. Herbert was hailed as the “master” of the Republican Party in New York County. But his inability to get the county Republicans to back William Howard Taft’s presidential candidacy in early 1908 was a blow. In August 1908, Herbert was considering not running for reelection, fearing that Progressives were fighting a losing battle and he would eventually be “thrown out” anyway. Praising his work, Elsie encouraged him not to leave Congress. “As for me, there would be both advantages and disadvantages in your withdrawing from politics. Our social life would be so much duller that I should want to get some amusement out of writing and I should be free to do so. On the whole, I should be disappointed if you declined renomination to Congress,” she concluded.¹⁴⁵ Despite the constraints his Congressional position placed on her, and the amount of time he devoted to his electoral work, Elsie was largely content with the life they were living in Washington. She willingly made the sacrifices required of her, and found compensating gains in new projects.

Nevertheless, in the fall of 1908, Elsie, now thirty-four, was feeling unhappily “middle-aged” and starting to exhibit a new restlessness.¹⁴⁶ She went off on a six-week vacation of swimming, canoeing, and horseback riding in the Adirondacks when Herbert was too busy to accompany her. While she was away, she enjoyed a week-long flirtation with a twenty-three-year old medical student, Reginald Fitz.¹⁴⁷ Basking

143 APS, ECP to HP, October 23, 1907; August 19, 1904; October 16, 1906; March 26, 1908; March 30, 1908.

144 APS, ECP to HP, July 11, 1906.

145 APS, ECP to HP, August 10, 1908.

146 APS, ECP to HP, April 24, 1907; APS, Lucy Clews to ECP, November 4 [1908].

147 Elsie corresponded with Fitz for a few months and tried to interest him in making another trip to the Adirondacks. But his conventional “Boston spirit” prohibited him from venturing “too far from civilization” alone with her (APS, Reginald Fitz to ECP [1908?]). He graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1909, and Elsie renewed her friendship with him in Boston during the summer of 1911 (APS, ECP to HP, June 16, 1911).

in the tonic effect of the young man's admiration, she teasingly informed Herbert, "you can be jealous, a little."¹⁴⁸ In her mind, it was all harmless fun. As she had told Herbert several years earlier, she was monogamous by nature. "I seem to have a monogamous instinct just as I have brown hair; & I don't pride myself on having either," she assured him.¹⁴⁹

The Imaginary Mistress

Elsie returned from the Adirondacks refreshed if not rejuvenated. Herbert was reelected in November 1908. At the beginning of 1909 she was pregnant again, and still acting like a very conventional wife. She attended Congressional debates and hearings on the bills Herbert sponsored, and hosted teas and dinners for him.¹⁵⁰ They dined and danced at the White House and the British Embassy, and developed a friendship with the Huntington Wilsons.

Herbert had become friendly with Wilson, an Assistant Secretary of State, and his wife, Lucy, during the summer of 1908, when Elsie and the children were in Newport. He enjoyed dining and walking with them, and mentioned them frequently in letters to Elsie. During the winter and spring of 1909, the two couples took canoe rides, walks, and sightseeing trips together, and saw each other often at dinners and parties.¹⁵¹

Elsie had assured Herbert that her flirtation with Reginald Fitz was harmless, but she did not feel that way about Herbert's friendship with Lucy Wilson. The Wilsons had no children and their marriage appeared to be strained. Herbert remarked on their frequent "spats."¹⁵² Jealousy had long been an issue for Elsie. As early as 1898, when Herbert had paid a midnight call to her friend Alice Duer (later Miller), Elsie was surprised — and dismayed — to discover that she had a "jealous disposition."¹⁵³ Now it came out in full.

148 APS, ECP to HP, October 2, 1908.

149 APS, ECP to HP, July 26, 1906.

150 RHS, ECP, "My Washington Diary", January, February, and March 1909.

151 RHS, ECP, "Washington Diary." APS, Lucy James [Wilson] to HP, March 28, 1918. F. M. Huntington Wilson, *Memoirs of an Ex-diplomat* (Boston: Humphries, 1945), [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b541385&view=1up&seq=1&kin=2021](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b541385&view=1up&seq=1&kin=2021).

152 APS, HP to ECP, July 19, 1909.

153 APS, EC to HP, June 30, 1898.

By mid-June 1909, after watching Herbert's behavior very closely, Elsie was convinced that he had fallen in love with Lucy.¹⁵⁴ Herbert assured Elsie she had no reason to be jealous, but continued to sing Lucy's praises. Unable to shake what she called her "obsession" with Lucy, Elsie, who was about five months pregnant, suffered intensely. She was angry when Herbert made light of her fears. She was angry when he took them seriously. When she was not angry, she was depressed.¹⁵⁵ Herbert added to Elsie's distress by often being irritable or preoccupied when they were together.¹⁵⁶

Elsie agonized over her behavior as well as Herbert's. In theory, she believed that "interest in the other sex at large shakes you up out of any settled, sodden conjugality and was therefore desirable."¹⁵⁷ But, in practice, Herbert's desire to spend time with Lucy Wilson left Elsie feeling aggrieved, angry, and hurt. Consumed by jealousy and suspicion, she could not keep her emotions in check. She was appalled to find herself making scenes, spying on Herbert, and bursting into tears. Without a professional outlet, Elsie had little to distract her. "The trouble with me is the lack of a time-compelling job. I always knew that my character couldn't stand against idleness. Lately I have taken to copying mss. in which there is no mental effort, but which keeps me occupied, and I am much better off," she informed Herbert.¹⁵⁸

Herbert, Jr. — a healthy baby — was born in October 1909, but the Parsons'es marital difficulties persisted. Just seeing Lucy's name in a letter pushed Elsie into unpleasant musings that reduced her "to a wretched state." In February, 1910, in a letter with many blotches and cross outs, she instructed Herbert not to tell her when he had been with the Wilsons and not ever to mention Lucy's name in his letters.¹⁵⁹ Accusing him of being "a poor psychologist", she warned him that it was impossible "to joke obsessions away." But when he was silent about Lucy, Elsie read between the lines and found other evidence of

154 APS, ECP to HP, June 18, 1909; HP to ECP, July 24, 1909; ECP to HP, August 23, 1909.

155 APS, ECP to HP, August 23, 1909.

156 Her distress: APS, ECP to HP, July 19, 1909. His irritability: APS, HP to ECP, July 18, 1909; ECP to HP, July 19, 1909; HP to ECP, August 9, 1909; HP to ECP, August 1, 1909.

157 APS, ECP to HP, July 27, 1909.

158 APS, ECP to HP, August 4, 1909.

159 APS, ECP to HP, February [n.d.], 1910.

his infatuation. "You haven't the art to keep her out of your letters even when you don't mention her," she railed.¹⁶⁰

Lucy would remain a thorn in Elsie's side for many years. The wound mostly festered out of sight, but from time to time, Elsie's unhappiness would flare into open conflict with Herbert. Years later, she wrote several fictionalized accounts of the Lucy Wilson episode that more fully reveal the toll it took on her marriage. Her unpublished short story, "The Imaginary Mistress", begun in 1913 and rewritten in 1915, draws heavily from the Parsons' letters as it charts the disintegration of a marriage that mirrors her own. Lois, Elsie's fictional counterpart, believes that her husband, Anson, has fallen in love with another woman, although he refuses to acknowledge it. Like Elsie, Lois suffers from a jealous obsession with the other woman, who is named Alice.¹⁶¹

The title, "The Imaginary Mistress", is particularly suggestive. For Elsie, the term alludes to the husband's unwillingness to act on his desire and make the woman he loves his mistress. But for the reader, there is another possibility: that Anson/Herbert is not in love with Alice/Lucy and his supposed feelings are a construct of Lois/Elsie's imagination. Lois considers this explanation, but dismisses it. Like Elsie, she is convinced that her husband is in love with another woman but too timid to consummate the relationship. For this, he earns Lois's pity and contempt. Similarly, Elsie's 5-page play, "In New York State", written during 1914 and 1915, depicts a dramatic confrontation between a jealous wife and a husband who remains faithful to her despite being in love with another woman.¹⁶²

It is impossible to know whether Herbert had an affair with Lucy or if he was in love with her. There is no extant correspondence between them in 1909–1910, and no documentation — other than Elsie's and Herbert's letters, and Elsie's fiction — about the relationship. Certainly, there must have been a strong emotional tie between Herbert and Lucy. Years later, Lucy would tell Herbert that the time she spent in Washington from the summer of 1909 through the spring of 1910 was the "happiest" period

160 APS, ECP to HP, Saturday AM [n.y.].

161 APS, ECP, "The Imaginary Mistress", pp. 7, 10, 11, 14, 15.

162 APS, ECP, "In New York State."

of her life between 1904 and 1915.¹⁶³ For Herbert to have seen so much of Lucy, over so many years, despite the difficulties it created in his marriage and the pain it caused Elsie, suggests that her company was exceedingly important to him. But his personality and upbringing make it highly unlikely that, even if he had a strong attraction to Lucy, he and she had a physical relationship. Elsie herself was convinced that they did not.

Herbert was an extremely religious, highly principled, deeply moral man. He was brought up as a strict Presbyterian, a tradition that frowned on pleasure, encouraged sexual repression, and promoted adherence to virtue and duty. As an undergraduate at Yale, he contemplated becoming a minister; throughout his life he was a regular churchgoer and involved in church administration and leadership. In both public and private life, he was driven by a keen sense of duty. He could be priggish, even prudish; he was sometimes moralistic and moralizing. He took the staff of Greenwich House to task for holding a fundraising entertainment on a Sunday evening in violation of his religious principles; he was horrified when Elsie let the children see her nude; he thought it was harmful for young men to know about brothels; he was offended when Huntington Wilson swore in front of Lucy. He was so uncomfortable with Elsie's views on sex, marriage, and pre-marital cohabitation that he did not want to read *The Family*.

Unlike Elsie, Herbert believed in the institution of marriage. According to her, he thought that unhappily married people should simply learn "to make the best of it." He was not introspective or inclined to analyze his feelings. As a politician, he was notorious for being unreadable and unfathomable. These views, beliefs, and habits were likely not only to have kept Herbert from acting on his feelings, but also to have protected him from the self-knowledge that he was in love with a woman who was not his wife. Elsie also suggested that the appeal of romantic yearning and virtuous self-sacrifice would have been powerful motivators for Herbert. He was a man of integrity, not a hypocrite.

What mattered was that Elsie believed Herbert was in love with Lucy, not whether her suspicions were justified. When her obsession began in the summer of 1909, Elsie was very much in love with Herbert,

163 APS, Lucy James [Wilson] to HP, March 28, 1918. The Wilsons married in 1904 and divorced in 1915.

and her happiness was very much entwined with his. "What I had most cared for I had lost," Lois mourns in Elsie's short story. "The old sense of oneness with him that I had ridiculed as a conjugal tradition but which had been a profound and joyful reality for me had disappeared," she laments. Decades later, discussing her daughter's unhappy marriage, Elsie paid tribute to the happiness of her early relationship with Herbert by remarking, "[anyone] who did not have the experience of eight or ten years of fairly comfortable living with another person was missing one of the big things in life."¹⁶⁴

It was particularly galling for Elsie to think that Herbert had fallen for a woman of Lucy's "type." In "The Imaginary Mistress", Lois/Elsie describes Alice/Lucy as "a quiet, self-effacing person, but charmingly dressed, pretty, and possessed of a delightful voice." She maintained a "beautiful house," and was "in every way a woman of taste." The woman who captivates the husband in Elsie's short play "In New York State" is scornfully characterized by the wife as being the type of woman who would "like being the head of your house — even if she weren't in love with you" — that is, a woman who enjoyed playing hostess and maintaining a gracious and decorative home.¹⁶⁵ In Elsie's eyes, Lucy epitomized the womanly ideals she herself had rejected: helplessness, domesticity, unthinking adherence to social conventions, selfless devotion to a man. Similarly, Herbert's fictional alter egos — chivalrous males who serve and protect their lady love — fit the romantic ideal that Elsie had always scorned.

In fact, Lucy, the heir to the Dun (of Dun and Bradstreet) fortune, was not quite the domestic nonentity that Elsie suggested. Although Lucy was renowned as a gracious hostess, she was also an accomplished pianist. Planning to have a career as a concert pianist, she had gone to Vienna to study with the man who taught Paderewski. Ill health had forced her to give it up. Lucy was also exceedingly beautiful. Portraits by John Singer Sargent and others depict her as softly feminine, almost ethereal. (Photographs of Elsie, in contrast, show her to be much firmer of jaw, resolute, strong, and determined.) Lucy was well-traveled and familiar with the non-European world. She and her husband had lived

¹⁶⁴ ECP, "Imaginary Mistress", pp. 10 and 18. APS, Ralph Beals to Peter H. Hare, July 31, 1978.

¹⁶⁵ APS, ECP, "In New York State."

in Japan when he was an attaché at the American Embassy, and they had traveled in the Balkans and Turkey as well as the Far East. Far from being shy and retiring, Lucy boldly (and successfully) lobbied Secretary of State Elihu Root to procure a promotion for Huntington.¹⁶⁶

While Elise wrestled with jealousy, Herbert was beset by another problem that caused him to weep aloud and lose sleep, and undoubtedly contributed to his preoccupation and irritability. His father, the legal counsel and a director of the American Sugar Refining Company, popularly known as the Sugar Trust, was under a federal investigation for allegedly illegal business practices undertaken by the Trust. Knowing that John E. Parsons, one of New York City's most prominent lawyers, was likely to be indicted, and fearing that an indictment "would kill" the eighty-year-old man, Herbert offered to help him and was prepared to resign from political office. But Parsons did not want his son to be involved.¹⁶⁷ On July 1, 1909, Parsons and six other directors of the Trust were indicted for conspiracy in restraint of trade. If convicted, they faced possible jail terms. All the defendants pleaded not guilty and were released without bail. A series of legal appeals delayed their trial until March 1912. After it ended in a mistrial, due to a hung jury, the government delayed for another six months before dropping all the indictments.¹⁶⁸

Although Herbert repeatedly asserted that he himself had never done any work for the Trust or profited from it, he was potentially tainted by his father's problems.¹⁶⁹ An editorial in the *New York Sun* in November 1909 claimed that Herbert was in the pay of the Sugar Trust and had used his position as Chair of the Republican Committee of New York County to aid the Trust and protect the indicted men.¹⁷⁰

166 New York Community Trust, "Lucy Wortham James" [n.d.], <https://nycommunitytrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Lucy-Wortham-James.pdf>. See also, Huntington Wilson, *Memoirs*. Elsie and Herbert would have met the Wilsons in 1905, when the Taft Congressional tour was entertained at the American Embassy in Japan.

167 APS, HP to ECP, June 24, 1909. Herbert's father was the legal mastermind behind the establishment of the trust.

168 A separate civil case with a different set of defendants ended in a settlement in March, 1909. The Trust paid millions of dollars in fines and back payments for customs fraud.

169 RHS, HP to Hon. Charles A. Culberson, February 11, 1909; HP to Phillip P. Campbell, December 7, 1909 and December 16, 1909.

170 "The Cancer of a Republican Administration", *The Sun*, November 7, 1909.

Republican candidates won important victories in New York City municipal elections in the fall of 1909, but the election of Tammany Hall's mayoral candidate was a setback for Herbert and the reform politicians.

Late in January, 1910 Herbert abruptly resigned as Chair of the Republican Committee. His years of public service were praised at a dinner given in his honor, but questions about his relationship to the Trust persisted. In April, he and his father were sharply attacked in a debate in the House of Representatives. Herbert stood loyally by his father, and was given a standing ovation by the chamber.¹⁷¹ Elsie provided little support for Herbert during this difficult time. Years later, she regretted that she had, in her words, "failed" Herbert by not being more sympathetic when he had been so troubled about his father's case.¹⁷²

In the midst of these personal and professional problems, Elsie and Herbert traveled to the American southwest in the summer of 1910. While Herbert conducted the official part of his trip as a member of the House Committee on Public Lands, Elsie spent a week camping and traveling on horseback with a guide in what was called "Indian country", an experience that whetted her appetite to study the Native American cultures of the southwest.

Traveling separately, both Elsie and Herbert were moved by the rugged beauty of the landscape. But when they traveled together in the Grand Canyon and Yosemite, in the company of a guide, the differences in their perspectives and temperaments became painfully obvious. On their second day on the trail, Elsie lost her wedding ring when she slipped it off before swimming, left it in a towel, and shook out the towel after her swim. Despite hours of searching, Elsie and Herbert could not

171 Paul deForest Hicks, *John E. Parsons, An Eminent New Yorker in the Gilded Age* (Westport and New York: Prospecta Press); *The New York Times*, December 17, 1909, p. 6; *The Independent* 17 (July-Dec.1909), p. 57; RHS, *Report of Addresses at a Dinner Tendered to the Honorable Herbert Parsons, Hotel Astor, March 22, 1910*; William Parsons, Jr., "Progressive." "Scores Sugar Trust", *Washington Herald*, April 15, 1910, p. 2. *US Congressional Record*, April 14, 1910, 4695-706. Rep. Rainey (D-Illinois) claimed that "the sugar trust by a system of false weights has stolen millions from the US treasury and its officials still go about in private yachts, posing as respectable citizens."

172 APS, ECP to HP, June 16, 1913.

find the ring.¹⁷³ No conscious act of Elsie's could have sent a clearer message about her growing ambivalence about her marriage.¹⁷⁴

Over the next week, she upset Herbert by being headstrong and reckless on the trail.¹⁷⁵ She went "dashing ahead" on a very perilous road, took a wrong turn, got seriously lost, and later slept along the bank of a rushing river. Herbert, as usual, played it safe. He maintained a steady pace on the trails, carefully followed the guide, retreated to safer ground for sleeping, and fussed about the delays in their schedule.¹⁷⁶ When Elsie and Herbert finally had a frank discussion about the problems in their marriage, in the summer of 1912, their painful memories of that 1910 trip loomed large.¹⁷⁷

After that trip, Elsie slipped, somewhat uncomfortably, back into domestic life. Earlier in the summer, she had been spending five to six hours a day doing lessons with the children and "bullying the whole household most painfully" in her effort to make the children more self-reliant.¹⁷⁸ After her return, she resumed teaching Lissa and John reading, story writing, and mapmaking, a challenge she found harder than teaching college students.¹⁷⁹ Her candid accounts of her difficulties show how incapable she was of sentimentalizing motherhood and how uncompromisingly honest she was with both herself and Herbert. Regretting that she had lost her temper with Lissa, Elsie ruefully acknowledged, "She provokes me to a desire for physical violence and leaves me amazed with myself — I now understand wife-beating — given a certain kind of wife."¹⁸⁰

Increasingly, Elsie seemed to be turning to male friends to provide the strenuous physical activity and intellectual companionship for which Herbert seemed to have little time or interest. Congressman

173 RHS, HP, Diary date book, 1910 and HP, Diary of 1910 Western Trip.

174 Sigmund Freud discussed the significance of a lost wedding ring in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: MacMillan, 1915), p. 235. I am indebted to Barbara Fisher for this citation.

175 APS, HP to ECP, August 7, 1912.

176 RHS, HP, Diary of 1910 Western Trip.

177 APS, ECP to HP, August 6, 1912; APS, HP to ECP, August 7, 1912.

178 Hours per day: APS, ECP to HP, June 27, 1910. Bullying: APS, ECP to HP, June 26, 1910.

179 APS, ECP to HP, September 8, 1909; similarly, APS, ECP to HP, June 27, 1910.

180 APS, ECP to HP, October 29, 1910. Other instances of Elsie's efforts at self-control and her chagrin at losing her temper with Lissa: APS, ECP to HP, October 28, 1910; March 18, 1911; and June 11, 1911.

Andrew Peters, a friend of both Elsie and Herbert, was a willing companion in 1909 and 1910. (On more than one occasion, he was taken to be her husband.¹⁸¹) The witty, erudite, aristocratic, married British diplomat George Young was a particular favorite while he was working in Washington between 1910 and 1912. He took as much delight as Elsie in their lively intellectual discussions, canoe and horseback rides, and sightseeing expeditions.¹⁸²

Herbert lost his Congressional seat in the November election in 1910, a defeat that left him feeling “churlful.”¹⁸³ After five years in Washington, the Parsonses prepared to return to New York. In December, Elsie was pregnant again. Eager for an adventure before succumbing to the constraints imposed by another pregnancy, she spent a month sailing in the Bahamas with Kirk Brice, a friend she had known for many years, when Herbert was unable to join her. Careful to avoid gossip and scandal, Elsie and Kirk cabled separately to make hotel reservations, refused to share the only available sleeping room on a train to Florida, and slept in separate staterooms. But they also enjoyed moonlit sails and swims and overnight side trips, Elsie reported to Herbert.¹⁸⁴

When his Congressional term ended in March 1911, Herbert returned to New York to resume his legal practice, while Elsie stayed in Washington so the children could finish the school year. To head off her jealousy of Lucy Wilson, Elsie encouraged Herbert to widen his social circle and see other women in New York.¹⁸⁵ She adopted a similar approach with her circle of male friends. Convinced that Herbert was incapable of feeling jealous, Elsie wrote freely to him about her

181 APS, ECP to HP, August 13, 1909. Peters served in Congress (1907–1914), as Assistant Secretary to the Treasury (1914–1918), and Mayor of Boston (1918–1922). After he married Martha Phillips in 1910, the two couples remained friends. The Peters were invited to Lissa’s wedding in 1922 and Elsie and her younger sons went sailing with them in the 1920s.

182 Elsie’s feelings for George Young: APS, ECP to HP, March 10, 1911 and April 18, 1911. His feelings for her: APS, George Young to ECP, May 17, 1912.

183 RHS, John Edward Parsons to HP, November [9], 1910, quoting the telegram Herbert had sent announcing his defeat. John Edward Parsons regretted that Herbert had become a “victim” in the election.

184 APS, ECP to HP, February 7, 1911, and ECP to HP, Saturday [1911].

185 APS, ECP to HP, March 7, 1911.

activities and her feelings for her male companions. She insisted, both at the time and afterward, that her flirtations were rare, and none were serious. Her trips and outings were simply a device to distract her from her unhappiness and keep her from making demands on Herbert that he could not or would not fulfill, she assured him.¹⁸⁶ She expected her accounts to be believed. But she never accepted Herbert's assertions that he did not love Lucy Wilson.

Elsie felt sobered by "the tremendous responsibilities" she and Herbert faced in raising their children, but their different approaches to childrearing and religion drove them further apart in the spring and summer of 1911.¹⁸⁷ Herbert let Elsie know how hurt and angry he was when she — in Lissa's presence — contemptuously noted that he was a churchgoer.¹⁸⁸ He was shocked when eight-year-old John began to use bad language and Elsie did nothing to stop it.¹⁸⁹ He was outraged that she let the children see her in the nude. Elsie explained, "Nudity *per se* has never stimulated any sex feelings in me. But a sunset, waves, singing, a jest, do."¹⁹⁰ Herbert's angry response indicates his contempt for Elsie's radical social views and experiments. "Why think that John a boy should be like you & unlike other boys!" he expostulated.

I am frequently astonished at your novel propositions entirely self-made, not based on the views of those most experienced & almost universal reason and belief, but in direct opposition to them without reason [...] what I am wont to call your lack of knowledge of human nature. I want what is best for the children, new or old, but I trust the old until real reasons are given for the new.¹⁹¹

Worn out by childcare responsibilities and domestic routines, Elsie scheduled numerous outings and several weekend trips with a variety of male and female friends in the spring of 1911. She had an unexpected

186 Lack of jealousy: APS, ECP to HP, July 27, 1909. Rationale for trips: APS, ECP to HP, February 7, 1911; ECP to HP, 1911, n.d; ECP to HP, June 16, 1911. APS, ECP to HP, August 6, 1912.

187 Tremendous responsibilities: APS, ECP to HP, March 30, 1911.

188 APS, HP to ECP, May 1, 1911.

189 APS, HP to ECP, October 4, 1911.

190 APS, ECP to HP, July 26, 1910.

191 APS, HP to ECP, July 27, 1910.

overnight stay with George Young, when they missed the last train back to Washington after a day of sailing on Chesapeake Bay.¹⁹²

Herbert may or may not have been jealous of Elsie's male friends, but he was not happy about the time she was spending away from the children. He snidely observed, "You must have a very competent governess to look after your children when you are away & bring them up so charmingly."¹⁹³ This suggests that anger and resentment — and concerns about the children — smoldered beneath his customary forbearance. (Elsie did not employ a governess, but she had the trusted Miss Carmody to look after the children in her absence.)

As a working father, Herbert had little time to be with the children. He tried to reserve Sundays for his family, and he occasionally took the children on special outings.¹⁹⁴ But when he expressed regret that he was not free to spend more time with the children, Elsie drily observed, "I doubt you would enjoy having the children so constantly with you for 2–3 weeks as you do for 2–3 days."¹⁹⁵

In July 1911, a month before her sixth and last child, McIlvaine, was born, Elsie wrote to Herbert from Newport that she had fallen asleep considering whether he "wouldn't be happier and second better off married to one of [Lucy's] type" than to her. The dream she had that night — in which she was wearing a "flaming scarlet dress in a picture gallery" and an admirer was "sitting upright in a bed declaring that he was in love with me" — suggests that she was beginning to contemplate a more flamboyant role for herself, that of a *femme fatale* rather than a devoted wife and mother.¹⁹⁶ Her longstanding aversion to marriage as an institution deepened. "[S]o many sins flourish under its protection, and so many virtues are found incompatible with it," she wrote despondently to Herbert.¹⁹⁷

192 Worn out: APS, ECP to HP, June 12, 1911. Weekend trips: APS, ECP to HP, April 24, 1911 and ECP to HP, June 16, 1911. Overnight with Young: ECP to HP, April 24, 1911.

193 APS, HP to ECP, May 10, 1911.

194 RHS, HP letter regarding speaking request at Yale University [1910]. After Lissa had had a tooth pulled in 1910, Herbert took her to meet President Theodore Roosevelt in order to cheer her (Kennedy, "Reminiscences").

195 APS, ECP to HP, August 22, 1911.

196 APS, ECP to HP, July 12, 1911.

197 APS, ECP to HP, July 25, 1911.

Replacing an Emotional Easy Chair

Having another baby and moving the family back to New York later in 1911 did not ease the strains between Elsie and Herbert. The tensions that had been building for years finally flared dramatically in August 1912 when they were both in Newport. After an argument that began in person, Elsie finally forced Herbert to talk about the problems in their marriage. The discussion continued over several days by letter after Herbert returned to New York. Elsie began by laying out her “theory” that Herbert had “been in love with Lucy Wilson these three years — on & off.” She explained:

Just how much you have yourself realized it, I don’t know, but about the fact itself I have never been uncertain. I believe it has made no difference in your feeling for me, that you care for me now as much as you ever did. In fact, as you once told me, that you enjoy my company even more after having been with her. As far as I can see too she does you good.

So in my better moments I have honestly wanted you to see as much of her and as intimately of her as possible. But try as I will, and during the last three years I have resorted to many devices, I still have despicable moments which I don’t understand in the least.¹⁹⁸

Herbert dismissed Elsie’s notions as “bosh” and accused her, as usual, of “exaggerating matters.”¹⁹⁹ Elsie was stung by his dismissive response to her effort to be open and honest.²⁰⁰ In the ensuing discussion, they acknowledged what had been clear for several years: although Lucy Wilson was the precipitating cause of the marital crisis, she was by no means the only problem. Both Elsie and Herbert focused on their failure to be sufficiently “companionate” with each other, although each had a different perception of what marital companionship entailed. Herbert felt Elsie had changed in ways that puzzled and distressed him. He did not “understand” her growing need for “travel, [and] things new & unconventional.”²⁰¹

Elsie agreed that they had become increasingly disconnected, both emotionally and intellectually. “I think we have always had a different

198 APS, ECP to HP, August 4, 1912.

199 APS, HP to ECP, August 6, 1912.

200 APS, ECP to HP, August 7, 1912.

201 APS, HP to ECP, August 4, 1912.

theory of companionship, although it is only within the last two or three years that it has been apparent to you," she explained. "It is my new experiences, my new ideas, and feelings, my fresh impressions of persons and places that I have wanted to share with you. The more interesting or exciting or delightful a thing was the more I wanted you in connection with it." She wanted a relationship in which both partners would take an interest in the other's activities and talk freely about their respective work. Differences of opinion should be openly discussed, not hidden or ignored. Elsie had hinted at this during their courtship and had long chastised Herbert for being too uncommunicative about his work. But she had never before expressed the pain she felt when he failed to show interest in her work. Now she wrote:

Do you realize that apart from the family and the routine of life all my energy and a very large part of my interest have gone into writing which you have never shown the slightest interest in? [...] to have you absolutely out of so large a part of my life is cutting. It isn't that I want your agreement. Any kind of criticism or ridicule of the ideas themselves would be welcome. Then there is so much in talk that I have to constantly repress because I know it would put you out with me.²⁰²

Herbert's response could not have assuaged Elsie's concerns. He had not read all of *The Family* out of "cowardice": he feared he would find the contents too distasteful. But he resolved to make amends and read it.²⁰³

Elsie was also wounded by Herbert's disinterest in finding "companionship in new places" with her. "Tolerance" of her enthusiasms and the freedom to explore them on her own or with others were as much as he could promise; he did not intend to involve himself in her new pursuits. She could travel but he had no intention of joining her. He offered practical reasons for his reluctance. He traveled weekly for his law practice; he could not afford to take so much time off; he wanted to spend as much time as possible with the older children while they were still living at home. (John and Lissa were ten and twelve at this time.) But "cowardice" was a problem here, too, Herbert confessed. Ever since the Yosemite trip, he had been "afraid" to take another trip with her.²⁰⁴

202 APS, ECP to HP, August 6, 1912.

203 APS, HP to ECP, August 7, 1912.

204 Ibid.

His attitude did not bode well for their future. The relationship they had enjoyed for the first decade of their marriage had been very satisfying, but it was no longer enough for Elsie. She wrote:

[U]ntil about three years ago although I had short times of much unhappiness I was very happy in your companionship and made the most of your theory of companionship — a kind of emotional easy chair.

Not that I haven't been happy during this time in our *institutional* companionship. I like easy chairs very often myself. Our relation is still the chief thing in the world to me and it seems grotesque to even have to tell you so.²⁰⁵

Herbert's concept of companionate marriage was still quite limited, although more advanced than many men of his era. He offered Elsie independence, but would not become part of her new life. She did not want his patronizing tolerance; she wanted his companionship and engagement. The "emotional easy chair" Elsie had happily shared with Herbert was becoming a strait jacket that confined and constrained rather than comforted. As they reestablished themselves in New York, they needed to find a different mode of relating if they were to move forward together.

In the meantime, Elsie imposed yet another rule about Lucy Wilson. Struggling to honor her belief in marital freedom, protect herself from jealousy, and avoid future emotional scenes, Elsie told Herbert she did not want him to mention Lucy in his letters, but he should feel free to spend time with her. Elsie would not accept invitations from Lucy for herself, but would pass them along to Herbert. "The idea that you should not see her whenever you want is most repugnant to me," she stressed.²⁰⁶

An Unclassifiable Woman, 1913–1920

Elsie reshaped her work and marriage in bold ways after she returned to New York. While Herbert picked up his life pretty much where he had left off in 1905, she developed new friends, new interests, and new professional outlets. She became a member of Heterodoxy, a pioneering feminist consciousness-raising organization; a contributor to

205 APS, ECP to HP, August 5, 1912, emphasis in the original.

206 APS, ECP to HP, August 26, 1912.

opinion-shaping journals like *The Masses* and *The New Republic*; and an accomplished anthropological field researcher.²⁰⁷

Free to express her opinions and use her own name, Elsie published four books and a stream of popular and scholarly articles between 1913 and 1916.²⁰⁸ Writing what she called “social propaganda”, she explored how societies seek to shape and control their members by stamping out individuality. By studying her own society as an ethnographer would look at an unfamiliar culture, she revealed the roots of “modern” customs and behavior, and challenged popular assumptions about the distinctions between “primitive” cultures and more “advanced” societies. By exposing the often hard-to-see mechanisms of social control in everyday life, she hoped to free individuals — especially women, but also men — from the insidious effects of social classification. Elsie’s books help to explain her personal iconoclasm and her desire to break away from social artifice and convention. “The more thoroughly a woman is classified the more thoroughly she is constrained,” she proclaimed. Her pronouncement, “the new woman means the woman not yet classified, perhaps not classifiable” was a fitting credo for her own life.²⁰⁹

Noting that marriage forced women to be intellectually, economically, and emotionally dependent on their husbands, Elsie denounced it as “the most satisfactory device yet worked out for the control of one adult by another.”²¹⁰ She supported women’s suffrage, but was more concerned about the subtle but powerful ways that social custom constrained a woman’s freedom in daily life.²¹¹ “It’s more important to women to get rid of their petticoats than to get a vote. And it’s still more important

207 Herbert returned to his family’s law firm (although his father no longer headed it), resumed the philanthropic endeavors that were family traditions, and continued to support the Progressive institutions and causes he had championed before 1905. He served on the boards of the Memorial Hospital (which his father had helped to found) and Greenwich House, run by Elsie’s old friend, Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch.

208 ECP, *The Old Fashioned Woman*, *Primitive Fancies about the Sex* (New York: Putnam’s, 1913); *Fear and Conventionality* (New York: Putnam’s, 1914); *Social Freedom: A Study of the Conflicts between Social Classifications and Personality* (New York: Putnam’s, 1915); and *Social Rule: A Study of the Will to Power* (New York: Putnam’s, 1916).

209 ECP, *Social Rule*, pp. 56–57.

210 *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

211 ECP, “Feminism and Conventionality” in *Women in Public Life*, ed. by James P. Lichtenberger. Special Issue of *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 56 (November 1914), 47–53 (p. 48).

for them to get a good job," she argued in *The Journal of a Feminist*.²¹² She focused on eradicating the everyday constraints on women's inner freedom: "checks upon going about alone, clothes that hinder movement, censorship of ideas and feeling, endless little sex taboos."²¹³ Herbert, in contrast, was an enthusiastic proponent of women's suffrage and worked closely for its passage with the leaders of the New York State movement. Elsie was also an advocate for birth control at a time when that was a very radical act. She presciently observed that the opportunity to separate sex and parenthood by controlling childbearing was nothing short of revolutionary.²¹⁴

In Washington, Elsie had been a lone voice, a "crank" who stood out for her iconoclasm.²¹⁵ In New York, others felt similarly about the things she cared about and experimented with alternative lifestyles. As a member of Heterodoxy, she was part of a sympathetic and scintillating circle of feminists, intellectuals, social experimenters, and bohemians who challenged social and marital norms, debated the tenets of feminism, and lead unconventional lives. The writers and intellectuals she came to know at *The New Republic* and *The Masses* were equally committed to freeing the individual from societal constraints, outmoded standards of behavior, and the trappings of bourgeois marriage.²¹⁶ In these circles, Elsie emerged as a sly observer and witty chronicler of

212 ECP, *Journal of a Feminist*, p. 67.

213 Ibid., p. 46.

214 Ibid., p. 40. See also, ECP, "Feminism and Sex Ethics", *International Journal of Ethics*, 26 (July 1916), 462–65; and ECP, "When Mating and Parenthood are Theoretically Distinguished", *International Journal of Ethics*, 26 (January 1916), 207–16. For a public speech, see APS, "Society Told of Birth Curb", newspaper clipping from the *Chicago Tribune* on a talk ECP gave in 1917. For Elsie's support of Margaret Sanger's efforts to disseminate information about birth control in 1916, see Margaret Sanger, *Margaret Sanger: An Autobiography* (New York: Norton, 1938), pp. 188–89.

215 RHS, ECP, "Washington Journal."

216 For Heterodoxy, see Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 43–45; Judith Schwarz, *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy, Greenwich Village, 1912–1940* (Norwich, VT: New Victoria, 1986); and Joanna Scutts, *Hotbed: Bohemian Greenwich Village and the Secret Club that Sparked Modern Feminism* (New York: Seal Press, 2022). Margaret C. Jones explores the articles and milieus of the female writers and editors of *The Masses*, many of whom were members of Heterodoxy, in *Heretics and Hellraisers: Women Contributors to The Masses, 1911–1917* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), pp. 1–21, 28–53. For Elsie's work in particular, see pp. 34–39, 48–49. See also, Leslie Fishbein, *Rebels in Bohemia: The Radicals of the Masses, 1911–1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

sexual and social mores and feminist beliefs and practices. A forerunner of 1970s feminists, she understood that the personal and the political were inextricably linked.

Elsie was also laying the groundwork for a career as a professional anthropologist. Two solo trips to the Southwest, in 1912 and 1913, reinforced her desire to become a serious student of Native American culture. Under the leadership of Franz Boas, a professor at Columbia University and curator at the American Museum of Natural History, anthropology was being transformed into an academic discipline that required formal training, rigorous standards of proof, and extensive field research.²¹⁷ Elsie allied herself with a group of young anthropologists — among them Pliny Goddard, Robert Lowie, and Alfred Kroeber — who were trained by Boas and exercised considerable influence in the discipline. These pioneering anthropologists provided her with social as well as intellectual companionship and encouraged her to make the transition from writing social propaganda to writing scholarly anthropological treatises. By 1918 she earned Boas's interest and support as well.²¹⁸

All the while, Elsie was struggling to develop a new set of ground rules for her own marriage. During what she called the "year of misery" that followed the confrontation of August 1912, her ambivalence about Herbert and her marriage was as strong as ever.²¹⁹ Although he had urged her, "Write me *anything* [...] Don't repress," she still felt stifled by his disapproval. "I don't want to love you merely as I do a child, & if I can't talk freely to you & *be myself* to you that is what it will come to," she wrote despondently to him in January 1913.²²⁰ And she still felt pushed aside by Lucy's continuing presence in Herbert's life.

217 For Boas's role in the early history of anthropology, see Margaret Mead and Ruth L. Bunzel, *The Golden Age of American Anthropology, 1880–1920* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), p. 400, and Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1968), pp. 250–54.

218 Boas's support: APS, ECP to HP, December 28, 1918. ECP's correspondence with all these men is in APS, and she mentioned them in her letters to Herbert. On their importance to her as anthropologists and friends, see Deacon, pp. 145–63; and Zumwalt, pp. 163–81.

219 Year of misery: APS, ECP to HP, June 16, 1913.

220 APS, HP to ECP, August 7, 1912; APS, ECP to HP [January 13, 1913]. Emphasis in the originals.

Elsie tried to honor her resolution that Herbert should be free to spend time with Lucy as long as he did not mention her in person or in letters. When Elsie left on a solo trip to Mexico early in 1913, she encouraged him to see Lucy. Herbert, who had been hired as Lucy's lawyer, was drawing up her will; they had many business meetings and a few dinners during the month Elsie was away.²²¹ Nevertheless, Elsie was incensed when she could not avoid Lucy after her return and discovered that Herbert had arranged for Lissa to spend several days with the Wilsons in Washington. Berating Herbert for creating such a "messy situation", she scolded, "You do mismanage appallingly, and you seem incapable of learning."²²² She instructed him to make a new rule: "Whenever L. W. is in evidence (i.e., when E. C. P. cannot get out of the way in time) and for one week afterwards do not make love to E. C. P. at all. First you stimulate and then you inhibit E. C. P.'s feelings & it is that which during the last half year has made her so often go to pieces."²²³ Referring to herself in the impersonal third person and instituting a rule were Elsie's way of depersonalizing the situation and distancing herself from the pain Herbert's behavior caused her. She warned him that if they began "to dislike each other", they would have to "part for good."²²⁴

More misery followed. In June, 1913 Elsie spent a day in tears, wishing that she and Herbert could "get back to our old simple loving relation." She resolved to "be more loving" and avoid the behaviors that annoyed him.²²⁵ "I will wear a hat in town. I won't talk 'theories' — what else?" she queried a week later.²²⁶ During the rest of the summer, she seemed unsettled — anxious for new experiences and eager to get out of her domestic easy chair. In July, she jumped at an opportunity to report on women's reactions to the Balkan War as a special correspondent for two

221 RHS. Herbert's billable hours and business meetings with Lucy are recorded on worksheets for his office in January and February 1913. Dinners with Lucy are recorded in his calendar diary for these months. Elsie's alter ego in "The Imaginary Mistress", her fictionalized account of Herbert's relationship with Lucy, resents that her husband becomes her rival's business manager even though she consented to the arrangement (p. 13). Elsie may have felt the same emotions after Lucy hired Herbert to be her lawyer.

222 APS, ECP to HP, February 13, 1913.

223 APS, ECP to HP, February 15, 1913.

224 APS, ECP to HP, February 14, 1913.

225 APS, ECP to HP, June 16, 1913.

226 APS, ECP to HP, June 23, 1913.

New York newspapers. Expecting to go to Athens and Constantinople, she arranged to travel with her friend George Young, the British diplomat, who was also reporting on the war.²²⁷ When her assignment was cancelled after a second war broke out, she quickly scheduled a fall trip to study Native American cultures in the American Southwest.

In Elsie's fictionalized accounts of the Lucy Wilson episode, written between 1913 and 1915, her alter egos finally rid themselves of their "obsession" with the other woman, after years of unhappiness, by ceasing to love their husbands, a development the unperceptive husbands never notice.²²⁸ Elsie was very likely describing her own experience of falling out of passionate, romantic love for Herbert. After the summer of 1913, she appeared to have her emotions under control and no longer expressed a longing for Herbert or their past life. Instead, she was constructing a new life that did not revolve around him. Herbert, meanwhile, continued to do legal work for Lucy Wilson, and handled her divorce from Huntington Wilson in 1915.

Having fallen out of love with their husbands, Elsie's fictional counterparts grow troubled by the hypocrisy their marriages represent. The unnamed female protagonist in "In New York State" wants her upright husband to continue to live with her while taking the other woman for his mistress. Knowing that he is too conventional to do that, she urges him to divorce her and marry the other woman. A divorce would give her "freedom from the insincerities of our present mode of life." But he — predictably — shies away from the public embarrassment of having to prove adultery in order to obtain a divorce. In "The Imaginary Mistress," Elsie's alter ego, Lois, is contemptuous of her husband's "conventional ideas" about marriage and fear of scandal. She regards her husband's rectitude as a fault not a virtue, and pities him for his "self-suppression."²²⁹ Unhappy about living a lie, she urges her husband to divorce her. When he refuses, she abruptly leaves him and moves to Mexico, where she becomes a successful archeologist and hosts a famed salon.

227 APS, ECP to HP, July 23, 1913. With characteristic disregard for others' convenience, Elsie asked Herbert to book her sailing to Europe, and prevailed upon Young to travel earlier than he had originally intended.

228 APS, ECP, "In New York State"; ECP, "Imaginary Mistress", pp. 17–18.

229 APS, ECP, "Imaginary Mistress", pp. 7–8, 12–13, 16–17, 20.

Elsie and Herbert never discussed divorce in their letters, but surely they talked about it. Elsie, who believed that the legal, societal, and religious restrictions on divorce and remarriage should be relaxed, would certainly have considered it, if not argued for it; Herbert, undoubtedly, would have opposed the idea. Elsie explored the topic at length in *The Journal of a Feminist*. Amos, the character based on Herbert, believes it is permissible for married partners to separate but not to remarry. Cynthia, the diarist who expresses Elsie's views, thinks that the right action depends on the circumstances. Couples might wisely choose to stay together for the sake of their children, but she finds Amos's view that unhappy couples should remain married and "make the best of it" both pointless and absurd.²³⁰

Elsie had always insisted that she was monogamous by nature; her ideal was a passionate relationship that was exclusive so long as it was fulfilling and truly loving. Finding herself unhappily married to a man who did not believe in divorce, seemingly no longer in love with him, and much sought after by other men, Elsie needed a new model for marital behavior.

In the summer of 1913, she was receiving amorous letters from Grant LaFarge, a prominent New York architect.²³¹ She had known LaFarge for many years, and they were part of the same social set in Newport. In late July and August 1913, he appeared to be pressing Elsie to have a sexual relationship, but seemed willing to accept whatever terms she proposed.²³² In October, he was writing to her about his views on sex and his reactions to a short story she wrote, presumably "The Imaginary Mistress". He lamented that it offered no vision of a sexual relationship that was "entirely mutual, equal, fully shared."²³³ In the spring of 1914, they spent more than a month together traveling in Europe.²³⁴

230 ECP, *Journal of a Feminist*, p. 12.

231 Christopher Grant LaFarge (1862–1938), the eldest son of the artist John LaFarge, married Florence Bayard Lockwood in 1895. His firm, Heins and LaFarge, planned the original design of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, the buildings of the Bronx Zoo, and the architecture of the first subway line in New York City. His oldest son, Oliver, became a noted anthropologist and an advocate for the Native Americans of the Southwest.

232 APS, Grant LaFarge to ECP, 29 July [1913]; 19 August [1913?]; and Tuesday [1913?].

233 APS, Grant LaFarge to ECP, 14 October [1913].

234 APS, ECP to HP, April 27, 1914 and May 3, 1914. Elsie was using the money her father gave her as an allowance to pay for the trip, she explained to Herbert.

We do not have Elsie's letters to Grant, but we can trace her thinking about extra-marital affairs in Cynthia's ruminations in several journal entries dated November and December 1913 in *The Journal of a Feminist*. (Grant appears as a married man who no longer loves his wife — or she him — and who has already had an affair.) Although Cynthia's ideal (like Elsie's) is a relationship of exclusive passion, she sees no value in maintaining "moribund" relationships merely for the sake of the past. Believing that most husbands can be satisfied with routine and unthinking sex a few times a month, she is comfortable with the idea that a woman can take a lover while continuing to have a sexual relationship with her husband.

It is impossible to document when Elsie's relationship with Grant, which lasted for almost ten years, became an affair, but there is no reason to doubt that it did. Unlike Herbert, Elsie had no moral qualms about having an affair. She had been faithful to Herbert because she loved him, not because of her marital vows, institutional bonds, or societal expectations. Once she fell out of love with him — assuming that the situations she described in "The Imaginary Mistress" and "In New York State" are true to life — she had no reason not to have an affair. She was too comfortable with sexuality, too much part of an avant-garde world, and too eager to grasp experiences to hold herself back when she felt no moral repugnance at the idea.²³⁵

Realigning her life and establishing a new *modus vivendi* with Herbert was nevertheless painful. Elsie never wrote directly about that process. But what she wrote a decade later, about situations when a woman or man has an ongoing affair but continues to maintain a relationship with her or his spouse, sheds light on her affairs and her relationship with Herbert.²³⁶ She vehemently rejected the term "adultery" as a "vicious catchword." She also objected to the term "sharing" which implied that women were property to be owned. She was more accepting of "trios",

235 Earlier, she might have been hesitant if a situation she describes in "The Imaginary Mistress" is accurate. When Elsie's alter ego Lois travels in Mexico (as Elsie did in January 1913), a lingering sense of loyalty to her husband keeps her from responding to the kisses of a man she meets and travels with. Lois thinks there would be nothing wrong with such a physical relationship, but she foregoes it because she knows it would hurt her husband "to the quick."

236 University of Chicago, Hannah Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, Robert Herrick Papers (RH Papers), ECP's notes for Chapter "Pigeon Cove" in "Tides", the book she and Robert Herrick were writing in the mid-1920s.

but cautioned, “[t]here is ‘nothing desirable’ about that [...] it is an emergency measure against disaster. And I don’t see how outsiders can ever determine the amount of disaster it may preclude — or involve.” Nevertheless, Elsie thought trios were very common situations, and perfectly natural, almost inevitable, when “either husband or wife comes to love the other in a parental kind of way.”²³⁷ Her description of trio arrangements as fraught and difficult, born out of a sense of desperation, undoubtedly describes her own experience. No wonder she was so unyielding with Herbert and so unaccommodating to others’ schedules during the mid- and late- 1910s.

Rewriting the Rules of Marriage

As she wrestled with the problems in her own marriage and explored marriage customs in other cultures, Elsie struggled to articulate how modern couples could keep relationships vital and passionate, protected from the stultifying effects of domestic routines, proprietary habits, and formulaic behavior. Reciprocity, mutual responsiveness, candor, and sincerity were essential to any meaningful relationship, she argued.²³⁸

Expanding on the themes she had written about in *The Family* in 1906, Elsie championed opportunities for women to express their sexuality, practice birth control, and engage in premarital and extramarital sex. Believing that marriages should derive legitimacy from the relationship between a couple rather than the sanction of church or state, she supported easing divorce laws and relaxing the social stigma that attended divorce. Elsie’s remedies for the ills of marriage were provocative for a woman of her class and background, but they were emblematic of what many leading social rebels, intellectuals, and artists — including members of Heterodoxy and writers at *The Masses* — were saying, writing, and doing about marriage in the 1910s and 1920s.²³⁹ Her

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ ECP, *Social Freedom*, pp. 32–33; ECP, *Fear and Conventionality*, pp. 152–53; ECP, “Feminism and Sex Ethics”, pp. 462–65.

²³⁹ For the backgrounds, connections, and views of leading “sex radicals” and other marriage reformers in the 1910s and 1920s, and Elsie’s place among them, see Claire Virginia Eby, *Until Choice Do Us Part: Marriage Reform in the Progressive Era* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), and Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women’s Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War I*

connections to these groups provided her with inspiration and support, as well as opportunities to publicize her views.

Marriage “imposes conditions fatal to passion,” Elsie believed. A husband, knowing he can get what he wants at any time, stops taking trouble to get it, and his “uncourted wife” becomes passive and passionless, “at best only a friend, at worst a jealous proprietress.” The “complementary institution” of adultery was just as lethal to passion, Elsie warned, noting that lovers could be institutionalized as easily as husbands, and long term affairs were just as likely as marriages to sink into unthinking habit.²⁴⁰

To keep passion alive, Elsie recommended that couples eliminate routine, spend time apart, and find ways to express their individuality. “The daily familiarity we so insist upon in marriage of itself would take the edge off any spiritual intimacy, dulling responsiveness. A degree of loneliness is essential to fervor,” she asserted.²⁴¹ Convinced that domestic routines had an enervating effect on passion, she urged modern couples to follow the eighteenth-century example of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin and experiment with keeping separate apartments while married.²⁴²

Maintaining separate social lives was another strategy to avoid boredom and keep relationships fresh. “Conjugal detachment is essential to conjugal attachment,” Elsie had informed Herbert in 1910.²⁴³ Couples should spend time together because they enjoyed each other and had common interests, not because society found it convenient to treat them as a unit. To eliminate what she called the “tagger-on spouse problem,” Elsie argued in the *New Republic* in June 1916 that married individuals should be sent separate invitations to social events; a host should not be obligated to invite both partners when he or she wanted to see only one.²⁴⁴

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Most of these champions of change were white, heterosexual, middle-class or upper-middle-class intellectuals who addressed a white middle-class audience, but Simmons also writes about the views and marriages of middle-class Black reformers during this period.

240 ECP, *Journal of a Feminist*, pp. 43–44.

241 ECP, “Feminism and Sex Ethics”, p. 464.

242 ECP, *Journal of a Feminist*, p. 48.

243 APS, ECP to HP, June 30, 1910.

244 ECP, “Must We Have Her?”, *New Republic*, 10 June 1916, 145–46. The *New York Evening Telegram*, *Evening Herald*, and *Evening Sun* all ran stories about Elsie’s article. The newspaper clippings are in APS.

The major problem Elsie wrestled with was how a woman could preserve her independence when she was in love with a man. "How are women to live *with* men, not *without* men like the ruthless fighters for institutional freedom, and not in the old way *through* men?" Elsie agonized.²⁴⁵ Recognizing that there was "a marked impulse to subjection in the normal woman," she warned against letting a love relationship become a woman's entire existence.²⁴⁶ "That monstrous alternative of the Nineteenth Century, Work-instead-of Love is by no means slain," she lamented.²⁴⁷

To avoid "self-surrender" and preserve her "inviolable" core, a woman had to find a focus for her energy and imagination that had nothing to do with the man she loved. This required "intellectual work or indeed any work that is interesting and exacting." In Elsie's view, having a job would allow a woman to maintain her individuality and independence, and help her to build a stronger relationship with a man:

Hitherto the work of women has been considered only from the economic standpoint, or from the point of view of making her economically independent of men [...]. It is time now to consider her work as a safeguard of her spiritual independence — a preservative of her integrity, a means of discipline. It is only through work one can be quite sure one is taking life at first hand, and it is only by taking life at first hand, by being the spiritual equal of her lover that a woman may preserve a free and passionate life with him, a life of mutual joys and satisfactions, a life aglow through their imagination.²⁴⁸

Elsie put these ideas into practice in her own life. By 1915, she was adamant that she and Herbert should lead quite separate domestic and social lives. The Parsons'es multiple homes — in Manhattan, Lenox, and Harrison, New York — helped Elsie maintain the physical distance she desired.²⁴⁹ Increasingly, she and Herbert stayed at different residences. If either wanted to spend time with the other, it had to be arranged in advance. They still had a sexual relationship, since there was a pregnancy

245 APS, ECP, "Journal of a Feminist" mss., p. 53 (ECP, *Journal*, p. 46). Emphasis in the original.

246 Ibid.

247 APS, ECP, "Journal of A Feminist" mss., p. 56 (ECP, *Journal*, p. 48).

248 APS, ECP "Journal of a Feminist" mss., p. 54. (ECP, *Journal*, p. 47.)

249 Herbert inherited Lounsberry in Harrison from his father in 1915.

scare in 1915.²⁵⁰ Their professional activities also kept them apart. Elsie went off for weeks of field work several times a year. Herbert traveled for his law practice and rented a house in Albany in 1915 when he was a member of the Constitutional Convention that was rewriting the New York State constitution. "How strange you all are about where you live!" their oldest son, sixteen-year-old John, observed in 1919, noting that Elsie was at Lounsberry, Herbert was in an apartment on the Upper East Side, and Lissa was in midtown.²⁵¹ Elsie travelled frequently and freely, but not with Herbert. After another unhappy trip visiting several National Parks with their older children, in the summer of 1914, she and Herbert did not travel together for seven years.²⁵²

"I can't help thinking that freedom rather than consideration is the basis of a real relation between two persons," Elsie told Herbert, explaining why he had no "*a priori* claim" on her evenings just because they were married.²⁵³ She frequently turned down his proposals to do something together.²⁵⁴ Nevertheless, she took offense if Herbert forgot that they had made plans or expressed a preference to garden rather than to do something with her. And she was hurt when Herbert was invited to parties for the pro-suffrage set hosted by her friend Alice Duer Miller, while she was not.²⁵⁵

Despite Elsie's belief in marital freedom, Herbert's continuing relationship with Lucy Wilson still had the power to wound. Elsie was uncharacteristically vitriolic when she discovered that he had spent part of a weekend at Lenox motoring with Lucy and the Parsons children in the spring of 1915, while he was working on Lucy's divorce case. "Keep your 'cat' out of the family life, just for your own fun," she instructed him, echoing the anger she felt when she returned from Mexico in February 1913 and found that Herbert had arranged for Lissa to spend a weekend with the Wilsons in Washington.²⁵⁶

250 APS, ECP to HP, September 17, 1915 and October 5, 1915.

251 APS, John E. Parsons to HP, December 9, 1919.

252 Elsie apologized to Herbert for being "cranky" during the trip, but felt he had arranged it to suit his style of travel rather than hers. APS, ECP to HP [July 31, 1914].

253 APS, ECP to HP [April 5, 1915]; similarly, ECP to HP, April 21, 1915 and April 24, 1915.

254 APS, ECP to HP, November 2, 1916. RHS, telegrams from ECP to HP, November 6, 1916 and November 19, 1916.

255 Hurt: APS, ECP to HP, November 15, 1916.

256 APS, ECP to HP, May 26, 1915.

Escape Artist

"Interesting and exacting work" was the antidote Elsie recommended to counterbalance a woman's unfortunate tendency to "self-surrender" when she was in love. It was also her strategy for overcoming the unhappiness of her marriage. From the mid-teens on, Elsie structured her life to accommodate her work rather than fitting her work around the needs of her husband and children. In the summer of 1915, she embarked on the intensive field research on the Pueblo dwellers that she had been "hankering" to do for years.²⁵⁷ She published her first scholarly articles on the culture of the Pueblo after making a second research trip to New Mexico later that year. By 1918, she was spending at least a month every year in the southwest studying indigenous cultures, and a month or longer in the Caribbean or the southeast coast of the United States documenting the spread of folktales from the islands to the US mainland. She published frequently and widely in scientific journals and held numerous offices in professional associations of anthropologists.²⁵⁸

Anthropology filled Elsie's need for adventure, physical challenges, and discovery of the new and exotic. Unimpeded by trains, tourists, and an anxiously protective husband, she slept outdoors in all kinds of weather, rode horseback for hundreds of miles over rough terrain (armed with a loaded revolver), and survived earthquakes and poisonous snakes.²⁵⁹ She came to prefer the company of the "negroes and Indians" she met on her research trips to the people she socialized with back East.²⁶⁰

Elsie's changing relationship with Herbert gave her the impetus and the freedom to spend a great deal of time in the field. After her marriage soured, she felt no obligation to create a home for Herbert. "New York seems drearier than ever, & this 'keeping house' more abominable, when there's no point in keeping it — for anybody," she complained in

257 APS, ECP to HP, August 31, 1915.

258 Elsie received a "starred" listing in *American Men of Science* in 1927, an indication that she was a recognized leader in the anthropology profession (Rossiter, *Women Scientists*, I, p. 289; Table 10.4, p. 293). For accounts and assessments of Parsons's career in anthropology, see Deacon, and Zumwalt.

259 She pitied Herbert for seeing the country only through the glass windows of a train. APS, ECP to HP, February 16, 1918.

260 APS, ECP to HP, November 21, 1917. See also, APS, ECP to Tony Luhan (husband of Mabel Dodge Luhan), April 11, 1932.

1913 and in later years.²⁶¹ Her youngest children, born in 1909 and 1911, were still quite young when she started her anthropological expeditions. As they grew older, she increased the amount of time she spent in the field. When she was home, Elsie secluded herself so she could work undisturbed every morning. If she was immersed in her work, she turned down requests from Herbert and the children to spend time with her, and largely put the family out of her mind.²⁶² When Herbert noted how much he valued letters from home when he was stationed in Europe, Elsie expressed surprise. "When my own interest is much absorbed, in the Southwest, for example, I don't care much for letters, in fact I forget people," she confessed. A weekly telegram telling her that everything was all right at home was sufficient for her.²⁶³

Although Elsie employed many household servants, she relied increasingly on Herbert and her daughter Lissa to help out. According to Mac, their youngest child, Elsie and Herbert negotiated an arrangement in the teens whereby he agreed to take more responsibility for the older children while she had primary responsibility for the younger ones.²⁶⁴ Herbert became a very engaged father. He attended family ceremonies, holiday celebrations, athletic events, and school functions (including Lissa's high school graduation) that Elsie missed. He went on camping trips with the two older children, and took them (along with Elsie's mother) to Europe in 1921. With help from his sister, he planned Lissa's 1921 wedding.²⁶⁵ When she and John came home to visit, he turned down professional and social engagements so he could spend his evenings with them.²⁶⁶ Lissa fondly remembered the pleasure she and her father took in staying up late to gossip about the politicians they

261 APS, ECP to HP, December 17, 1913. Similarly, APS, ECP to HP [April 15, 1915] and November 21, 1917.

262 APS, ECP to HP, November 2, 1916; ECP to her son, John E. Parsons, May 14, 1918, May 16, 1918, and May 18, 1918. Elsie looked forward to Herbert's return from the army in 1919, but was prepared to miss his homecoming if it conflicted with a rescheduled research trip to the Southwest with Boas.

263 APS, ECP to HP, October 17, 1918.

264 Desley Deacon, 1994 interview with McIlvaine Parsons (Deacon, p. 462, note 5).

265 Wedding and 1921 trip: APS, HP to ECP, July 7, 1921. 1921 trip: RHS, HP to State Department, May 9, 1921; HP Memo for Office, May 6, 1921. Wedding planning: RHS, HP file: Correspondence re Yale Club 1921, and Herbert's annotations on an invitation list for Lissa's wedding in RHS, HP, Folder: Fifth Division.

266 RHS, HP to Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch [n.d., 1920]; HP to Frank F. Barth, August 24, 1924.

knew.²⁶⁷ Herbert also did a lot for the younger boys in the early 1920s: he escorted them to boarding school, made sure they were properly outfitted, visited them, and arranged for their travel back home. He corresponded at length with the boys' schools about their curriculum and performance, hired tutors, and took the boys on vacations.²⁶⁸

Herbert's involvement with the children, unusual for a man in this era, served his purposes as well as Elsie's.²⁶⁹ Doing more with the children gave him opportunities to counter her iconoclasm and expose them to the values, standards, and experiences that were important to him. Both Lissa and Elsie counted on Herbert to provide Lissa with connections to the social world that Elsie scorned.²⁷⁰ After accompanying Lissa to a dance on Upper Fifth Avenue in 1918, Elsie felt "quite like an immigrant mother who does not know her daughter's set."²⁷¹ Herbert worried that Herbert, Jr. and Mac were not getting an adequate education at the experimental day school that was very likely Elsie's choice.²⁷² The boys started attending Herbert's alma mater, St. Paul's School, in 1923 when they were fourteen and twelve; John was already enrolled there.

Taking charge of renovating and decorating their homes similarly provided opportunities for Herbert to counter Elsie's untraditional tastes. Elsie, who had always claimed incompetence about furnishing and decorating a house, was happy to turn those responsibilities over to Herbert.²⁷³ In addition, he made travel arrangements for all the family members and dealt with Elsie's relatives when they were too much for her.²⁷⁴ Even Herbert's secretary contributed to Elsie's freedom by taking

267 Kennedy, "Reminiscences", p. 21.

268 RHS, HP correspondence in the 1920s with the Lincoln School, St. Paul's School, and Herbert Jr.'s tutor, Edward P. Furber; and plans for trips and arrangements for Herbert Jr.'s summer camp.

269 For men's roles in childrearing, see Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

270 APS, ECP to HP, January 14, 1919.

271 APS, ECP to HP, April 15, 1918.

272 RHS, HP correspondence with St. Paul's School in 1922. APS, HP to ECP, July 7, 1922.

273 APS, ECP to HP, October 12, 1911; February 24, 1916; March 21, 1918. Elsie's house in North Haven, Maine, purchased after Herbert died, was the only residence that reflected her tastes, according to her grandson David Parsons, who noted that its Southwestern décor is strikingly different from the Parsons's other homes. Author interview with David M. Parsons, July 2010.

274 Herbert informed Elsie's brother, Henry Clews, about Lucy Clews's failing health when Elsie could not think of what to say, and took the younger boys to visit Henry

care of personal tasks that a more traditional wife — or a wife who was more often at home — would have done.²⁷⁵

Lissa, who was always more domestically inclined than her mother, also filled in, not always happily. When the servants were not on duty, she cooked.²⁷⁶ During the spring and fall of 1918, she took charge of the household and her younger brothers for several weeks while Elsie was in the southwest and Herbert was in Europe with the US army.²⁷⁷ She also managed the household accounts for several years, a responsibility she disliked intensely.²⁷⁸

When she was home, Elsie played a typical maternal role — reading bedtime books with the younger boys, giving them swimming lessons, making a riddle book with Mac, escorting Lissa to dances.²⁷⁹ But her pacifist views, liking for “negroes and Indians”, and refusal to wear a hat embarrassed her older children, especially in front of their friends and their friends’ mothers.²⁸⁰ Her relationship with Lissa, her temperamental and intellectual opposite, was fraught for many years and repeated much of the generational conflict that characterized Elsie’s relationship with her own mother. Elsie remained deeply disappointed that Lissa was not a feminist.²⁸¹

Elsie’s lifestyle from 1915 on was, in part, an adjustment to a troubled marriage. But it was more than that. She was implementing her ideas about protecting women’s freedom, expressing individualism, and preserving love and passion. She would apply the same rules in

in France. (RHS, HP to Henry Clews, Jr., June 2, 1924 and undated cable; HP Vacation Memo, June 28, 1924.)

275 Herbert asked his legal secretary to give instructions to his Manhattan housekeeper (RHS, HP to Miss Doran, July 18, 1917; July 12, 1917; and July 13, 1917) and to send a birthday telegram to Lissa (August 6, 1917). Doran helped with arrangements for Lissa’s wedding and mailed out the invitations (RHS, HP Folder: Correspondence re Yale Club 1921).

276 APS, ECP to HP, March 17, 1917 and March 20, 1917.

277 APS, Lissa Parsons to HP, February 2, 1918, and September 11, 1918; Kennedy, “Reminiscences,” p. 21.

278 APS, Lissa Parsons to HP, September 26, 1919; June 22, 1920; February 28, 1921.

279 APS, ECP to HP, February 3, 1918; ECP to HP, April 15, 1918; ECP to HP, October 16, 1918.

280 APS, ECP to HP, June 17, 1917; John E. Parsons (son) to HP, April 9, 1917 and April 23, 1917; ECP notes for lecture on “Social Conventions.”

281 Lissa dropped out of Bryn Mawr College after a year, married in 1921 when she was twenty, and had her first child a year later. Not a feminist: APS, Ralph L. Beals to Peter H. Hare, July 31, 1978 and December 19, 1978.

her romantic relationships with other men, holding both herself and them to high standards of behavior. After years of compromises and accommodations, she was constructing exactly the life she felt a modern woman should lead. When a male friend asserted that women were not meant to be scientists and it would be impossible for Elsie to escape from writing “social propaganda,” Elsie proudly announced to Herbert, “Well, I have escaped, & forever.”²⁸² She was escaping, not only from the strictures men placed on women professionals, but also from the constraints of a traditional marriage focused on domestic life.²⁸³

Gypsy, Goddess, Witch

In the 1910s and 1920s, Elsie turned to other men to find the intellectual companionship and romance that Herbert failed to provide. The architect Grant LaFarge, the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, the novelist Robert Herrick, and the playwright Clarence Day all paid court to her, expressing their love in poetry and prose as well as letters. They wooed her with wit and charm, and romanticized her as something other worldly, exotic, even magical. To LaFarge, she was “my beloved Gypsy Queen” or an exotic mermaid. Herrick likened her to the lion-headed Egyptian goddess, Sekhmet. Kroeber called her a “lovely witch.”²⁸⁴

Herbert had failed Elsie, not only by seeming to succumb to the charms of another woman, but also by being unable — or unwilling — to share her interests and discuss her unconventional views. Now entering her forties, she deliberately chose partners who showed a genuine interest in the work she was doing and the settings in which

282 APS, ECP to HP, November 6, 1918. The friend was Meredith Hare, whom Elsie had known since college days.

283 Elsie wanted to create opportunities for other women as well. She chastised her male colleagues for not awarding fellowships to women and expressing anti-feminist views (APS, ECP to A. L. Kroeber, March 26, 1929). She used her own money to fund a month of field research for a young scholar and mother who was caring for three stepsons and an infant daughter. The recipient, Esther Schiff Goldfrank, contrasted Elsie’s support with Boas’s opinion that motherhood was more important than anthropology. See Gloria Levitas, “Esther Schiff Goldfrank” in Ute Gacs et al., *Women Anthropologists: Selected Biographies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 120–26.

284 APS, Grant LaFarge to ECP, 24 July 1918; APS, A. L. Kroeber to ECP [1919?]. Sekhmet: quoted in Blake Nevius, *Robert Herrick: The Development of a Novelist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 301.

she did it. None of these relationships is well-documented. Few of the men's letters to Elsie, and almost none of hers to them, have survived. We do not know how she felt about the men, but we know something about how she approached the relationships and how her partners felt about her.

The men who figured most prominently in Elsie's life after 1913 were, up to a point, supportive work partners and enthusiastic travel companions.²⁸⁵ She embarked on a joint project with each of the men — another touchstone of romance and intimacy in her Greenwich Village milieu, which celebrated creative collaborations between lovers. Nevertheless, she did not let her romantic attachments interfere with her research or writing schedules. Nor would she surrender the freedom to come and go as she pleased and see whomever she wanted.

Grant LaFarge, the architect who played a major role in Elsie's life from 1913 into 1922, shared her love of the outdoors and her interest in Native American lore, camping, and canoeing.²⁸⁶ He designed the log cabin where she wrote at Stonover Farm, and eagerly supported, discussed, and shared in her work.²⁸⁷ At the very beginning of their relationship, he imagined a "fascinating little vision" of work done together.²⁸⁸ Later, he happily recalled trips when she had worked while he fished. Dreaming of future trips where they would work side by side, he hoped "to do that work which more than any other brings me reward; to surround your work with pleasure, ease, with happiness; perhaps even with romance?"²⁸⁹ When he accompanied her to the southwest, he made drawings, paintings, and photographs of the indigenous cultures she studied. They collaborated on *American Indian Life* (1922), a collection of native tales retold by leading anthropologists

285 The author Clarence Day (1874–1935), severely crippled by rheumatoid arthritis, was a close friend but apparently never a lover. After he published an affectionate sketch of Elsie as an intrepid folklorist (Clarence Day, "Portrait of a Lady", *New Republic*, July 23, 1919, 387–89), he explained, "I couldn't have done it just the way I did if I hadn't loved you [...]. I don't mean that I love you like a madman, or a husband, or anything. But I do love you more than as a friend." (APS, Clarence Day to ECP [1919?]) Day also expressed frustrated love for Elsie in light verse (APS, Clarence Day to ECP [n.d.]).

286 See Oliver Lafarge, *Behind the Mountains* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956). APS, ECP to HP, April 27, 1914.

287 Cabin: Kennedy, "Reminiscences", p. 24.

288 APS, Grant LaFarge to ECP, Tuesday, [n.d., 1913?].

289 APS, Grant LaFarge to ECP [n.d.].

that she edited and he illustrated.²⁹⁰ They seem to have parted ways in 1922, but there is no surviving record that explains how or why this happened.

Shared work interests stimulated Elsie's relationships with Alfred Kroeber and Robert Herrick in their early stages, but both men ultimately felt that her devotion to her career was an insurmountable barrier to the intimacy they desired. A professor at the University of California at Berkeley, Kroeber was one of the anthropologists in Boas's inner circle who had encouraged Elsie to make a career in anthropology. Widowed in 1913, he was a leading anthropologist and a cosmopolitan intellectual, handsome, charismatic, and charming.²⁹¹ A strong friendship and the beginnings of a romance blossomed between him and Elsie in 1918, when he was on leave from the University of California and Herbert was in Europe with the US army. Alfred spent a good deal of time in Lenox and made himself popular with Elsie's children by teaching them "outrageous" forms of poker; he and Elsie were flattered to be asked to join John and his friends on a camping trip.²⁹² Alfred seems to have made a sexual overture to Elsie during the summer but had been rebuffed. He continued to write her affectionate letters and assured her she remained "#1" on his scorecard, although he knew he was lower down on hers.²⁹³ (Both LaFarge and Day were also sending Elsie love poems and love letters during the summer of 1918.)

In the fall of 1918, Elsie and Kroeber went together to the Zuni pueblo in New Mexico where she studied the ceremonies and he, the language; they planned to write a joint paper on the comparative ceremonialism of the Pueblo peoples. Elsie wrote Herbert that she found the trip enjoyable and helpful for her work.²⁹⁴ But Alfred was disappointed that she seemed more interested in her work than in him. He lamented,

290 ECP, ed. *American Indian Life: By Several of Its Students* (New York: Huebsch, 1922).

291 Two years younger than Elsie, he entered Columbia College in 1896 and earned his PhD under Boas in 1901. See Julian H. Steward, *Alfred Kroeber* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), and Theodora Kroeber, *Alfred Kroeber: A Personal Configuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

292 Trip with John: APS, ECP to HP, June 14, 1918. Outrageous poker games: Kennedy, "Reminiscences."

293 APS, A. L. Kroeber to ECP, July 23, 1918 and August 6, 1918.

294 APS, ECP to HP, September 26, 1918.

Haven't you made it a little hard for me, Elsie, to be as interested in you as I did want to be? Perhaps it was a defense, or an antipathy reaction produced by myself, that made you put work in the foreground when I was surely more interested in Elsie the person than in Elsie the anthropologist. Before long I got the impression that you wanted nothing between us but shop.²⁹⁵

The collaborative project was never finished, and their friendship waned after Alfred returned to Berkeley, although they saw each other from time to time in New York.²⁹⁶

By the time Elsie became involved, in the fall of 1923, with Robert Herrick, a popular and critically acclaimed novelist, she was quite explicit about how she expected a romantic partner to relate to her work. She wanted what she had never gotten from Herbert. "Each is to contribute to the systematic pursuits of the other, and with real interest not merely with patience and long-suffering," she explained as they were preparing for a long trip in 1925. The dividends of such behavior would be substantial, she assured Robert. "By showing her that he is really interested in her doing good work, not merely tolerant of her working, and that he wants to contribute to her work as work she is sure to feel a spontaneous kind of gratitude that may surprise him by its expressiveness," Elsie promised.²⁹⁷

For a time, the relationship provided what Elsie sought. Robert, a widower with a grown son, accompanied her on lengthy research trips to the Southwest, the Caribbean, and Mexico. They had many interests in common: modern womanhood, marriage, and gender relations were central themes in his novels, and he was knowledgeable about race relations and Caribbean island cultures.²⁹⁸

They planned to collaborate on a book (tentatively titled "Tides") that would contrast the sexual experiences and perspectives of an older couple like themselves (Robert was fifty-seven and Elsie, forty-nine,

295 APS, A. L. Kroeber to ECP, Tuesday [n.d., likely fall 1918]. More on his disappointed hopes: APS, A. L. Kroeber to ECP, October 9, 1918; December 12, 1918; and February 22, 1919.

296 APS, A. L. Kroeber to ECP, January 26, 1920 and May 24, 1920.

297 RH Papers, ECP to RH, "Memorandum for Travel in the World and in Life."

298 Herrick's early books are regarded as perceptive illustrations of changing social mores in America in the early twentieth century. See Nevius, viii–ix, and Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp. 39–43.

when their affair began in 1923) with those of a younger generation. For the youth perspective, they would draw on the lives of their adult children. Elsie had long been interested in the role a novelist could play in promoting new norms of social behavior.²⁹⁹ Now she had an opportunity to see such work at close hand and help to shape it. She wrote comments on Robert's drafts and contributed chapter outlines and notes for their joint book.³⁰⁰ In one of the scenes she wrote, the female character who represents her tells her lover, who is based on Robert, "it's more fun talking to you than to anybody."³⁰¹

Although Robert would come to see their relationship as exceedingly one-sided, it was nevertheless stimulating for his work as well as for Elsie's. He had a reputation for basing his plots and characters on the lives of the people he knew, and Elsie provided him with enormously rich material at a time when he felt his career was at its lowest ebb.³⁰² The novel he had published in 1922 — his first in seven years — had not been well-reviewed and sold poorly.³⁰³ When he met Elsie, he was fearful of being displaced by younger writers with fresher ideas. With her, he found new focus and new energy. He produced *Wanderings* (1925), a book of four lengthy short stories, including "The Adventures of Ti Chatte" and "Stations of the Cross"; *Chimes* (1926), a novel about the early years of the University of Chicago; and early versions of the material that was meant to be in "Tides", but would eventually be used in *The End of Desire* (1932). All these books explored modern womanhood, and all featured Elsie as a major character. In addition, he wrote numerous drafts of "The Story of Jessica Stowe," fleshing out the personality of the female character who embodied Elsie, in different guises and under different names, in the fiction he published between 1925 and 1932.

Robert was deeply in love with Elsie and fascinated by her as the epitome of a modern woman. In his depictions, she is beautiful, charming and alluring, adventurous and physically fearless, relentless

299 ECP, *Journal of a Feminist*, pp. 44–45. Herrick felt similarly about the role of the novelist. RH Papers, "What Women Say about Themselves."

300 RH Papers, "Tides." Typescript text with handwritten notes by ECP.

301 RH Papers, ECP notes for the chapter entitled "Pigeon Cove."

302 RH Papers, "Diary of an Intravert [sic]."

303 RH Papers, Alfred Harcourt to RH, August 2, 1922 and November 26, 1924; RH to Robert Morss Lovett, April 20 [1924].

in challenging convention and old-fashioned thinking — but also aloof, independent, insistent on her individuality, ruthless in getting her own way, reprehensibly focused on her work, and impervious to the pain she causes others. His fiction and diaries chart the progress of their affair and his changing view of her as their relationship deteriorated. As he grew more frustrated, and more despairing about their future, his depictions of Elsie became harsher and more unflattering. In the end, he portrayed her as a model of modern womanhood that was to be avoided rather than emulated.

Elsie envisioned a companionate relationship with Robert that would free both of them from traditional gender roles and allow them to preserve separate identities. But having no models for the kind of connection she aimed for, she acted what others regarded as the male part. Robert saw a role reversal and resented taking on the traditionally female role. Writing about Elsie as the model for the character Jessica Stowe, Robert described her “manlike” qualities: she does exactly as she pleases with no consideration for others, puts her work above all else, and brings more passion to her science than to her relationships. He knows that if she were a man these traits “would have been considered wholly admirable.”³⁰⁴ But as the lover of such a woman, he feels distressed and demeaned by her behavior. He chafes at taking on the supporting role that the wives and female partners of male professionals of this era were conditioned to accept. His diaries record a litany of complaints: he has to cater to her whims, follow her lead, fit himself around her convenience and schedules. She does not give him the time, attention, or sympathy that he craves. And yet, he finds it impossible to resist her charms.

In another reversal of traditional gender roles, Elsie focused on her work, while Robert focused on creating the conditions in which she could work. At first, he happily took charge of the logistical arrangements for their trips, arranging for their food and lodging, and hiring and outfitting their boats. But less than a year into their relationship, he likened himself to a “kept lover, always on tap when she wanted and ignored the rest of the time.” The experience of “subordinating myself to her somewhat whimsical will, taking whatever she feels like giving”

304 RH Papers, “The Story of Jessica Stowe”, pp. 68–69.

left him feeling “degrade[d].”³⁰⁵ Affronted by Elsie’s “very great absorption in her professional work — and her vanity about it and all its perquisites,” he became increasingly resentful about serving as her “housekeeper, cook, and manager” — tasks he had voluntarily taken on in the hope of making himself indispensable to her.³⁰⁶ Struggling with impotence in 1924, a problem he blamed on Elsie’s “emotional sterility,” he feared he could not satisfy her sexually.³⁰⁷

Robert summed up his understanding of the part he was expected to play in Elsie’s life shortly before they sailed to the West Indies in February 1925. He believed he was supposed to “efface himself when not wanted by Dr. E. C. P.” and “subordinate all and any of his interests to the pursuit of Folk Lore [and] assist in every possible way the accomplishment of the objective of the Field Trip, — especially in regard to arranging for transportation, accommodations, baggage, etc.” In addition, “when Dr. P is occupied with folklore” he was “not in any way to obtrude upon her notice, nor expect attention, consideration, personal or amatory.”³⁰⁸ Robert’s choice of verbs is revealing: he was to efface, subordinate, not obtrude. In short, he felt he was expected to be wholly submissive to Elsie — yet another reversal of traditional gender roles. By addressing her in an impersonal memo and referring to himself and her in the third person, Robert was imitating Elsie’s style. She responded with a memorandum of her own, but she softened the effect by using their pet names. Explaining that he should not feel “she is being perverse and indifferent when she declines to play with him”, she warned that “clashes of time and place may have to be met by temporary separations to which no emotional meaning is attached.”³⁰⁹ Her explanation did little to reassure him or quell his resentment.

Robert’s growing hostility to Elsie was also fueled by professional jealousy. She was in demand as a social critic even after she switched her main focus to anthropology, while Robert, who wrote about many of the same themes, felt unappreciated. She contributed an article for *The Nation*’s series on “Our Changing Morality” and gave an address (“Is

305 RH Papers, “Diary of an Intravert [sic]”, January 24, 1924, January 27, 1924, and February 4, 1924.

306 Ibid., January 24, 1924.

307 Ibid.

308 RH Papers, RH to ECP, “Field Trip, Number Three”, 1925.

309 RH Papers, ECP to RH, “Memorandum for Travel in the World and in Life”, 1925.

Monogamy Possible?") at the public dinner the magazine hosted in 1924. Robert, who attended as Elsie's guest, admired her performance but sourly dismissed the evening as a "half-baked journalistic concoction."³¹⁰

More fundamentally, their conflict grew out of their contrasting ideas about love. Elsie explicitly rejected the nineteenth-century ideal of "oneness" that expected a woman to submerge herself in the beloved and find her identity and purpose in loving him. She wanted "Tides" to illustrate how the love between a woman and a man produces a new sense of joint identity. Her theme for the chapter on "Creation" was: "The sense of life created as a child by both, nourished by both, shared in by both, making something in which both participate something which is held in common, but is not a merging, submission of one to the other."³¹¹ A chapter on "Union" would show that "the unitary idea of merged personality — is fundamentally false. Not only is such a complete absorption of one personality by another or the transformation of two personalities into one impossible, it would be a dreary and impoverished state of being."³¹²

Early in their relationship, Robert had expressed similar views. In 1923, he wrote about love as "a union of souls, yet a jealous preserving of individuality [...]. It is, in reality a doubling of life and purpose with a single unity of feeling."³¹³ Nevertheless, his fiction and journals suggests that he believed love has to be all encompassing and all absorbing, and that the woman has to submit to the man. Each of his male protagonists wants to be a romantic hero whose love awakens his beloved to sexual delight, melts the harshness and iciness of her personality, and transforms her into a true woman — a woman who is gentle, loving, and nurturing. Like so many men and women of this era, Robert seemed unable to free himself from this romantic ideal of a strong man who overpowers a weak, dependent woman.

The dramatic tension in his fictional accounts of his affair with Elsie arises from the protagonist's attempts to break down what Thomas Lapin, the hero of "The Adventures of Ti Chatte" calls the "terrible self-sufficiency" of his lover, subsume her, and transform her through his

310 RH Papers, "Diary of an Intravert [sic]", January 24, 1924.

311 RH Papers, "Tides" [1925].

312 RH Papers, Chapter "The Ebb", in "Tides" [1925].

313 RH Papers, "Passion, Love, Marriage — all or none?" (1923).

love.³¹⁴ In Herrick's view, these relationships fail because the woman cannot love or give of herself, not because the hero asks too much. The independence of the heroine in "The Stations of the Cross" elicits in the narrator a physical and violent compulsion to bend her to his will. He feels driven by the need

to discover this glowing inner coal of passion within himself, to penetrate her cool aloofness — to possess and exult. The very whiteness and coldness of the woman, denying him, refusing to be drawn into the circle of his will, to become one with him [...] now tempted him to violence. He looked steadily, stilly at her, like a serpent. And she met his gaze as if fascinated by some new power, feeling herself drawn irresistibly out of her isolation into the circle of his will.³¹⁵

In Robert's notes for the book that became *Chimes*, the poet who loves Jessica Stowe Mallory, the character modelled on Elsie, finally recognizes the futility of his love because "he did not elicit the woman he dreamed from the actual Jessica and he fails to persuade her [,] the actual Jessica[,] to find her fulfillment in or through him."³¹⁶ He ultimately recoils from the woman's "exaltation of work above love" and her insistence on preserving a sense of self, independent from him. This theme is replayed in *The End of Desire*, Robert's final novel about Elsie. The heroine, Serena Massey, is a thinly disguised Elsie; Arnold Redfield, her lover, is based on Robert. Massey, a highly successful psychologist, is "aloof," "cool," and "self-contained." Redfield, a professional colleague, is both angered and wounded by the recognition that she and he "are not 'one': she the individualist, had never let him forget that for a moment!" In contrast, Redfield feels a "complete absorption" in Massey.³¹⁷

In a reversal of traditional gender roles, Redfield does for Massey what a woman typically does for a man. While she fits him into a busy schedule of professional engagements, family responsibilities, and travel, he sacrifices all his other interests, including professional opportunities, so he is free to see her whenever she desires. He devotes himself to providing the "cherishing care of her person and her spirit, which he

314 RH, "The Adventures of Ti Chatte" in *Wanderings* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925), p. 211.

315 RH, "Stations of the Cross" in *Wanderings* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925), p. 87.

316 RH Papers, "Jessica at Fifty."

317 RH, *The End of Desire* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1932), pp. 6–7, 281–82, 286.

had made a cult."³¹⁸ While she works on her scholarly articles, he types her manuscripts and sees to lunch; when they travel together, he makes all the practical arrangements and devotes himself to providing for her comfort. He has an ulterior motive: he practices subordination in order to create dependency and establish power and control.

Robert's growing antagonism colored his depiction of Elsie the professional as well as his portrayal of Elsie the woman. Although he initially admired Elsie's work, the more he felt controlled by her, the more he denigrated it. When he began writing about Elsie as the character Jessica, he planned to make her a brilliant research scientist, distinguished by her intellectual passion and her "selfless" dedication and commitment to her work. But he ultimately decided to portray Jessica as "a curious second rate scientist without an originating idea, but industrious as a gather [*sic*] of facts." He likens her absorption in "computation, proof reading, summary cross referencing" to the sewing or knitting that occupies other women.³¹⁹

Herrick's ambivalence about Elsie's career, his vision of "oneness," his desire to make himself indispensable and forge intimacy out of her weakness and dependence, are reminiscent of George Herbert Palmer's relationship with Alice Freeman Palmer. (See Chapter 1.) George, a cousin of Robert Herrick's mother, was an early mentor to Robert. The novelist knew both George and Alice well: he was a frequent guest at Boxford, a colleague of Alice's at the University of Chicago, and their travel companion in Europe in 1895. Both Alice and Elsie are featured in *Chimes* (1926), Robert's novel about the early years of the University of Chicago.³²⁰ Alice (transposed to a widow instead of an absentee wife) appears as the beloved Dean of Women, Edith Crandall. Crandall's warmth, generosity of spirit, old-fashioned ideals and womanliness contrasts with the "intellectual passion" and "emotional sterility" displayed by Jessica Stowe Mallory, the married psychology scholar who is based on Elsie.

Herrick was not the only man who felt threatened by Elsie's self-reliance and saw her as unwomanly despite her charm and beauty. The

318 Ibid, p. 279.

319 RH Papers, "The Story of Jessica Stowe", pp. [2], 69; "Jessica Stowe, 3rd version."

320 RH, *Chimes* (New York: Macmillan, 1926). RH Papers, Robert Morss Lovett to Allen T. Hazen, February 24, 1947.

images that Elsie's lovers and admirers used to describe her — mermaid, witch, goddess — suggest menace as well as magic. Mermaids lure men to their death; witches are evil; goddesses ruin the lives of mere mortals. Such beings are dangerous because they are not bound by the ordinary conventions of civilization. Elsie's male admirers also found her deficient in the stereotypically female traits of compassion and tenderness. LaFarge avoided turning to Elsie for comfort when he was depressed, explaining, "I'm in that primitive male state where I want petting & I've a feeling that you have no use for such critturs."³²¹ Kroeber characterized her as a woman hardened by experience, "scarred" by "her long fight for self-preservation."³²² In the aftermath of their trip to Zuni, he felt it necessary to remind her to be "kind" and not "harsh" with him.³²³

Robert was hardest on Elsie. He presents her, in the character Serena Massey in *The End of Desire*, as a woman who takes but never gives. She is heedless of how her behavior affects those closest to her (her family as well as her lovers) and indifferent to the inconvenience that others suffer on her behalf; she uses her admirers and then discards them. He views her efforts to balance her time between her lover, her family, and her work as reprehensibly egocentric; he equates her reserve and self-sufficiency with frigidity. He depicts her as a woman devoid of softness or tenderness, despite her charm and sexual appeal. He expressed the same mixture of attraction and distaste in his journal when he compared Elsie to the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet. "Sekhmet [...] the lion-headed one, was worshipped more in fear than in love. She was stern, ruthless, remote from human feebleness of will and purpose. Inexorable — and yet a woman and lovely! Like my Sekhmet [...]. Something more than mere woman, something less, too."³²⁴ "Ruthless", "brutal", "hard" are recurring epithets in Herrick's descriptions of Elsie.³²⁵

Both Herrick and Kroeber admired Elsie's accomplishments and enjoyed the intellectual stimulation she provided. But they were put off by her independence and resented having to compete with her work for her attention. Not surprisingly, their subsequent romantic

321 APS, Grant LaFarge to ECP [n.d., 1913?].

322 APS, A. L. Kroeber to ECP, Christmas [1920?].

323 APS, A. L. Kroeber to ECP, Christmas [1920?] and February 12, 1921.

324 Quoted in Nevius, p. 301.

325 RH Papers, "Forward to Jessica", pp. 1–3.

partners were quite different from Elsie. In 1926, when he was fifty, Alfred Kroeber married one of his graduate students, a twenty-nine-year-old widow with two small children. Theodora Kracaw Kroeber gave up anthropology when they married so she could devote herself to her family and support her husband's career. Alfred Kroeber's (male) biographer describes her as "an ideal wife" whose devoted care was instrumental in Alfred's professional success. Among other things, she served dinner to their four young children in their rooms "rather than impose them on Kroeber." Theodora pursued her own successful career as a writer and anthropologist only after the children were grown and Alfred had retired.³²⁶

Herrick's subsequent romantic history was an equally emphatic rejection of Elsie and her values. After their affair ended, he retreated to the pampering care of his devoted housekeeper, and then had an affair with a married woman who did not have a career. He continued to write unflattering portraits of career women in his novels and praised the kind of woman he dubbed the "Gretchens" of the world — women who understood what it meant to sacrifice their work for a loved one, especially a man.³²⁷

Many of the men and women Elsie knew in Greenwich Village underwent similar struggles and ultimately failed to free themselves from the old-fashioned concepts of love and gender that they railed against in their journalism and fiction. Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, and Hutchins Hapgood, for example, initially sought female partners who were talented, intellectual, and independent. But after tempestuous relationships with such women, Eastman and Dell each settled for a woman who gave up her own aspirations and happily devoted herself to making him a home and supporting his career.³²⁸

326 Steward, *Alfred Kroeber*, pp. 18–19, 22; Grace Wilson Buzaljko, "Theodora Kracaw Kroeber", in Gacs et al., pp. 187–93. See also, Theodora Kroeber, *Alfred Kroeber*.

327 RH Papers, "My Last Book" (January 1928). For his life and relationships after parting from Elsie, see Nevius, pp. 311–27.

328 See Ellen K. Trimberger, "Feminism, Men and Modern Love" in *Powers of Desire* by Ann Snitow et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 131–52. "I'll be anything you want me to be — sister, sweetheart, secretary, slave — I'll be your mother if that is what you want," the Russian artist Eliana Krylenko promised Max Eastman. After they married, Eastman proudly reported that she "kept house, typed my manuscripts, and washed my shirts in a cold well." Krylenko continued

In contrast, Elsie stuck to her principles and tried to get her male partners to honor them. That this proved no easier with her lovers than her husband shows that patriarchal beliefs and behaviors were as deeply embedded in the psyches of individuals as in the institutions of early twentieth-century life. As Elsie would learn, a simple reversal of gender stereotypes and activities engendered its own problems and was potentially no more satisfying than a more traditional division of work and domestic activities.

War on the Home Front

Elsie's relationship with Herbert remained strained throughout the teens. He knew when she was traveling with a man, but her letters never discussed her relationships with the men, and he did not comment on them. As a passionate and long-term pacifist, Elsie was both outraged and pitying when Herbert volunteered at the age of forty-eight for a job with the US army in the summer of 1917.³²⁹ She had vociferously denounced American involvement in the war, railed against the militarism and jingoism that swept the country, and protested the suppression of free speech on academic campuses and in the press.³³⁰ Herbert called their Lenox home the "headquarters of pacifism."³³¹

Commissioned as a major, Herbert expressed the masculine love of war that Elsie deplored. He welcomed the challenge of "doing one's job to the limit" and reveled in the "excitement" war service brought to his life.³³² He spent six months at the Army Training College before sailing to France in January 1918 where he was attached to the Headquarters of the Fifth Division of the US Infantry. One of the few officers who spoke German, he interrogated German prisoners of war in France, and

to paint, but only as a hobby. "I love to see you play at all kinds of work so vividly," Eastman observed with patronizing approval (Trimberger, p. 146). For a positive portrait of how the writers Hutchins Hapgood and Neil Boyce managed to combine work and love in their marriage, see Eby, pp. 135–69.

329 APS, ECP to HP, August 21, 1917.

330 See Hare, pp. 107–21, and Deacon, pp. 184–86.

331 HP to ECP, June 11, 1917, quoted in Hare, p. 108.

332 APS, HP to ECP, June 20, 1917; HP to ECP, November 21, 1917; HP to the children, January 25, 1918.

went to Germany with the army of occupation after the armistice. He returned to the States in March 1919.³³³

Elsie and Herbert had a number of angry exchanges about the war while he was in Europe, but they eventually found some accommodation. By the summer of 1918, she had relaxed her ban against military dress in her home and moderated her denunciations against the war.³³⁴ Away from the family, Herbert waxed nostalgic and sentimental. Writing to the children on Mother's Day 1918, he described how he and Elsie met and fell in love, and he praised the "foresight and intelligent care" she had invested in their upbringing.³³⁵ Shortly before his division was expecting to see action in September 1918, he wrote Elsie a heartfelt farewell letter that expressed his love and made clear that he valued her for what she valued in herself: "So grateful too have I been for the stimulation to honest effort & the challenge to straight thinking you have always been, even if at times I may not have seemed appreciative of it."³³⁶

The longer Herbert was in Europe, the more critical he grew of the army's emphasis on bureaucracy, rank, and obedience — views that would have resonated with Elsie.³³⁷ Convinced that wars had to be prevented as well as waged, he resigned from the Republican Party in September 1920 when it failed to support the League of Nations. This ended his political career and earned him public denunciations from prominent Republicans, including a cousin who was his law partner.³³⁸ Unpopular but principled actions were Herbert's hallmark. He refused to be associated with a fundraiser for Greenwich House because it involved a Sunday night theatrical performance, a practice that violated his religious principles.³³⁹ He did not join the American Bar Association in 1913 because he believed it excluded lawyers of color.³⁴⁰ Nevertheless,

333 RHS, HP memos to his office, January 25, 1918 and November 15, 1918.

334 Relaxed the ban: APS, ECP to HP, August 20, 1918.

335 APS, HP to the children, enclosure in HP to ECP, May 12, 1918.

336 RHS, HP to ECP, September 10, 1918.

337 APS, HP to ECP, November 20, 1918.

338 RHS, HP to Chairman of the Joint Committee on Printing, September 1, 1925 and clipping from *The New York Times*, October 18, 1920.

339 RHS, HP to Mabel F. Spinner, October 4, 1919.

340 RHS, HP to Charles A. Boston, July 16, 1913 and July 18, 1913.

he was aghast when he learned that Elsie brought a Black man home to tea in 1921.³⁴¹

Herbert said that his law practice and volunteer activities kept him very busy, but time may have hung heavy on his hands after he gave up his political work.³⁴² He admitted to being lonely and welcomed visits from family members when Elsie was away.³⁴³ He developed a passion for horticulture and landscaping, and did much of the gardening at Lounsberry and Stonover Farm himself.³⁴⁴ He remained very fussy about things being done right and fired off letters of complaint about trains that were delayed, overcrowded, or overheated; telegrams that were not delivered on time; shipments of Lenox produce that were not properly packaged; and department store orders that were improperly filled.³⁴⁵

During the 1910s and 1920s, Herbert enjoyed a friendship with Vira Boarman Whitehouse, a woman more like Elsie than like Lucy Wilson. Born in 1875, Vira was a debutante and Southern belle who grew up in New Orleans and attended Sophie Newcomb College. She married the stockbroker Norman de R. Whitehouse and had one daughter. She was a member of Heterodoxy, President of the New York State Woman's Suffrage Party, and a proponent of birth control. As a suffragist leader, she raised large donations from wealthy men, implemented an expensive advertising campaign, and linked the suffrage cause to the war effort.³⁴⁶ In 1918, she became the director of the Swiss Office of the US Committee on Public Information, which combatted German propaganda and promoted American war aims in Europe. Her book,

341 Their son, John, described Herbert's agitation to Elsie. APS, John E. Parsons to ECP, January 26, 1921.

342 RHS, HP to Col. Goodson, November 20, 1922.

343 RHS, HP to John E. Parsons, January 20, 1924.

344 Descriptions of Herbert's gardening interests and activities abound in his correspondence in the 1920s in RHS. For example, HP to T. A. Havemeyer, January 15, 1920; HP to Charles Berndt, April 22, 1922.

345 RHS: Trains: HP letter of December 27, 1916. Merchandise: HP to Wanamakers, January 2, 1922 and January 4, 1922. Produce: HP to Stonover staff, 1925. Postal service: HP to Post Office [October 1915].

346 Although the *New Republic* and other contemporary sources credited her with winning New York State's endorsement of women's suffrage in 1917, Vira and the wealthy women she worked with were successfully "airbrushed" out of many accounts of the struggle, Johanna Neuman argues in *Gilded Suffragists: The New York Socialites Who Fought for Women's Right to Vote* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), p. 142.

A Year as a Government Agent, detailed the obstacles she encountered as the first woman to hold such a position. In 1921, she bought a leather business, reorganized it, made herself president, and managed it for eight years before selling it.³⁴⁷

Vira and her husband had attended Elsie and Herbert's wedding, but her close relationship with Herbert developed when both were active in the women's suffrage movement. They often appeared on the same public platforms and participated in the same back room strategy discussions. She also served with Herbert on the board of Greenwich House.³⁴⁸ At the end of 1915 and beginning of 1916, he dined frequently with her, during a time when Lucy Wilson seems to have faded out of his personal life after her divorce in November 1915.³⁴⁹

Wartime service took both Vira and Herbert to Europe in 1918–1919. The summer after Herbert returned from the war, Vira asked for his legal advice about suing *The New York Times* for publishing articles that she believed were a deliberate effort to make her look "ridiculous."³⁵⁰ (He advised her not to sue.) Two letters in Herbert's files suggest their

347 Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Papers of Vira Boorman Whitehouse, "Finding Aid"; Lauren Claire West, "The Uneasy Beginnings of Public Diplomacy: Vira Whitehouse, the Committee on Public Information, and the First World War" (unpublished MA thesis 4718: Louisiana State University, 2018). https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/4718/

348 The Whitehouses were listed as guests at Elsie and Herbert's wedding in 1900. See "Miss Clews is Married", *The New York Times*, September 2, 1900. Vira served with Herbert on the Board of Greenwich House in 1914. (Tracy Briggs, "Twenty Years at Greenwich House" (unpublished PhD thesis: The University of Toledo, 2008), <https://www.proquest.com/openview/f8c206869eee0373717a42fec748b050/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750>) In 1916, Herbert gave a speech at a Cooper Union meeting on women's suffrage that Vira presided over as Chairman of the New York State Woman Suffrage Party (RHS, HP 1916).

349 RHS, HP Diaries, 1915 and 1916. After her divorce, Lucy took the name Mrs. Lucy Wortham James, and maintained an apartment in New York and a house in Newport. She served on the boards of both the Memorial Hospital and Greenwich House along with Herbert in the 1910s and 1920s. He rarely recorded appointments with her in his engagement calendars after her divorce. She wrote him several letters in 1918 when he was serving with the US army in France and she was in England. In one very long, very rambling, somewhat incoherent letter written while she was sailing back the States, she nostalgically recalled happy times in Washington during 1909 and 1910 — the period when Elsie was overcome with jealousy of Lucy. Lucy posed two direct questions: "Do you want letters or do they irk you?" and "What address?" (APS, Lucy James to HP, March 28, 1918.) There are no additional letters from Lucy in Herbert's papers, but they continued to serve together on the boards of the Memorial Hospital and Greenwich House after he returned from Europe.

350 RHS, HP memos to Vira Boorman Whitehouse, June 19, 1919 and June 20, 1919.

relationship was affectionate. Vira wrote from Newport, "I've seen Mrs. James. She is lonely but so very fragile she makes me feel like a great coarse over-healthy fat woman over-flowing with vitality. I suppose there is no use to ask you to come up for a Sunday? I wish you could. Yours — until 1957 — was it? Vira B. W." Herbert responded that he was spending his weekends in Lenox, but expected to be in Newport on weekends in August. "What would my family say if I stayed away now, for a weekend visit to a fat lady in Newport? And one who is against the GOP."³⁵¹ (The "Mrs. James" Vira mentions was very likely Lucy Wilson.)

Herbert frequently mentioned Vira in his letters to Elsie in the 1920s, noting when they dined together or attended concerts and plays. It is impossible to know whether their relationship was a friendship or an affair. There is no evidence to suggest that Elsie suffered the pangs of jealousy over Vira that she had endured over Lucy.³⁵² Elsie would not have approved of Vira's decision to win support for women's suffrage by linking it to support for the American war effort. But she might have been pleased that Herbert chose a companion who was an activist and a feminist who rejected the idea that a woman's place was in the home.

Rapprochement between Elsie and Herbert

Despite their differences and despite — or possibly because of — their other attachments, Elsie and Herbert's relationship improved in the early 1920s. Their letters became chattier, more affectionate, and less angry. Instead of coming up with reasons to avoid seeing Herbert, Elsie accepted his invitations and proposed additional occasions to be together. They stayed more frequently at the same residence, had more of a joint social life, and took their younger sons on joint vacations. Traveling in the southwest, Nova Scotia, and Europe, they shared staterooms and hotel rooms. Nevertheless, Elsie fiercely guarded her freedom to come and go as she pleased. She frequently did not let her family know when she would be returning from a field trip; she repeatedly informed

351 RHS, Vira Boarman Whitehouse to HP, July 10, 1919; HP to Vira Boarman Whitehouse, July 14, 1919.

352 However, in keeping with her "principle of not crowding family life", Elsie decided not to attend an event at St. Paul's School when she learned that Vira would be accompanying Herbert to it (APS, ECP to John E. Parsons, June 3, 1921).

Herbert that her plans to join him had changed or were likely to change at the last minute; and she often tacked a separate trip for herself on to a family vacation.³⁵³ And she continued to take trips with Grant LaFarge and with Robert Herrick.

During this more tranquil period, the Parsons recaptured the habits that had enriched their early marriage: they were respectful of each other's concerns, found compromises that honored their differences, and tried to please each other. After visiting her mother before leaving on a lengthy field trip, Elsie reported to Herbert, "[I] called on Mama yesterday to say goodbye and please you both."³⁵⁴ They also recovered some of the teasing affection that characterized their first years together. Informing a friend about the schedule for a proposed visit from him and the younger boys, Herbert noted that Elsie's plans were still up in the air. "If there are Indians, colored people or Hindus she will prefer to spend her time folk-loring them," he warned.³⁵⁵ Herbert tried to take the sting out of the younger boys' criticisms of Elsie by recounting how other sons treated their parents during his recent visit to St Paul's School.³⁵⁶

Now, as earlier, the Parsons were most powerfully connected through their roles as parents. Mutual concern about the older children — Lissa's unhappy marriage and John's future as a lawyer — and mutual delight in the younger boys' exploits brought them closer together.³⁵⁷ Other developments also eased tensions. Herbert's willingness to accept Elsie's rules about her work and relationships, his increased involvement with the children, his loving tributes from Europe, the difficulties that developed in Elsie's other relationships: all undoubtedly helped to make Elsie more appreciative of Herbert. She would later tell their eldest son, John, "There was never anything like Father's welcome. I always wanted

353 Social life and living arrangements: RHS, HP to Major J. B. Barnes, March 9, 1922, and undated telegrams from ECP and HP. Trips together: RHS, HP memo to ECP, June 27, 1922; HP Vacation Memo, June 28, 1924. Separate trips for Elsie: RHS: HP to Henry Clews, Jr., 1923; HP to Charles Sheldon, June 12, 1923 and July 8, 1923, and HP memo to ECP, June 27, 1922.

354 RHS, ECP to HP, Thurs AM [n.y. 1925?].

355 RHS, HP to Charles Sheldon, June 12, 1923, and July 8, 1923.

356 RHS, HP to ECP, November 12, 1923.

357 Younger boys: RHS, ECP to HP, Sunday [n.y.]; [August 18, 1925] and [August 21, 1925]. Lissa's marriage: RHS, Lissa to HP, April 10, 1924; July 29 [1924]; August 12 [1925]. John's future: Lissa to HP, May 21, 1925.

to come back to it. He was so plainly glad to have me back and was so much nicer than other people I might have been seeing."³⁵⁸

In the midst of this rapprochement with Elsie, Herbert suffered a freak accident. In September 1925, when he was showing his youngest son, Mac, how to ride a new motorbike, the vehicle overturned, landed on top of Herbert, and ruptured his kidney. Elsie was in Lenox with the family when the accident occurred. She spent the next two days at the hospital with Herbert, who was conscious until close to the end. Herbert, Jr. reported that the only time he saw Elsie cry was when she returned to tell the family that Herbert had died.³⁵⁹

Nevertheless, Elsie did not reveal her emotions in public. The town of Lenox put on something like a state funeral for Herbert. All the shops in the town closed; church bells tolled fifty-five times, one for each year of Herbert's life; Stonover employees carried his casket; and local residents turned out en masse.³⁶⁰ Elsie, who felt that "death has always meant the end", chose not to attend. On the day of the funeral, she and the younger boys lunched with Walter Lippmann, a founding editor of *The New Republic* who had served with Herbert in Europe in World War I. Lippmann said that Herbert's name was never mentioned during the meal.³⁶¹ Had she been on her own, Elsie noted, she would have taken off for the southwest as soon as Herbert died. She stayed long enough to get her sons off to school, but missed the christening of Lissa's second child.³⁶²

Elsie's Final Years

Herbert's death upended Elsie's life in very significant ways. It removed a critical source of emotional ballast. With Herbert gone, she spent more time with the family and became more involved in the children's lives. The year after Herbert died, she bought a house in North Haven, Maine, which became her home base in summers. During the rest of the year,

358 APS, ECP to John E. Parsons, September 4, 1930.

359 RHS, Elsie's account of Herbert's death, dated September 22, 1925. Seeing Elsie cry: Hare, p. 66.

360 "Services for Parsons Here and in Lenox," *The New York Times*, September 19, 1925. There was also a service for Herbert at the Brick Memorial Church in Manhattan.

361 Funeral and lunch: Hare, p. 167; friendship: Kennedy, "Reminiscences".

362 ECP to Mabel Dodge Luhan, October 13, 1925, quoted in Zumwalt, p. 92. See also Deacon, p. 300.

she made her home with her children and relied on female relatives to take care of her domestic needs. From 1927 to 1935, she lived mostly with John and his wife Fanny at Lounsberry, where Fanny happily ran the household. After Lissa remarried in 1935 and moved to Lenox, she and Elsie developed a closer relationship. Elsie spent time with her every fall, and moved into Lissa's Manhattan apartment, sharing it with her son, Mac, for a few years. Lissa helped manage the apartment, and Elsie also had the services of two maids and a secretary.³⁶³

Elsie's relationship with Robert Herrick deteriorated after Herbert's death. Between 1926 and 1928, they spent time together in New York, New England, and Maine, and he accompanied her on lengthy and adventurous research trips to Egypt and the Sudan, the Caribbean, and Majorca. His "angry feeling of smothered resentment" that he was "being used as a convenience" intensified. His efforts to win her over by serving as "housekeeper" when they traveled "went for naught," he complained.³⁶⁴ He wanted to spend more time with her, and even marry her, but this is not what she wanted. She was busy with her work, more involved with her children, and wary as ever about the deleterious effects of marriage.³⁶⁵ Their affair ended sometime in 1928, when Robert was writing *The End of Desire*, his final, highly unflattering, account of Elsie and their relationship.

Elsie, who did not read the novel before its 1932 publication, contemptuously dismissed it as bad portraiture and a "dull book."³⁶⁶ She complained to her eldest son, John, "Why a woman described directly as self-centered does not marry a man described indirectly as self-centered is to him a theme. Besides you are wondering all the time why he wanted to marry such a prig and why he felt so sorry for himself." She found Robert's depictions of her mother and her children "perverse and grotesque" and hoped they would not recognize themselves. If she felt betrayed and hurt by Robert's hostile portrait, she did not dwell on

363 For Elsie's domestic arrangements, see Hare, p. 140, and Deacon, pp. 353, 367.

364 RH Papers, "Leaves from the Diary of a Wanderer," 1926, 1927.

365 Deleterious effects of marriage: ECP to Mabel Dodge Luhan, May 8, 1923. Copy in APS.

366 Herrick finished writing *End of Desire* in 1930, but had trouble finding a publisher due to concerns that the book would cause a scandal and the female protagonist (Elsie) would be easily identifiable. One editor advised him to publish it under a pseudonym. RH Papers, RH to Robert Morss Lovett, 18 May 1930; 24 May 1930; and 22 March 1931; Nevius, pp. 305–06, 319–20.

it, although she admitted, "It does leave a bad taste in my mouth about the writer, and I am not surprised that even if he did not think it was portraiture he was disinclined to see me while he was writing it."³⁶⁷

Elsie's anthropological explorations took her to the Caribbean, the southwest, Central America, and South America in the 1930s and 1940s, but her traveling companions were younger colleagues or her sons. She went on many field trips alone. She had at least one more romance, but it did not go well. Her only account of it, written in a draft letter to an unidentified recipient, probably in 1929, suggests that the man was younger, less experienced, and rather naive.³⁶⁸

All the while, Elsie's professional success and reputation grew. She published her major contributions to anthropology in the late 1930s — *Mitla, Town of Souls* (1936) and *Pueblo Indian Religion* (1939). At the end of 1940, she was elected president of the American Anthropological Association, the first woman to hold that office and head a major scientific organization in the United States, according to her journalist son, Mac.³⁶⁹

Elsie returned to New York from two months of field work in a remote Ecuadorean village in late November 1941. Busy as she was with meetings, anthropological work, and seeing family and friends, her thoughts turned to Herbert. "There are times when I miss Father awfully. This is one," she wrote her son, Mac, in early December, just days before she fell ill with appendicitis.³⁷⁰ Despite all the disappointments and pain of their marriage, her bond with Herbert persisted sixteen years after his death.

A colleague described Elsie as being in good spirits and apparent good health on the evening of December 10, when she attended a council meeting of the American Ethnological Association. The next day, she was in the hospital undergoing an appendectomy. She seemed to be making a good recovery, and planned to attend the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association at the end December, when her presidential term ended. On December 19, she took a turn for the

367 APS, ECP to John E. Parsons, April 3, 1932.

368 The letter is quoted in Deacon, p. 320.

369 McIlvaine Parsons, "Dr. Elsie Clews Parsons in Dead," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 20, 1941.

370 ECP to McIlvaine Parsons, December 7, 1941; quoted in Hare, p. 66, and Deacon, p. 380. According to Deacon, the original letter was retained by McIlvaine Parsons.

worse and died, at the age of sixty-six.³⁷¹ She had already written her presidential address, which anthropologist Gladys Reichard read to the meeting. In keeping with the instructions she had given her family, Elsie was cremated and had no funeral, religious service, or gravestone.³⁷²

The legacy of Elsie's "accomplishful" life lies not just in her contributions to anthropology, but also in her trenchant social critiques, feminist perspectives, and resolute efforts to construct a personal life that accommodated both passion and work. The challenges she faced were compounded by the fact that she rarely had a partner who shared her vision. Unlike Alice and Grace, each of whom adjusted her career to accommodate a husband, Elsie was prepared to jettison her relationship with a man rather than give up her productive work life. The two marriage narratives that follow show the greater potential for change when both partners were committed to constructing a marriage grounded in mutual support for each other's work.

371 Gladys Reichard to A. L. Kroeber, December 19, 1941; Gladys Reichard to Herbert Parsons, Jr., 12 January 1942. Quoted in Zumwalt, p. 329. Elsie's death was variously attributed to an embolism, uremia, and pulmonary thrombosis. See Hare, p. 167.

372 APS, ECP Memo to Lissa, February 11, 1940.