

Meet the Confidante

BY ALBERT H. MOREHEAD

DOROTHY DIX has told millions of people what to do, and most of them have straightway gone and done it. She has patched up broken homes, forestalled suicides, spurred on the spiritless, consoled the inconsolable.

To these millions Dorothy Dix is confidante as well as mentor. They eagerly scan her newspaper columns for advice, which they then as eagerly follow. In letters to Dorothy Dix utter strangers bare their souls, often with such remarks as "I couldn't tell my mother this," or "I wouldn't admit this to anyone but you."

Yet Dorothy Dix, one of the best-known names in the United States, is one of the least-known women.

So varied are the dream images of Dorothy Dix that the mail brings her proposals of marriage from men ranging in age from twenty to eighty. So fantastic are the rumors about her that some will assure you Dorothy Dix never really existed, and that her columns are turned out on a production-line basis by a staff of a dozen nonentities.

Those who have thought themselves "disillusioned" by such legends may take comfort from the truth. Dorothy Dix does exist. The name is a pseudonym, but the person and personality behind it are real. Dorothy Dix is a tiny, gray-haired, charming little lady whose true name is

Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, who writes her own column and answers her own letters every day just as she has since 1898, and whose heart is in her work.

Why there should be any mystery about Dorothy Dix is itself a mystery. Surely it is not of her own making. Just as Dorothy Dix' public has no secrets from her, she has none from it. She sees anyone who wants to interview her. Her conversation is a connected narrative, a sort of thumbnail autobiography, interspersed with bits of humor which make her bright eyes twinkle and with anecdotes sparkling with intrinsic interest, as one would expect from a famous reporter.

Behind the advice which Dorothy Dix gives to others lie not only her forty-six years of experience but a personal life with its trials and tragedy and problems.

Dorothy Dix was born Elizabeth Meriwether, on the boundary line between Kentucky and Tennessee. The Civil War, or War Between the States, as it is respectively called north and south of the Mason and Dixon line, had ended only five years before. The Meriwethers, like all landed, leisured families of the old South, were impoverished. They could not afford to send their children away to school, and there were few educational facilities at home. Elizabeth Meriwether had little formal education, but she substituted an appetite for good books and read incessantly. The educational result, as was later demonstrated, was most satisfactory.

A career is born—and a name.

At twenty, Elizabeth Meriwether married George O. Gilmer. What should have inaugurated a tranquil, uneventful Southern home life proved instead to precipitate a crisis such as few girls just out of their teens are called upon to overcome. Within a year George Gilmer was afflicted with a mental ailment. He never recovered from it, but he lived on for thirty-five years, and during all that time Mrs. Gilmer supported and nursed him.

The first two years were the hardest. Young Mrs. Gilmer, unaccustomed to crisis, cracked under the strain, and her family took her for a rest to a little resort on the Gulf of Mexico.

"Our next-door neighbor there was Mrs. Nicholson, who published the New Orleans *Picayune*," Mrs. Gilmer recalls. "It was unusual, then, for a woman to be a newspaper publisher, but Mrs. Nicholson was an unusual woman. When her husband died she went into the *Picayune* office, sat down at his big desk, and carried on."

Impressed by a short story Mrs. Gilmer had written, her publisher-neighbor offered a job on the *Picayune*. The job was accepted, and within a few years Mrs. Gilmer became a Sunday columnist. For this assignment she chose a pen name. The pen name she selected was Dorothy Dix.

"I had always thought 'Dorothy' was a pretty name—I still think so," Mrs. Gilmer explains, "and the 'Dix' was taken from an old servant in our family whose name was Dick, but whose wife always called him Mister Dicks. 'Dorothy Dix' made a nice name—simple and alliterative." There had been a famous New England woman named Dorothea Dix, "but I didn't know that till years later," says Mrs. Gilmer, "when her family be-

Excerpts from letters to Dorothy Dix

I am a 50-year-old man in love with a woman who already has a husband. Please suggest the quickest and most humane way of getting rid of same.

I have found out that the man I am engaged to is already married. Do you think I would be justified in breaking our engagement?

I have a nice home, a car, furs, jewels—everything a girl marries for.

I have tried to act like a lady, which is all right in theory but doesn't work out in practice.

My husband has left me. I would not mind except he took the ration book.

I have always wanted a baby, a piano or a washing-machine.

I have always wanted to know what happened to the soul immediately after death. Please answer by return mail.

I am not sure that you can solve this problem, Miss Dix, but when plucking a chicken is it the woman's job or the man's job?

Of course, my wife and I have our spats like other married couples and once I broke her ribs, but we have had no disagreements of a serious nature.

We are congenial in every way except manners, habits and tastes.

My husband is always especially attentive on holidays. On Valentine Day he gave me a broken nose.

of Millions

For forty-six years Dorothy Dix has been chief adviser to the lovelorn, and counselor to all



Dorothy Dix today—a recent photograph, taken by Bob Brown, Asheville, North Carolina. “What I have tried to do,” she says, “is to give fresh hope to tired and discouraged men and women and, above all, to preach the gospel of common sense.”

gan writing to ask what branch I came from. I had to tell them the Dix in my name was just invented.”

The columnist assignment forced another decision—what to write about, and how to write it. Custom decreed a highfalutin style and phrases with a flourish. Mrs. Gilmer rebelled—“I just couldn’t write like Dickens and Thackeray,” she says. She decided that whatever she had to say, she would say it simply. And what should she write about? In a burst of inspiration Dorothy Dix hit upon a plan startling in its

originality. “I decided,” she says, “to tell women the truth.”

It was indeed a novel approach. The conventional line was that men are beasts and women are pure and sweet. Dorothy Dix boldly proclaimed that women, too, can stand some improvement, that parents are not infallible, that marriage is a matter of equal partnership. “I lambasted them,” says Mrs. Gilmer.

The readers, sometimes shocked, sometimes chastened, were always interested. Another who was interested was

William Randolph Hearst, who invited Dorothy Dix to join the staff of the *New York Journal* and proffered a large increase in pay.

“I couldn’t accept just then,” says Mrs. Gilmer. The aged editor of the *Picayune* was dying; he wanted Dorothy Dix’ column to continue and she would not leave him. When he died, Dorothy Dix left the *Picayune* and joined the *New York Journal*.

“I hadn’t thought I’d ever really meet Mr. Hearst,” Mrs. Gilmer recalls, (Please turn to page 82)

cause he was no good for the Army with his game leg. Those might be contributing factors, Kit saw, but the big thing was that Greg wanted a wife, and he didn't have one. He had a fair housekeeper, a conscientious mother for his children—but, beyond that, a tired, unattractive, short-tempered stranger. Certainly not the girl he had married.

"Those are fighting words, pal," Kit addressed herself grimly in the darkness. "But you deserve them!"

Curious, how once you managed to get your head over the edge of an uninspiring rut, energy seemed to well up in you in a warm tide. Kit got up and went through the quiet house to the bathroom. She switched on the light and drew the shade and blinked at her reflection in the mirror. A quick shower first, she decided. After that, she splashed on some of the cologne Greg had given her last Christmas—it was a disgrace how much of that cologne was still left. Next, Kit wriggled into a red dotted Swiss housecoat she hadn't taken time to make use of all summer. Then, on a sudden gay impulse, she brushed her hair into a soft pompadour and tucked a spray of white cotton daisies on top.

She heard Greg's step on the front walk, and her heart lurched in the funny

little way she had almost forgotten. A smile curled her lips as she switched off the bedroom light and moved down the hall to meet him. She had just remembered that she had intended to say some very mean things to Greg when he got home. Maybe Greg was expecting it—maybe that was why his step was so slow, so unwilling, crossing the front porch.

Suddenly Kit was almost running toward the door. An aura of gardenia must have preceded her, for Greg stopped dead just inside the hall, an expression of almost ludicrous amazement on his face. Slowly his gray eyes traveled from Kit's perky topknot of flowers, down the flattering lines of her housecoat and up again to rest on her eager face.

"Baby," he exclaimed, grinning as he reached out to gather her into his arms, "where have *you* been?"

Lifting expectant lips for Greg's kiss, Kit thought, "I can't be like this all the time—Greg wouldn't expect it. But at least I've got my perspective straightened out; my sense of values isn't all cockeyed."

And then, as Greg's mouth came down to hers and stayed there, Kit added a mental postscript to that last thought. "We," she reflected, "will make a nice memory . . . a *very* nice memory!"

Meet the Confidante of Millions

—MOREHEAD



(This story is continued from page 41)
"but before I'd been at the *Journal* two days he called me into his office and had a long talk with me." The subject of the talk was murder trials. Mr. Hearst thought newspapers were missing a lot of bets in covering them.

"Look at the success Conan Doyle has with his mystery stories," William Randolph Hearst told Dorothy Dix. "But in a real murder case, we have better material than he ever has. We have a better plot, because truth is more interesting than fiction. We have more genuine dialogue, because it's all taken down in court, word for word, as it's spoken. All we need is to write it properly."

Dorothy Dix took this talk to heart. She continued her Dorothy Dix Talks, but she also covered big murder cases for the *Journal*. She became, in fact, the most famous of the murder-trial reporters. Dorothy Dix has a quality that makes people reveal their innermost secrets to her. The same quality made some of the men and women who were on trial for their lives, and who were harassed and wary and suspicious, talk to Dorothy Dix when they wouldn't talk to anyone else.

Like many others who have made great successes, Mrs. Gilmer likes to attribute her journalistic feats to luck, or

the help of the great men for whom she has worked, or almost anything but her own ability and enterprise. Thus she explains an early outstanding exploit, when she was a greenhorn venturing into unfamiliar ground.

A woman in New Jersey was charged with murder. Dorothy Dix' city editor sent her to get a story.

"I didn't even have a toothbrush," says Mrs. Gilmer, "and I didn't know where New Jersey was. I had to ask a policeman." She pronounces it PO-lis-m'n, a relic of the Southern accent which her years of cosmopolitan life have never quite obliterated.

Helped by a jilted swain.

She got to New Jersey, and she hired a man with a horse and buggy to drive her around. "That was my biggest piece of luck," she says. "The driver was a jilted swain of the accused woman. He told me about her—things that nobody else knew." Dorothy Dix wrote 1,500 words and wired it in. It was the first story she had ever sent by telegraph; should she cut out all the ifs, ands and buts? "If I do that," she thought, "the story just won't make sense. I'll send it in this way if it costs Mr. Hearst a fortune." The *Journal* liked it—ifs, ands, buts and all.

Dorothy Dix covered murder stories for more than twenty years, her swansong being the Hall-Mills case. But she gave up regular reporting in 1917, to devote herself to her column. Shortly thereafter she returned to New Orleans.

"Be sure to tell them I live in New Orleans," she insists. "Most people think all columnists live in New York. I don't."

She lives in a two-apartment house, her brother and his family having the

other apartment. Mrs. Gilmer's apartment is crammed with relics of the world-wide travels which, prior to the days of war and threat of war, were her principal source of joy. The war and its gasoline rationing have also eliminated her favorite recreation, which is taking long automobile rides through New Orleans.

Otherwise, the passing years have changed Mrs. Gilmer's professional habits very little. She works every morning, writing her column and answering letters. Some days, especially when she is stacking up an advance supply of articles so she can go away for a vacation, work proceeds into the afternoon. Her staff consists of her secretary—the greatest luxury success has brought her, for in all her journalistic years “I never could learn to manage a typewriter,” she says—and another assistant whose job it is to open and read the mail.

The mail is a never-ending source of material for the Dorothy Dix Talks; it is also a never-ending source of work. There are hundreds of letters every day—“baskets and baskets full,” as Mrs. Gilmer describes it.

No names for “lonely hearts.”

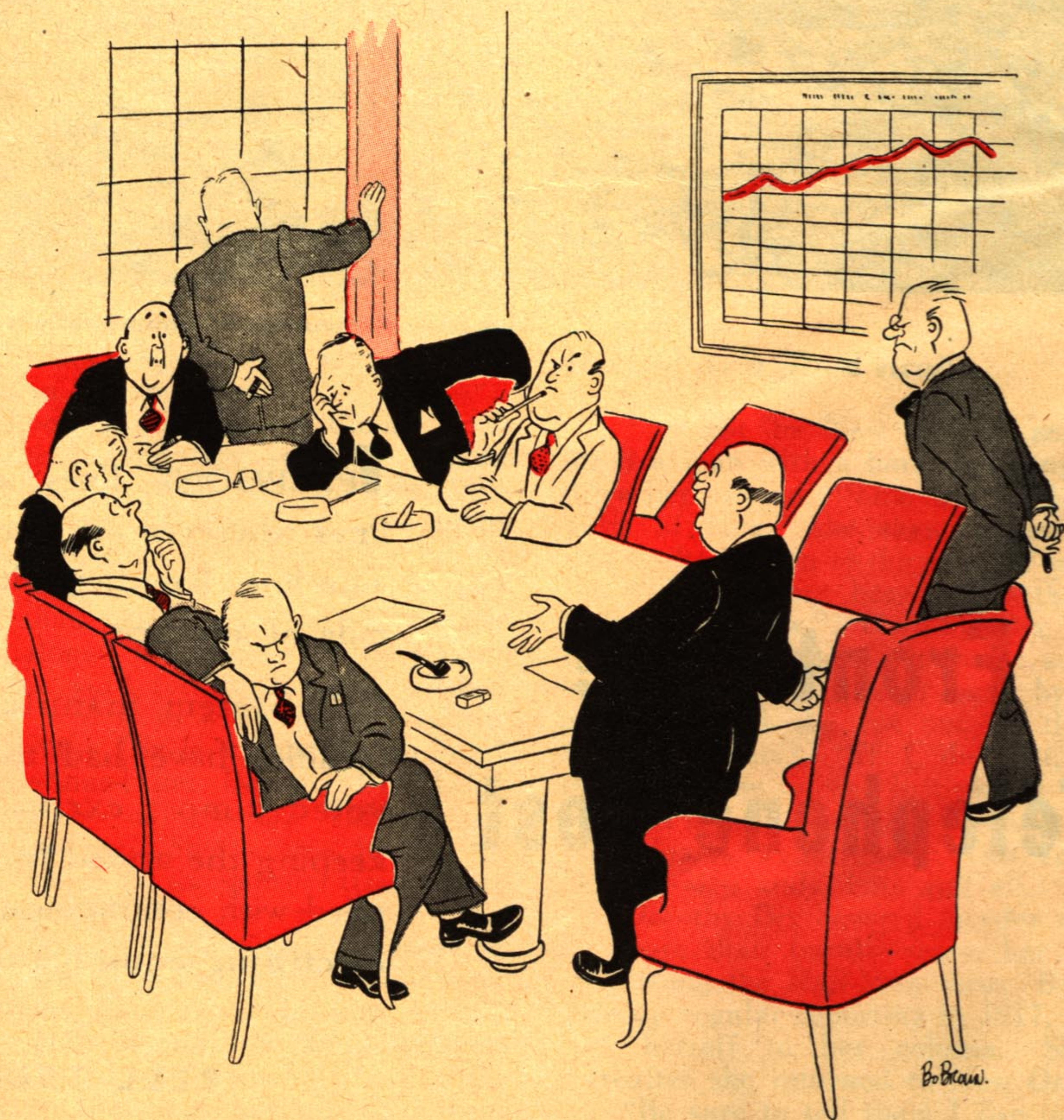
Many of the letters can be taken care of automatically. All the proposals are rejected. The “lonely hearts,” who want names and addresses of people they can write to, must be told that Dorothy Dix never gives out names or addresses.

For people who want to know more about Dorothy Dix, Mrs. Gilmer has prepared a biographical booklet.

Others want miscellaneous information which is available in reference books, an unusual example of this type being the woman who wrote, “Please send me the name of a lying-in hospital, or, better still, a reformatory, so I can learn to reform while lying in.” Says Mrs. Gilmer, “We gave her the addresses of both. We answer all letters which contain a stamped, self-addressed envelope; and sometimes, when there's an emergency and we might be able to stop someone from taking an unwise step, we furnish the envelope and postage and answer them anyway.”

The weeding-out process finally reduces the letters to a stack which contains real personal problems, and these Mrs. Gilmer answers herself. As many are from men and boys as from women and girls. The original title of the column, “Dorothy Dix Talks to Women,” was changed to just “Dorothy Dix Talks” for that reason. Newspaper editors may not have known that men, too, have their emotional problems, but the men knew it, and wrote to Dorothy Dix about it.

Supersophisticates, who think they can order their lives without assistance (and whose divorce rate, incidentally, is the highest in the world) affect amusement at the very idea of “advice to the lovelorn.” Indeed, Dorothy Dix finds many humorous tidbits in her volumi-



“Now that we’ve been given permission to reconvert, doesn’t anyone remember how we used to make them?”

nous correspondence. She admires the clever turn of speech with which one girl wrote, "Please tell me how to acquire IT. In other words, how to look hot and keep cool," and another complained, "He sure dishes out the soft soap, but the trouble with the soft soap is that it has so much lye in it." She relishes the naïveté which prompted a correspondent to observe, "I have tried to act like a lady, which is all right in theory but doesn't work out in practice." And she chuckles over that faith in her omniscience which leads to such demands as, "I have always wanted to know what happened to the soul immediately after death. Please answer by return mail."

"But, remember, these things don't seem funny to them," Mrs. Gilmer admonishes. "They're in deadly earnest. Why, they ask me everything. I bet I've named a million babies—and cats, and dogs, and yachts, and everything else." Though some of the letters are amusing, more of them are heart-rending in their hopelessness, or challenging in their bold presentation of problems which are real, and immediate, and inescapable.

She shuns personal appearances.

The "lovelorn" are only a part of Dorothy Dix' vast audience, and affairs of the heart only one phase of the problems of life which are presented to her daily. Her principal thought is to help people in the job of living, getting along, being happy and useful in the world. That is one reason she has never tried to cash in on her celebrity. She has shunned personal appearances and has refused dozens of offers to go on the radio. "I don't like women's voices on the air," she confides; but, more important, she believes that if she did these things her column would suffer from neglect and she could not answer all the letters.

"I have been interviewed literally hundreds of times," Mrs. Gilmer says, "and nobody has ever asked me the question that I think is the only interesting

thing about me, and that is what I have tried to do, however poorly, in writing my column—to give fresh hope to tired and discouraged men and women wrestling with the insoluble problems of marriage and the other trials and tribulations of domesticity, and, above all, to preach the gospel of common sense that it seems to me is much needed in a hysterical world."

The proudest recollections of Dorothy Dix are those cases in which she has successfully mended people's damaged lives—the sailor who addressed her as "my more than Mother"; the young woman who wrote to say, "I think this letter will be your best Christmas present," and went on to tell how the advice of Dorothy Dix saved her from a misstep she would have regretted.

Ingenuity, too, is often necessary in the framing of Dorothy Dix' replies to her baffled correspondents. There is the case, for example, of the farm wife who had determined on suicide and who wrote one last letter to Dorothy Dix. She felt she could no longer go on with a large family of children to care for, a house to keep clean, meals to cook, work in the barn and the fields, an unromantic and undemonstrative husband. . . . "I couldn't have cajoled that woman with any stock phrases," Mrs. Gilmer says. "So I told her how truly important her life was; how she might be raising another Lincoln, or another Caruso." It was just the spark that was necessary to restore a purpose in life, and the suicide was averted.

The academic world has recognized the value of these letters. The psychiatric faculty of a famous medical university wrote, "We are just bookish men who don't really know life. May we read your mail?" Mrs. Gilmer sent them bundles of it.

"They told me they had never known before how many different worries people have," she says.

The novelist, Sherwood Anderson, was another who appreciated the letters to Dorothy Dix. When he spent a season



"Mother, do you suppose Dad would mind my placing a long-distance call to Dorothy Dix?"

in New Orleans he used to drop in every morning as a volunteer mail-opener. "Why, there are plots for a thousand novels in those letters!" he exclaimed.

When one considers that Dorothy Dix has been receiving intensely personal letters through three distinct ages—the dying Victorian one, the first World War with its jazz age and flapper aftermath, and the present critical times—it would be interesting to learn if Dorothy Dix' own point of view has changed materially; if she answers a given question the same way today as she would have forty years ago. But "I don't know," she says. "They just don't ask me the same questions. When I started, girls wanted to know if it was proper to help a gentleman caller on with his coat. Today they want to know if they should spend a week-end with a man they aren't married to. Parents used to accuse me of being too daring, and now young people sometimes say I'm old-fashioned, but not very often." There is a good reason why Dorothy Dix seldom seems old-fashioned; it was she who set so many of the acknowledged present-day standards of proper conduct. . . .

One change Mrs. Gilmer has noted is recent and noteworthy. "Before the war, boys used to write me very discouraged letters," she says. "I was afraid they were losing courage and ambition and decency. They had the here-today-gone-tomorrow philosophy. They'd ask, 'Why shouldn't I do as I please?'"

"But now that these boys are in uniform, the letters they write me are entirely different. Discipline and fellowship seem to have given them a new sense of duty and self-respect. If that is so, maybe this war will have paid for itself."

This is another in a series of "Dream Jobs"—meetings with those rare individuals who do the things most of us can only dream of doing.

Next month, meet H. T. Webster, cartoonist, who draws "The Timid Soul," "Life's Darkest Moment," etc.