

WIT & HUMOR

from *Ship of Fools* (1962): erotic combat



Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

Fraulein Lizzi Spockenkieker, in the ladies' garment business
Herr Siegfried Rieber, publisher of a ladies' garment trade magazine

A tall thin young woman—a leggy 'girl' with a tiny, close-cropped head waving on her long neck, a limp green frock flapping about her calves—strode in screaming like a peahen in German at her companion, a little dumpling of a man, pink and pig-snouted.... His pace was triumphant, he was a little short-legged strutting cock....

"Ah, you men," she screamed joyously, "you are all alike!" She leaned over and whacked him three times on the skull with a folded paper fan. Herr Rieber was all ready for a good frolic. How he admired and followed the tall thin girls with long scissor-legs like storks striding under their fluttering skirts, with long narrow feet on the end of them. He tapped her gently on the back of her hand with his forefinger, invitingly and with such insinuation she whacked him harder and faster, her teeth gleaming with pleasure, until the top of his head went florid.

"Ah, what a wicked girl," he said, dodging punishment at last but still beaming at her, unvanquished—indeed, quite stimulated. She rose and pranced along the deck. He strolled out of his chair and bounced after her. "Let's have coffee and cake," he cried tenderly... He licked his lips....

Lizzi Spockenkieker and Herr Rieber were having a very fast game of ping-pong, which had begun lightly and at once developed into a duel. They smashed the little ball back and forth over the net, crack pop pop crack, their strokes speeding up shorter, faster, their faces darkening with blood, until both grimly, silently, struck like automatons. It was a matter of life or death to win and they were smiling no longer. La Condesa with her three students who were singing "*La Cucaracha*" bore down upon them suddenly at Lizzi's back, sailed by her without a pause or glance; but Lizzi faltered, her eyes flashed aside, and Herr Rieber won, at last.

"Ah, shame!" screamed Lizzi, and running around the table with long strides she cracked the triumphant Herr Rieber over his bald head with her little paddle. "Ah, if it had not been for that crazy woman and those stupid boys—they—they— Oh why must things like this always happen to me?"

Herr Rieber ducked and sidestepped; indulgently he soothed her:

"Come now, even the best of us must lose sometime. Let's not mind so much. Remember, it is the playing of the game that counts, not winning!"

"You can talk," cried Lizzi, lifting her paddle again. Deftly he seized her wrist, brought her hand down to his mouth and imprinted a large, juicy kiss upon it. "There now," he said, "what a quick pretty hand it is and it shall be much quicker the next time. Don't mind not winning from me. I am ping-pong champion of the *Sportsverein* in Mexico City now three times over."

"I can believe it," said Lizzi, calming down a little. "I am not used to losing at this game."

Herr Rieber twinkled instantly with immense meanings. "At what game then *do* you lose?"

Lizzi shook his elbow violently. "If you talk like that I shall leave you!" she threatened, tossing her head like an unmanageable mare. "No, I shan't listen to such things or answer them."

"Clever girl," cried Herr Rieber, "nothing escapes you. Now suppose we take a little swim and cool off, unless of course you want to beat me *again*," he said with infinite slyness, "at ping-pong or at any game at all—any game you choose?" He squeezed her arm with such warmth that Lizzi blushed.

"No no, let's swim," she said, her voice rising, "ah, we must have a race!"...

Frau Rittersdorf turned to speak to Frau Hutten, when her attention was arrested by the queer behavior of Herr Rieber and Fraulein Spockenkieker, engaged in a most unedifying scuffle at the rail. Herr Rieber was wearing the lady's green and white scarf around his neck, and she was rather pulling him about by the ends.... Yes, that girl was pretending to tie a bow under Herr Rieber's chin, but she was really drawing the noose about his windpipe until he clutched for air and his beaming smile almost disappeared in a blue cloud of distended veins. She then loosened the knot, and the good-humored martyr went through a pantomime of coming to life again, gratefully....

"Let us have some beer," shouted Herr Rieber gleefully, stuffing the scarf in his pocket, where it dangled like a tail, and the shameless pair ran away, followed by a row of censorious glances....

"Fraulein Spockenkieker is a divorced woman, so I have heard," said Frau Rittersdorf. "She is, I am given to understand, a woman of business—a lingerie business of sorts, she has three shops and has kept her maiden name in all circumstances. No wonder she no longer has a husband. It may also account for her manners, or lack of them"....

Lizzi and Rieber were huddled together on the deck, backs to the funnel, fighting, laughing, wrestling. He was trying to play with her knees, and she was pulling down her skirts with one hand and pushing feebly at him with the other....

Lizzi's habits were fairly dependable. She stayed out usually until after midnight with that wretched little fat man; they were to be seen dodging about from one shadowy recess to another, with a great deal of giggling and squealing and not too furtive fumbling. Then Lizzi would come in, steaming hot, knocking against objects, her awkward stride accommodating itself too late to the confined space, clicking on the light and revealing herself with her hair like electrified strings, and her pupils excited as a cat's in the small mean-looking irises... Dropping her brush and picking it up, without fail she would say in her insolent imitation of courtesy, "So sorry. I hope I didn't wake you," in that voice which affected Mrs. Treadwell's nerves like the sound of a file on metal....

The woman was, Mrs. Treadwell decided, the most entirely unattractive animal she had ever seen. Undressed, her ugliness was shocking. Yet she was possessed by the mysterious illusion that she was a beauty... All her talk ran on about perfume, about clothes, about her shops, and men. "Friends," she called them. "A man I know in Hamburg, a real gentleman, very rich—a friend," she would say coyly, and rear the undersized head on the long neck with the cords in it. "I almost married him, but now I am glad I did not," because it turned out he had lost his money. These friends however were not all so unfortunate, and they paid her at all times the most expensive attentions, the most overwhelming compliments: she had them at her beck and call. Only the difficulty had been that there were so many of them.

"One must choose somewhere, *nicht wahr?* One can't marry them all, that's a pity!"

Little by little though the truth leaked out; most of them were married already, but that was a detail of no consequence; they were all of them prepared to break up their domestic arrangements at any moment if she said the word. But she loved her freedom too well, that was her trouble.

"When I left my husband, he accused me of going away to another man. 'Ha,' I told him, 'what do you take me for? There are five of them'."

She would writhe with laughter at passages like this, flapping her hands.

"Well of course, you know that was not quite true, there were only three or four, and none of them serious. But believe me, I am finished with marriage. I mean to amuse myself, but no more marriage"....

If a hyena suffered from hysteria it would laugh like that....

She was wondering why, in all this whirligig, Herr Rieber had never once mentioned marriage. Not that she wished to marry him—far from it. For a permanent settlement, and she had resolved that her next settlement should be permanent, wedlock locked and double-locked, secured with the iron bolts of premarital financial contracts, she looked, materially speaking, considerably higher than Herr Rieber. Still, it would never do to let any man run away with a situation, whatever it was; it must be clearly understood always—and not just by implications, hints, threats, glances, by mute understandings, but plainly in so many words—that she was a woman of the marriageable kind, and any amorous frolics with her were only preliminary to a possible march to the altar. Every other man she had known unfailingly pronounced the magic word “marriage” before ever he got into bed with her, no matter what came of it in fact. This one did not, and until he did, well! So far and no further.

Herr Rieber had not mentioned marriage to her, much as he might have liked, for the simplest reason in the world—he had a wife from whom he was legally separated, who refused to divorce him, was blameless herself in any lawful sense so that he could not divorce her. He was supporting her and three children, a family of four who detested him and whom he detested, who would hang on him leeching his blood for life. Oh what had he done to merit such a fate? Yet there it was, and Lizzi must never learn of his embarrassing predicament; it would be an intolerable affront to his pride. Besides, he was certain she would never understand, and why should she? Ah, the fine tall creature who moved like a good racing mare, oh, for a nice soft bed in a quiet hotel in Bremen even for a night and a day before he must go on. No such hope. It must be here and now, during the party... He went on a tour of the boat deck, selected a likely spot, indulged again in his day dream that after plenty of champagne and tender words, after long waltzing to soft music on deck, she would be melted and oozing like hot cheese on toast....

Herr Rieber had wound himself up to a state of decision regarding Fraulein Lizzi Spockenkieker. First, she was not a Fraulein at all, but a woman of worldly experience; and though Herr Rieber liked nothing better than a proper amount of feminine coquetry and playful resistance, still, carried beyond certain bounds, they became mockery and downright insolence which no man worthy of the name would endure from any woman, no, not if she were Helen of Troy herself. In this frame of mind he took her arm after dinner and guided her for their stroll. While listening to music, he drew her up the stairs to the boat deck, and led her, with the silent intentness of a man bent of crime, to the dark side of the ship's funnel. He gave his prey no warning, no moment in which to smack his face or flee, he seized Lizzi low around her shoulders, hoping to pin her arms to her ribs, and snatching her to him, he opened his mouth for a ravenous kiss. It was like embracing a windmill.

Lizzi uttered a curious tight squeal and her long arms gathered him in around his heaving middle. Her thin wide mouth gaped alarmingly and her sharp teeth gleamed even in the dimness. She gave him a good push and they fell backward clutched together, her long active legs overwhelmed him, she rolled him over flat on his back and for a moment her sharp hipbones ground his belly cruelly. Herr Rieber had one flash of amazed delight at the undreamed-of warmth of her response, then in panic realized that unless he recovered himself instantly, the situation would be irremediably out of his control.

He braced himself to reverse the unnatural posture of affairs, and attempted to roll into the proper position of masculine supremacy, but Lizzi was spread upon him like a fallen tent full of poles, her teeth now set grimly in his jowl, just under his jawbone. Pain took precedence of all other sensations in Herr Rieber's being; silently with tears in his eyes he fought to free himself. Yet there was a muted exhilaration in the struggle. When, if ever, he got the upper hand of this woman he would have got, he felt, something worth having. Meanwhile she showed no signs of surrender, but gripped him with her knees as if he were an unmanageable horse, her arms folded him in almost intolerably, with long thin tough muscles like a boy's working in them.

Never before had he encountered a woman who would not let herself be overcome properly at the correct moment: her intuition should tell her when! In despair, his jaw by now benumbed, his eyes wandered as if seeking help. The half-darkness showed a white blotch which proved to be the motionless form of Bebe, who had found the Hutten cabin door ajar, and had wandered aimlessly alone until at last he stood there not three feet away from them, openly gazing.

“Lizzi, my dearest,” gasped Herr Rieber, “Lizzi, the dog!”

His agonized tone brought Lizzi out of her carnivorous trance. Her teeth parted, she breathed “Where?” Herr Rieber snatched his face out of her reach. Her arms loosened and he seized her wrists, at the same time rolling over until he was at least lying beside her. At last by a series of resolute disentangling

movements, for now Lizzi seemed quite inert in his hands, he brought them both to a sitting position once more.

Bebe, balanced on his bowed legs and wavering slightly with the roll of the ship, the folds of his nose twitching, regarded them with an expression of animal cunning that most embarrassingly resembled human knowledge of the seamy side of life. Plainly he could see what they were up to, their intentions were no secret from him, but because of their strange shapes, and the weird sounds they made, he was puzzled—puzzled, and somewhat repelled. Indeed he was not at all sympathetic.

“Go away, get out,” commanded Herr Rieber, in as deep a growl as Bebe himself could have fetched up; but because Bebe wore a hairy hide and was on all fours he was therefore sacred, there was no question of using sterner measures. Herr Rieber was the soul of sensibility on this question: as a child, he had cried his eyes out on seeing a horse fall in the icy streets, tangled in his harness, prisoner to a beer truck. He wanted to beat, to kill the cruel driver who had let him fall. No tenderness could exceed Herr Rieber’s for the entire brute kingdom—indeed, he still believed hanging too good for any person who abused even the humblest member of that mystical world. When for the most unavoidable of reasons of discipline he was forced to beat his own dogs, his heart almost broke, every time. He spoke now to Bebe in his most wheedling tone. “Go away, there’s a good doggie,” he said, looking around hopeful for something weighty to throw at him. “Good doggie!”

Lizzi began to laugh uncontrollably, her head between her hands. “Ah hahaha,” she uttered in a voice thin as a twanging wire. Bebe went away then in silence, padding softly on his big feet, dismissed but not minding, full of his own business. He had ruined the occasion, though Herr Rieber had not the heart to take up again at this perhaps more promising point with a now somewhat chastened Lizzi. He contented himself with taking her hands and saying soothingly, “No, no—there now, there!”

She scrambled to her feet talking incoherently, gave Herr Rieber a weak little poke in the chest, and ran ahead of him down the steps without looking back. Herr Rieber followed but more slowly, thoughtfully fingering his jaw. He must not for a moment admit discouragement. After all, this was only another woman—there *must* be a way, and he would find it. He thought with some envy of the ancient custom of hitting them over the head as a preliminary—not enough to cause injury, of course, just a good firm tap to stun the little spirit of contradiction in them.

Katherine Anne Porter

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