

# AMERICAN SOCIETY AND NEAR-SOCIETY

CLARE BOOTHE BROKAW

**T**HE *Social Registers*, which are the official indices of "society" in the large cities of the United States somewhat resemble, in character, *Le Bottin Mondain* of Paris, *Webster's Royal Red Book* of London, the various *Taschenbücher* of Europe, with an occasional faint touch of the *Almanach de Gotha* and *Burke's Peerage*.

The New York *Social Register* for 1931 contained about thirty-five thousand names, an increase of fifteen thousand over the *Social Register* of 1914; and the fourteen social registers of the largest American cities contained more than one hundred thousand names—an increase of over fifty thousand names during the same length of time.

These figures are particularly remarkable when one considers that the social register of exactly one hundred years ago, *Longworth's New York Directory*, boasted exactly eighteen names. (They were, even in those days, "important" ones, and, with few exceptions, they have continued to figure prominently in the annals of American society: Astor, Brevoort, Bleecker, De Rham, DePeyster, Halleck, Irving, Livingstone, Brockholst, Rhineland, Roosevelt, Rutgers, Schermerhorn, Suydam, Stewart, Taylor, Vanderbilt, Van Rensselaer.)

The present Society census therefore shows an increase of ten thousand per cent, which is to say that the efflorescence of American society has outdistanced every other phenomenon of that phenomenal country. Not even the population itself has kept step with the growth of the beau monde. From being practically nonexistent a hundred years ago, it now blooms like the green bay tree throughout the country.

The average foreigner would deduce, from these figures, that the development must be a superficial, and not a profound, one. He cannot believe that a delicately integrated society, founded on birth and kept alive by breeding—even with due consideration of the usual intravenous injections of money—could evolve at such a rate. He is correct. As a matter of fact, authentic New York society of today is still fairly represented by those eighteen names of a hundred years ago, with the addition of perhaps two or three hundred other names—a normal enough increase. Those

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who bear them for the most part faithfully follow the principles and precepts, and maintain the traditions of simplicity, self-centeredness, pride of position, and birth, which is the characteristic of the best breeding, the true *haute société* in every country of the world.

But what of the other 34,500 names in the New York *Social Register*? Such a vast horde cannot be ignored. Surely their mere inscription therein signifies something of the standards of social life in America?

Entrance into the *Social Register* depends, first, on having enough money to live the same life as others lead who have already "gotten in." Anything over an income of twenty thousand dollars a year will assure the acceptance of most newcomers. To this prime requisite is usually added a modicum of breeding, an education that embraces a knowledge of how to pronounce the words "chic," "démodé" and "couturier," and (unless one's income is fabulous, in which case it may not matter, other things being equal) a gentile profile. These qualifications engender the formality of getting letters of proposal for the *Social Register* from eight other people who have been similarly proposed a few years, or perhaps only a few months, before. The great number of these names have made an appearance in the *Register* only during the last decade or so. They are post-war society, which, like post-war liquor, is not quite the real thing, but, for want of something better, does. Of course it must not be thought that every one who is in the *Social Register* is in society, any more than that every dog entered in a show wins a blue ribbon.

What is the social life of the average (i.e., one of the 35,000) Social Registerite? What does the so-called society woman do with her days and nights? In New York (and life in other American cities is a pale imitation of that life) she lives in an apartment house. She has from two to twelve servants, one to four motor cars, rarely more than three children. She awakens at ten, breakfasts in bed on tea and toast, reads her mail (she seldom reads anything else) telephones her friends, and exchanges gossip-items with them—long dialogues of the "he-said," "she-said" school; occasionally she orders the meals for the day (in house-

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keeping, in the European sense, she has small interest. She is a notoriously bad manager, and inefficient housewife). She then dresses and goes out to "shop," for either her apartment, which she is always in the throes of decorating or redecorating, or for herself, for she buys as many expensive clothes as her purse will allow. She takes luncheon in a public restaurant, always with a woman friend (it is not the custom for American men to lunch with women) or with four, eight, or twelve other women, in the apartment of one of them. She then plays bridge for a little more than she can afford during the rest of the afternoon, arriving home in time to dress hurriedly to dine out, and, before leaving her apartment, hurriedly kisses her children (whom she has not seen all day) good-night. She dines with four or six friends, drinking from one to four cocktails; and afterwards goes to a

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play which it is quite likely she has seen several times before, since it is the custom for the hostess to pick the successes of the theatrical season, which are few, rather than to risk boring her guests with an indifferent play which she is sure that they have not seen. After the theatre the party goes either to the Embassy Club, which is very much like the Embassy Club in London, but which has no counterpart in Paris, Vienna, or Berlin; or to a night club, which is much like night clubs everywhere else in the world, except that in American night clubs wines are not served, and the gentlemen are forced continually to pour strong liquors from large silver hip-pocket flasks.

If she does not go to the theatre, and the inevitable night club with her guests or hosts, as the case may be, she dines either in her house, or theirs, but the program varies little. At the dinner table there are apt to be more guests—twelve is the usual number, arbitrarily fixed by the fact that silver and china are bought in sets of twelve. This, in richer households for the same reason, is often extended to twenty-four. More cocktails are drunk beforehand than at a theatre party, and the sallies at the dinner and the card tables, which are relentlessly set up immediately after coffee is served, are correspondingly gayer. She leaves either card table or night club at about one, or two, o'clock in the morning.

This program, which forms the framework of the average society woman's life, is varied by busy days which include visits to the hairdresser's and manicurist's, or a morning spent at a musicale, at which four or five hundred women sit on stiff gold-backed chairs at eleven o'clock in the morning, in the ball room of some hotel, and listen to a tenor, in frock coat, a soprano in a low-necked gown, a perspiring pianist, all of the first rank, perform. Her spasmodic attempts at self-improvement—lecture courses, language lessons, and instruction in art, short-story writing, piano composition; her courses in physical training, and her diets and cures are seldom completed, and do not long disturb the even tenor of her ways. The highlights of her social activities are the opening night of the opera, weddings, and wedding receptions, and race meets; the charity balls and functions for

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which she is a "patroness" (i.e., she buys a number of tickets at from ten to twenty dollars apiece, or a box, priced from seventy-five to two hundred dollars, and has her name engraved on the program); the fancy-dress balls to which she wears costumes as elaborate as money will permit; the *débutante*, or "coming out," parties, to which she and the *débutante's* mother's friends are invited, along with several hundred of young men whom neither the mother nor the *débutante* herself knows, culled from the list of a sort of super-social secretary to the city—Miss Cutting (in New York). It is Miss Cutting's curious profession to arrange all the bothersome details, even to the assembling of an impressive number of "guests," for the monstrous balls given by people with larger bank accounts than visiting lists.

These *débutante* balls, given always in a hotel, sometimes cost as much as twenty-five thousand dollars, but modest ones can be arranged for five or ten thousand dollars. Their nominal excuse is to present young women to the society of her mother's friends, an excuse which is scarcely valid, as one-half of the "society" present is unknown to either the *débutante* or her parents. Indeed, for social, or even matrimonial purposes her presentation would be quite as effective if she were prominently displayed from nine in the morning to nine o'clock at night in a Fifth Avenue shop window, for several weeks during the height of the season. The real *raison d'être* of the *débutante* ball is partly habit (the evolution of a social custom into a social spectacle), and partly because it offers the newcomer a conventional opportunity of lavish spending in the pursuit of social fame.

The typical "society" woman's summer is spent, if she lives in New York, Philadelphia, or Boston—in Bar Harbor, Narragansett Pier, Southampton, or Newport (and the greatest of these is the last: Newport, euphoniously called The Queen Resort), depending on how many of her winter "friends" she will find there, and whether or not she prefers to leave them behind in her efforts to conquer new resorts and make new "friends." This tactic of treating last season's friends like last season's hats, is commonly called "enlarging one's circle"—a misnomer, as it is definitely "narrowing one's circle."

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During the summer she rides, plays golf or tennis in the morning, or bathes at the beach with other colonists. In the afternoon, she quite likely plays bridge or backgammon with her women friends. In the evening she dines with the same group she has been bathing, golfing, and bridging with earlier in the day. After dinner she plays bridge again, or backgammon. She goes to bed about an hour earlier than in town. She cultivates, possibly a sun-tan. She seldom goes into her garden except on a night when it is lighted for a party by multi-colored bulbs hung in the trees and artificial moons. She "does over" her cabaña, her bath house, her country house as often as possible, and her fondest wish is to have an indoor swimming pool and an indoor tennis court, lodged in a supplementary "playhouse" near by which shall also contain a bridge room, a ping-pong room, music rooms and a ball-room for "large parties." If she goes to Palm Beach during the winter this schedule varies scarcely at all. She bathes more, dances more, and drinks more. Her other activities suffer accordingly.

You ask, where do society *men* enter the picture? As a matter of fact, they seldom enter it until after seven in the evening. There are so few gentlemen of leisure in America, that it is hardly necessary to the purpose of this article to mention them. The majority of names in the *Social Register* are *business* names. (There are very few professional ones—a mere scattering of artists, writers, so-called idlers. But even these latter devote themselves with such professional zeal to their hobbies: racing, polo, hunting, yachting, even art collecting, that they make of them a business.) Death retires American men from their work. They are in their offices every day during the winter, and even during the summer are wont to join their wives only over the week-ends. Their spare hours throughout the year are spent half-heartedly (or inebriatedly) joining in their wives' nocturnal activities and, when during the day they have time to themselves, in playing golf.

The sexes really live separate lives in society. Wives and husbands see each other, of course, across the dining-room table or in bed. Women flirt, of course, but discreetly; and for a married woman to have anything approaching a genuinely "romantic

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episode" is far more difficult than scandalous. There is a good deal of odd-moment, catch-as-catch-can philandering, which gives the sentimental life of the social set a jumpy, nervous, inhibited, querulous quality. Men make love to other men's wives, but in the same hasty, preoccupied fashion as they make love to their own, so that whereas divorces and remarriages are frequent, owing to the force of circumstances, and swift tide of events, scandals are few. The men simply haven't the time to court, to woo, to seduce, which, however much they may regret it, does not give women much opportunity to be unfaithful. Such masculine specimens as find time "to hang about other men's wives" are of a caliber that offers no real menace or even temptation: interior decorators, budding musicians, indifferently successful artists. These are not dangerous, because they have no money. And money is the main-spring of American society. To suffer the need of it, in marriage or out, is to jeopardize one's entire social present, and certainly to ruin the future.

For the average society woman is really "in society" by the grace of her bank account. If she can, however, with a minimum of bad taste, over a period of ten or fifteen years, spend money as well and as lavishly as an Astor or a Vanderbilt (a few that have done so are the Wideners, Cosdens, Taylors, Williamses, Whitneys, Jameses, Biddles, Belmonts, Dukes, etc.) or if she can, through the marriage of her sons or daughters, ally herself to one of the hundred or so names which are the nucleus, the life-giving heart, of American society, she can be considered, at length, to have "arrived" in its deepest and most satisfactory sense. At this point she will find that her life among the *élite réelle* will consist of: playing bridge, decorating still larger houses and spending longer hours at the dressmaker's and hairdresser's. She will be only a little less afraid of "what people say" and whereas she may, from time to time, entertain celebrities, she will never, never, under any circumstances, allow the talk at her table to deteriorate into conversation. She will have only the faintest idea of what is meant by the word "salon," and even if she cherished such continental ambitions, would find them impossible to satisfy, in an American milieu where politicians, artists, actors, authors,

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idlers, playwrights and, with a few exceptions, musicians are considered beyond the social pale. When such suspicious characters appear in American homes, it is usually as paid entertainers, or court jesters; seldom as friends and equals of their hostess. And while her less important sister, the outer-fringer, dreams of the day when she will be invited to a ball for the Prince of Wales, her own secret desire is to *give* a ball for the Prince of Wales. Indeed, it thus correctly appears that, in the majority of cases, between the *real* member of "The Four Hundred," and the *average* society, or near-society, woman, there is little difference. Their ambitions are the same, their pursuits are the same, their ideals are the same. The only difference is that, usually, the real member of the upper set's money has been in the family a generation or two, instead of ten or twenty years, as in the case of the "new-comer." And there is apt to be more of it. And she may add, to her other civilized interests, an enviable success in collecting old masters, a taste for steam-yachting and frequent magnificent gestures in the direction of her "pet" charities. She will speak her French without an accent, and will not lose her self-confidence if she forgets to wear her pearls to the opera. She may also have better "manners" than her near-society sister—or, at least her bad manners will be *consciously*, rather than unconsciously, bad. Here is a subtle distinction which only members of long standing in society can understand. It is one thing to be intentionally rude (in fact it is often a "chic" thing) and quite another to be ignorantly so. The majority of American bad manners are, it must be admitted, of the latter sort. Their only saving grace is that they are sufficiently standardized (like everything else in America) to have become almost an accepted social code. Nobody bothers to answer written invitations (few people write them), to write bread-and-butter letters, letters of condolence. No one makes calls, leaves visiting cards, has a day at home, goes out of her way to entertain or be polite to the oldest generation, or in any other way practices the old-fashioned social amenities. And everybody is habitually, incredibly late for every engagement. In Newport, Tuxedo, Lenox, Bernardsville, the last outposts of



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marriage market for titles is picking up again), Austria, Roumania, Sweden (the first royal American marriage took place when Estelle Manville, asbestos-roofing heiress, married King Gustave's nephew) with probably double that number. Nevertheless, American society resembles French, German, and English society in its essentials, if not in its superficial aspect. It is more self-conscious, and therefore more snobbish; less self-contained, but more fearful of its integrity; more dissipated, and on the other hand, more moral; far less intellectual, but on the whole, less sterile, and more useful to that larger society of human beings of which it is sometimes an ornament, but usually an excrescence. If it has not the culture of continental society, it is not guilty of its perversities, its decadence, and absurd posturings; if it is not as simple as English society, neither is it as fatuous and smug. Otherwise American society is much the same as in other lands: linked, in the popular imagination, with glamorous women who wear beautiful clothes, ride in handsome motors, and go to sea in splendid yachts with witty, rich, and handsome men, whereas in reality it is more apt to be rather dull, dispirited, unenlightened, indifferent, and usually a little discontented.

I was once told of the most important single feminine figure in American society, that she was so exclusive and so snobbish that she suffered when in the presence of any one save her family physician or her blood relations. Even her well-born "in-laws" made her uncomfortable, aggravating her sense of superiority, until she felt contaminated by human contacts. In the final analysis, the ultimate of snobbishness and the ideal of exclusiveness is that of a woman who is *so* ultra that she receives *no one* at all, but lives in solitary and inviolable splendor. Although the methods by which American social aspirants try to reach this goal differ from those of other lands, the goal is the same. It might be better expressed by the figure of a circle continually decreasing in size until it is a mere zero, then a speck, then a point, finally becoming something which in its efforts to be exclusive achieves a magnificent nothingness.