

# THE ART OF REPARTEE



Mark Twain said that, “*Repartee is something we think of 24 hours too late.*” In *Viva La Repartee*, a delightful book subtitled, “Clever Comebacks and Witty Retorts from History’s Great Wits & Wordsmiths,” Dr. Mardy Grothe provides a long list of impressive retorts, rejoinders, ad-libs, and wise-cracks from the likes of Oscar Wilde, Groucho Marx, Winston Churchill, Dorothy Parker, and many more. Here are a couple of examples:

■ *The Forbes Book of Great Business Letters*, a collection of some of the most fascinating correspondence in history, also describes one of the most questionable pay-raise requests of all time. The executive editor at Monocle Periodicals in New York City sent his publisher a telegram that read:

**Must have raise or count me out.**

The publisher apparently didn’t think the editor was worth it, sending a reply telegram that read:

**One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.**

■ Although not especially well remembered today, Ilka Chase was a familiar name in the 1930s and ‘40s. A writer, actress, and radio celebrity, she starred in Broadway plays and Hollywood films, wrote numerous books, and hosted a number of popular radio shows. Soon after the publication of her 1942 autobiography *Past Imperfect*, she ran into an actor (some accounts say it was

Humphrey Bogart) at a party. The actor congratulated Chase and said, “I thought your book was wonderful. I can’t tell you how much I enjoyed it. By the way, who wrote it for you?” Chase delivered the perfect riposte:

**I’m so glad you liked it. By the way, who read it to you?**

■ At a White House luncheon in 1943, Winston Churchill was challenged by Helen Reid, the sister of the anti-British owner of the *Chicago Tribune*. Referring to England’s colonization of India, she attacked him and the British for their treatment of Indians. It was a tense moment, but Churchill coolly responded:

**Before we proceed further, let us get one thing clear. Are we talking about the brown Indians of India, who have multiplied... under benevolent English rule? Or are we speaking of the red Indians in America who, I understand, are almost extinct?**