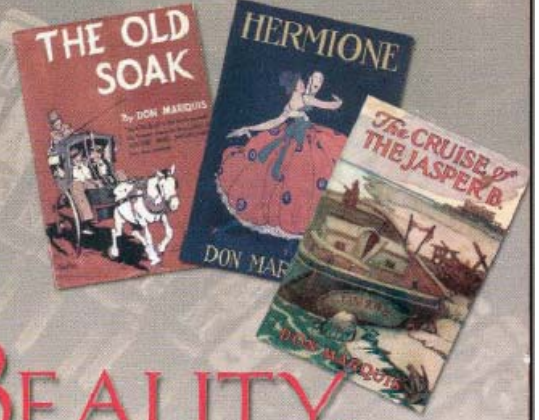


BY CHERYL CUDDEBACK

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## SAD BEAUTY, BAWDY ADVENTURE.

MEMORY  
LANE

Don Marquis is yet another forgotten figure from not only Forest Hills past, but from the literary world as well. Besides being a renowned poet and humorist in his day, he was also a cartoonist and an author of numerous books and short stories. He may have written a column for the early Forest Hills Gardens Bulletins named The Dog Watch under the pseudonym, "The Watch Dog."

Marquis typified a writer who smoked and drank while hammering away on his Remington typewriter during the wee hours of the night to meet a deadline. He was charming both in person as well as through his writing. His buddies included Will Rogers, resident of Kew Gardens and noted personality who 'never met a man he didn't like' and Homer Croy, fellow Forest Hillian and author of the silent movie "West of the Water Tower."

One tale that typifies Don Marquis' gift of humor took place while he lived in California. During his stay, he had a heart attack. Due to a shortage of ambulances, the only vehicle available to take him to a hospital was a hearse. On the way, the hearse was stuck in traffic. As Christopher Morley, one of the creators of The Saturday Evening Post tells the story:

"...the hearse pulled up next to a smart little open roadster in which two frolicsome young women were gaily chattering. In the middle of their mirth they noticed the transparent chariot alongside; they piously withheld palaver, and glanced reverently through the glass panel where Don's burly figure lay decently composed under a blanket. At that moment he caught their gaze, and in spite of heartburn and syncope [he] appalled them with a slow and magnificent wink...the damsels fell into a hysteric seizure, and as his carriage rolled away he saw them crash into someone else's car."

Don Marquis was born during a solar eclipse in Walnut, Illinois. His dad was the local country doctor and one of the town's original residents. Marquis attended Knox College for three months but left because he couldn't afford the tuition. After a series of odd jobs, which included working as a country school-teacher and a railroad section hand, he finally landed a job working as an editor for The Atlanta Journal. During the evening he wrote while at one of the local bars. He told others his goal was to succeed so he could be lazy.

He arrived in New York City on Thanksgiving Day with his new bride, Reina Melcher, who was also a writer. They set up home in Prospect Park, Brooklyn while Marquis wrote for The Brooklyn Eagle. It was around the time Marquis began to experience true success as a columnist for The Evening Star. It was also around this time he moved to the newly planned community of Forest Hills Gardens – on the same street that Dale Carnegie lived on – Wendover Road.

During these days Marquis was in his element. He created the memorable characters of Archy, a cockroach reincarnated as a poet who left messages on Marquis' typewriter, and Mehitabel, a cat who believed she was once Cleopatra. Marquis incorporated Archy's messages into his own column

The Sun Dial. Since it was awkward for Archy to jump onto the shift key to capitalize or punctuate, the text was only that; text. Some say this was the perfect excuse for Marquis not to concern himself with grammar etiquette, yet his style was in vogue with the vers libre movement of the day. Archy and Mehitable's adventures made it to the big time as a successful Broadway play as well as several books that are still published today.

His first book, *Danny's Own Story*, was about a hillbilly, who as a baby was left at the doorstep of strangers by his parents who worked in a traveling medicine show. Another book, *Hermoine and Her Little Group of Serious Thinkers*, includes monologues of a high society'ed debutante and her friends. The book that brought him the greatest success was *The Old Soak*, based on a hip-flask philosopher and how he endured the dry days of Prohibition. The book was staged into a top Broadway play, made into a silent movie, then a 'talkie' starring Wallace Berry, and a radio drama.

But Marquis' life wasn't all fun and games. If anything it was quite the opposite. While growing up his older brother and later his father died. Years later during the height of his career Marquis witnessed the sudden death of his first wife. He also lost his five year-old son and years later, his thirteen year-old daughter. To further throw salt onto the wound, he lost all his money on a play about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in *The Dark Hours*.

Marquis himself was not the picture of health. According to another anecdote Morley was fond of telling, Marquis was advised by his doctors to give up drinking. After being off the wagon for a spell, several of his cronies witnessed Don ambling up to the bar of 'The Players Club' saying, "I've conquered that god-damn will power of mine. Gimme a double scotch!"

Needless to say he didn't give up the booze which didn't help his health. He suffered a series of strokes starting in his mid-years, each one worsening his condition. Eventually it became too difficult for him to walk or speak. In his final years he was paralyzed and blind. Morley relates:

"I remember one of his sisters telling me that sometimes, during his long illness, he was heard laughing to himself...in the last two years, nothing was left of him but the look in his eyes."

During the end of 1937, Don's second wife, the actress Marjorie Potts Vonnegut, who took care of her husband all these years, died in her sleep. This coupled with his suffering from a cerebral hemorrhage caused Marquis' health to rapidly spiral downwards. Soon afterwards, he too quietly passed away in his home on Wendover Road. He was fifty-seven, at the height of his career and heavily in debt.

In his own circle Don Marquis was the best loved man of his time. Marquis was, and is, still considered a very funny man. His life was rich; full of sad beauty, pain and joy. His writings were of bawdy adventure, political wisdom, and wild surmise.

His funeral service reflected the admiration of many. His list of pallbearers read like a Who's Who of the day's writers, actors, artists and publishers, such as: Franklin P. Adams and Westbrook Pegler; Otis Skinner, noted American actor and author; Nelson Doubleday, Homer Croy and Adolf Weinman, beaux arts sculptor and Forest Hills resident.

How can one sum up one man whose life was of merriment and tragedy? Benjamin DeCessares, writer, poet and friend, succeeds in his parody based the Book of Job. In this story, however, Marquis is the victim of the "Great Impresario."

"Don the well-beloved, Don the sublime, Don the Poet, Don the Wit, Don who was stripped of all things in the manner of Job was lifted high into the light by the healing Angels of laughter, and his soul was carried into the Valhalla of Triumphant Mirth, where he shall reign as a shining spiritual presence..."

Don Marquis is buried along with his two sisters in Kew Gardens' Maple Grove Cemetery. Perhaps the best tribute we could pay our dear past neighbor is to read one of his books.