Chapter 2

Grandeur, Limited

OF ALL the contrasts between American life in 1900 and half a century or more later, perhaps the most significant is in the distance between rich and poor—in income, the way of living, and status in the community. At the turn of the century the gulf between wealth and poverty was immense.

One illustration may help to point the contrast. I have already mentioned Andrew Carnegie's income. During the year 1900 Carnegie owned 58½ per cent of the stock of his great steel company. That year it made a profit of 40 million dollars. Carnegie's personal gain that year, whether or not he took it in dividends, was therefore well over 23 million dollars—*with no income taxes to pay.* During the five years 1896-1900 his *average* annual income, computed on the same basis, was about 10 millions. And these figures include no other income which he may have had from any other property.

At the time that Carnegie was enjoying this princely income, tax free, the average annual wage of *all* American workers was somewhere in the neighborhood of four or five hundred dollars; one economic calculator has arrived at a figure of $417 a year, another makes it $503. Remember that these figures are averages, not minimum incomes.*

* To translate these figures into the terms of 1950 one must make allowance for the dwindling value of the dollar. This it is difficult to compute; for though statisticians may arrive at precise index figures for the rise in prices, money was spent in such different ways then, and nominally identical goods were in fact so

In short, Andrew Carnegie's annual income was at least twenty thousand times greater than that of the average American workman.

There you have the basic contrast. Andrew Carnegie was one of the very wealthiest men of his day, but many others had incomes in the millions. And their way of life showed it. Let us take a look at this way of life.

To begin with, they built themselves palatial houses.

During the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, when a great many American millionaires had decided that the thing for a rich man to do was to build himself a princely mansion, it had been the Vanderbilt family who had set the pace for the rest to follow. By the middle eighties there were no less than seven great Vanderbilt houses within the space of seven blocks on the west side of Fifth Avenue. One should perhaps question the published reports of the cost of these palaces—three millions for William H.'s, three millions for William K.'s, and so forth—but it would seem safe to say that the seven, between them, must have represented a family outlay of well over twelve millions (which, one must remind oneself, was roughly equivalent to over thirty-six millions today).

The first three of these buildings—William H. Vanderbilt's and the pair of houses he built for his daughters Mrs. Shepard and Mrs. Sloane—conformed outwardly, in everything but scale, to the New York brownstone tradition; but William H.'s contained a bewildering variety of statues, paintings, tapestries, and urns from all over—English, French, German, Japanese. For a pattern was forming: the American millionaire wanted to live like a prince; and since princes were foreign, and princely culture was likewise foreign, he must show

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different, that any index figure is suspect. For convenience I shall assume in this book that the 1900 dollar bought three times as much as the 1950 one, which is at least close to the reality. Translate the wages of 1900 into these terms and we find that the average 1900 wage, in terms of what it would buy in 1950, was somewhere in the neighborhood of $1,200 to $1,500—which looks considerably less appalling than $400 to $500.

But if we multiply the worker's wage in this way we should likewise multiply Andrew Carnegie's. And we find that in terms of 1950 purchasing power his income came to more than 60 millions, tax free, in 1900, and to more than 30 millions per year for the five years 1896-1900.

his princeliness by living among foreign furnishings and foreign works of art, in as great variety and profusion as could be managed.

The William K. Vanderbilt house and the Cornelius Vanderbilt house carried the idea a step further. They abandoned the New York brownstone and New York exterior aspect. For William K., Richard Morris Hunt designed a limestone castle that was reminiscent of the Château of Blois and even more so of the fifteenth-century French mansion of Jacques Cœur at Bourges; for Cornelius, George B. Post provided a brick-and-stone château that likewise carried people's minds back to Blois. Both were splendid buildings, ornaments to Fifth Avenue, but their foreignness amused the architect Louis Sullivan, who felt that houses should harmonize with the lives of the people who lived in them. "Must I show you this *French château,* this little Château de Blois, on this street corner, here, in New York, and still you do not laugh?" wrote Sullivan in his *Kindergarten Chats.* "Must you wait till you see a *gentleman* in a silk hat come out of it before you laugh? Have you no sense of humor, no sense of pathos? Must I tell you that while the man may live in the house physically . . . he cannot possibly live in it morally, mentally, or spiritually, that he and his house are a paradox, a contradiction, an absurdity . . . ?"

No such misgivings as these troubled the Vanderbilts, nor did they let anything stint their zeal for grandeur. Subsequently, the family fortune went also into the building of several massive Newport houses, of which the most immense was Cornelius Vanderbilt's The Breakers, which resembled an oversized Italian villa, and the most dazzling was William K.'s Marble House, the construction, decoration, and furnishing of which was alleged to have cost some eleven millions. There was also Frederick W. Vanderbilt's great house at Hyde Park, in which the dining room was approximately fifty feet long. There was William K. Vanderbilt's Idle Hour, at Oakdale, Long Island—with 110 rooms, 45 bathrooms, and a garage ready to hold 100 automobiles. But the champion of all the turn-of-the-century châteaux was George W. Vanderbilt's ducal palace at Asheville, North Carolina, which he called Biltmore.

Biltmore, too, was French, designed by Hunt after the manner of

the great castles of the Loire. It had forty master bedrooms, a Court of Palms, an Oak Drawing Room, a Banqueting Hall, a Print Room, a Tapestry Gallery, and a Library with 250,000 volumes. It was surrounded by an estate which gradually grew until it covered some 203 square miles, giving Vanderbilt ample scope to exercise his interest in scientific farming and forestry. To serve as his director of forestry, Vanderbilt hired a young man named Gifford Pinchot, who was enabled to offer what a standard work on American forestry calls "the first practical demonstration of forest management on a large scale in America."

J. Sterling Morton, U. S. Secretary of Agriculture in the middle nineties, regarded Vanderbilt's experimental work in agriculture and forestry with admiration not unmixed with envy. "He employs more men than I have in my charge," said Secretary Morton. "He is also spending more money than Congress appropriates for this Department."

No wonder a chronicler of the time reflected that "what with the six or seven great New York houses of the Vanderbilt family, and their still larger numbers of country estates, it could plausibly be argued that among them they have invested as much money in the erection of dwellings as any of the royal families of Europe, the Bourbons alone excepted."

And the Vanderbilts were far from alone in the building of vast villas and châteaux. The Goelet, Belmont, and Berwind houses at Newport; the Flagler house at Palm Beach; the Gould house at Lakewood, New Jersey; the Widener house near Philadelphia; the Phipps house at Pittsburgh—these were only a few of the mightier constructions in which the multimillionaires of the 1900 period sought to lead the princely life.

As one compares photographs of one palatial interior after another, with their marble floors, curving marble staircases, tapestries, urns, velvet hangings, carved and painted ceilings, brocaded chairs, mural paintings, pipe organs, potted palms, and classical statues holding electric light fixtures, one wonders if life in such surroundings must

not have seemed a little unhomelike. One is reminded of Anna Robeson Burr's description of Henry C. Frick, the steel millionaire, "in his palace, seated on a Renaissance throne under a baldacchino, and holding in his little hand a copy of the *Saturday Evening Post*." And not only was there nothing cozy about these marble halls; Paul Bourget, the French novelist, found in their furnishings an absence of moderation, of restraint. "On the floors of halls which are too high there are too many precious Persian and Oriental rugs," commented Bourget after a Newport visit. "There are too many tapestries, too many paintings on the walls of the drawing rooms. The guest-chambers have too many *bibelots*, too much rare furniture, and on the lunch or dinner table there are too many flowers, too many plants, too much crystal, too much silver."

One is reminded, too, of the apt comment of Harry W. Desmond and Herbert Croly in their book, *Stately Homes in America*, to the effect that the European palaces and châteaux which the millionaires' architects had copied had not been private houses only but public buildings also, crowded with tenants and retainers of the noble family which controlled the destinies of the region, and that as public buildings they "could with propriety be magnificent." In a land without a peasantry such palaces as these were anomalous. No wonder a Newport or New York or Pittsburgh château with no such neighborhood traffic surging through it made an oddly illogical frame for a magnate who had made his millions by merging steel companies, or for a magnate's wife to whom a rocking chair by a Franklin stove had once seemed the last word in luxury—even if the architect had provided for them not only Italian Renaissance paintings and Greek statuary and Flemish tapestries but also bathrooms, electric lights, automatic elevators, a lavish heating system, and a complete internal telephone system.

Some of the millionaires eschewed palatial magnificence. For example, J. Pierpont Morgan, though he lived a truly regal life, preferred masculine comfort to marble splendor (except in the Library which he built after the turn of the century to hold part of his

extraordinary collection of rare books and masterpieces). Morgan's town house at 291 Madison Avenue, New York, was commodious rather than grand: one could run it with a staff of a dozen servants or so. His country house at Highland Falls was ample but unpretentious; many American country clubs of today are bigger. His double house in London did not suggest a palace, though it contained a collection of paintings at which connoisseurs of Dutch, French, Spanish, and English art gasped. But he had also a sizable country house outside London; a thousand-acre place in the Adirondacks; a private apartment at the Jekyll Island Club on the Georgia Coast; a "fishing box" at Newport; special suites at the Hotel Bristol in Paris and the Grand Hotel in Rome which were set aside for his use whenever he wanted them; and, in addition to all these, the 302-foot steam yacht, *Corsair III,* which served him as an additional residence either on the Atlantic coast or in the Mediterranean. (He also had a private Nile steamer built to order for his pleasure whenever he should be in Egypt.) And Morgan could hardly have been accused of penny-pinching when, wanting carpets for *Corsair III* exactly like those on *Corsair II,* and finding that such were no longer made, he ordered the old patterns set up on the looms so that his new carpets, made to order, should be identical in design.

Andrew Carnegie's preferences, too, were in many respects simpler than those of the millionaires who frequented Newport. The house which he built for himself on Fifth Avenue at Ninety-first Street, though very large, didn't try to look like a palace; it had a subdued neo-Georgian aspect. His yacht, the *Seabreeze,* was not in a class with the *Corsair.* But during the nineties he acquired an estate in his native Scotland, Skibo, on which he really let himself go. Eventually the estate reached 32,000 acres in size. Carnegie had two or three hundred tenants; he poured out money on the construction of roads; and though he preferred informal dress and informal entertainment, and at Skibo Castle almost invariably wore a light gray Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, he and his guests were awakened at eight o'clock each morning by the Carnegie bagpiper approaching the castle from a distance and then circling it and skirling beneath the bedroom

windows, and a little later they ate breakfast to the music of an organ played by the Carnegie organist.

Nor was there anything especially palatial about the house in which John D. Rockefeller lived much of the year at Pocantico Hills, close to Tarrytown, New York. Rockefeller did not care for pomp and circumstance; his tastes were Baptist rather than Medicean, and after his retirement from active business in the mid-nineties he was further handicapped by ill-health, so that in the years immediately following the turn of the century he was living on a diet of graham crackers and milk, and was utilizing for his daily golf game a bicycle, on which he rode from shot to shot. Rockefeller was moved less by a lust for splendor than by a concern for personal protection, since he knew that the ruthless methods of his Standard Oil Company had made him violent enemies. What he did at Pocantico Hills was to build up, gradually, a vast personal enclosure within which he might live a prudently well-ordered life unmolested.

The estate was not completed until long after the turn of the century, when the discovery of oil in Texas and Oklahoma and the increasing popularity of the automobile were between them multiplying his millions faster than he could give them away; but the pattern was more nearly that of 1900 than of his declining years. If Rockefeller's own house was not a palace, it was one of more than seventy-five buildings on his estate; if he himself used one car for fifteen years, the garage on the estate was built to hold a fleet of fifty. Within his estate there were seventy miles of private roads on which he could take his afternoon drive; a private golf links on which he could play his morning game; and anywhere from a thousand to fifteen hundred employees, depending on the season.

All this, by the way, was for Pocantico Hills only; Rockefeller also owned an estate at Lakewood, which he occupied in the spring; an estate at Ormond Beach in Florida, for winter use; a town house on Fifty-fourth Street in New York; an estate at Forest Hill, Cleveland, which he did not visit; and a house on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland, likewise unused by him. Never, perhaps, did any man live a more frugal life on a more colossal scale.

II

But if Rockefeller lived frugally, there were those that did not. When one is trying to measure the lavish scale of life among the very rich of those days, it is a little unfair to dwell unduly upon such extreme extravagances as the Bradley Martin ball given early in 1897 —when the country was just pulling out of a grievous depression— at a reported cost of $369,200 (roughly the equivalent of a million dollars today); or the James Hazen Hyde ball of a few years later, for which Stanford White transformed Sherry's restaurant in New York into the semblance of the interior of the Grand Trianon, with marble statues brought from France, waiters tricked out in eighteenth-century livery and perukes, and entertainment provided by the great French actress, Réjane, and members of her company, likewise imported for the occasion. Both the Martins and Mr. Hyde found they had misjudged the public attitude toward such expenditures, and the fact that they both thereafter went abroad to live was not wholly unrelated to this discovery. Let us look at a less publicized and more representative part of the record. Let us visit Newport at the height of the 1902 season, the tennis week at the end of August, during which the Dohertys of England were able to defeat many of the best American tennis players in the matches at the Casino, and only a successful defense of the American title by William A. Larned in the "challenge round" turned back R. F. Doherty's assault.

On Monday evening of that week, August 25, Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt were "at home" at Beaulieu, the William Waldorf Astor villa which they had taken for the summer. If you had been invited, and the words "at home" had suggested to you a quiet chat in the drawing room, you would have been surprised to find yourself entering the estate through a specially-built arched entrance, 25 feet wide and 18 feet high; proceeding up a brilliantly illuminated midway along which there were shooting galleries, Negro dancers, singing girls, a Punch and Judy show, and other exhibits characteristic of an amusement park; and in due course continuing to a temporary theater, on the construction of which two gangs of

carpenters had worked night and day for five days. And in this theater you would have witnessed the first act of a successful Broadway musical comedy, *The Wild Rose,* featuring Marie Cahill, Eddie Foy, and Irene Bentley. The Knickerbocker Theater in New York had been closed for the evening in order that the entire cast of the show, with the first-act scenery, might be transported to Newport to delight Mrs. Vanderbilt's guests. When the show was over, these guests adjourned to the house for supper, while the theater was cleared for dancing; after supper there was a ball with, according to the *New York Times,* "two cotillion leaders and elaborate figures with beautiful and costly favors."

Two evenings later Mrs. Ogden Goelet gave a dinner dance at Ochre Court, with two orchestras and another cotillion; one figure of the cotillion required 700 gardenias, the provision of which offered something of a problem to Newport florists; according to newspaper reports, the gardenias were distributed "from a Russian sleigh." And the very next evening Mrs. William Astor gave a ball at "Beechwood" to open her new Louis XV ballroom, with another cotillion, led by Harry Lehr.

In the nineties Paul Bourget had commented favorably on several aspects of Newport life. He had remarked that there were no courtesans, because virtually all the men came only for week ends and holidays and the life of the place did not lend itself to secluded intimacies; that there were no adventurers, because nobody was admitted to society whose earnings and investments could not be at least roughly ascertained; and that most of the people looked healthy rather than dissipated. His points were well taken. This was not a depraved or debauched community; it had standards of conduct and decorum.

To explain the Newporters' look of health, M. Bourget described an average day in the life of a young girl there. She would be out riding before nine; she would return from her ride and change in time to watch a tennis tournament match at the Casino; then her carriage would take her to a yacht landing and she would be ferried out for lunch on a yacht; at half past four or thereabouts she would

leave the yacht to watch a polo match; then she would go home, bathe, and change for a dinner party, which would probably break up by ten-thirty because many of those who had been out in the open air would have difficulty keeping their eyes open any longer; after that she might go on to a ball. Paul Bourget, however, apparently did not attend any ball. If he had, it is safe to guess that this acute observer would have found in a grand Newport entertainment the same lack of restraint which he had found in the decoration of the houses. For these people had more money than they knew what to do with, and they were engaged in a competition to see who could toss it about most superbly.

The visitor from France might have wondered at the expenditure of thousands upon thousands of dollars in order that during one evening a couple of hundred people might see part of a musical show that could be seen in its entirety, and to better advantage, on Broadway, or might frolic in a midway that was in essence a small imitation of Coney Island. But it was characteristic of Newport entertaining that no expense was spared to bring to the place things that didn't belong there at all. For instance, according to Lloyd Morris,

> Mrs. Belmont imported Chinese artisans to construct a red and gold lacquer tea house on the cliffs at Marble House. The structure was gorgeous and authentic, but contained no provision for making tea. A miniature railroad was therefore laid from the pantry of the mansion to the cliffs, its course masked by elaborate planting, and footmen with trays were thereby whisked down to the lacquered toy.

At several houses in New York and Newport the hostesses prided themselves on being able to serve dinner for a hundred or more people on a few hours' notice—a feat which required, of course, a profusion of servants. But servants were not lacking: in some country houses they might number fifty or sixty in all, including the gardeners, chauffeurs, and grooms, and they were organized in a hierarchy of their own, English fashion. A few years after the turn of the century a young man fresh out of Harvard found himself installed for the summer in one of the marble mansions of Newport as tutor

to the son of the family. The young man was an earnest athlete, and it dismayed him that the boy in his charge was getting no chance to learn about teamwork in sports. One afternoon he found the butler and the other chief menservants playing soccer in a secluded part of the grounds. The very thing, he said to himself, and proposed that he and his young charge take part in the game. But it didn't work at all. For the moment the boy got possession of the ball, opposition melted away; these men, born and bred in a tradition of subservience, simply could not bring themselves to get in the way of the young master.

If my mention of people's being able to serve dinner to a hundred guests on short notice suggests some sort of casserole operation, be assured that there was nothing casual about a fashionable dinner at the turn of the century. The internal capacity of the prosperous of those days was prodigious. Seven or eight courses were likely to be served, with a variety of wines. In my life of Pierpont Morgan I printed the menu of a dinner enjoyed by the members of the Zodiac Club, a private dining club in New York. It is a little hard today to be sure, from that menu, which dishes were served as alternate choices and which constituted separate courses for all, but it appears to have been a ten-course feast: oysters, soup, hors d'oeuvres, soft clams, saddle and rack of lamb, terrapin, canvasback ducks, a sweet, cheese, and fruit—the dinner being preceded by sherry (instead of cocktails), accompanied successively by Rhine wine, Château-Latour, champagne, and Clos-Vougeot, and washed down with cognac (along with the coffee). It is difficult to imagine hunger being any more thoroughly assuaged; in fact, from the perspective of the nineteen-fifties it is difficult to understand how the diners could have faced the canvasback ducks with anything but dogged resolution.

If the members of the Zodiac Club dined heavily and well, they at least made no special attempt to enhance the grandeur of the surroundings in which they ate. A more all-round effort was made by Randolph Guggenheimer when he gave a dinner for forty ladies and gentlemen at the old Waldorf-Astoria on February 11, 1899.

His guests found the Myrtle Room of the Waldorf transformed into a garden, with roses, hyacinths, and tulips in bloom, and with hedges of fir. Nightingales, blackbirds, and canaries sang in the greenery. (It had been something of a trick to induce the zoo authorities to loan some nightingales for the affair.) The table was set in an arbor with a vine-covered trellis overhead and with green turf underfoot. The menus were painted in gold on scraped and polished cocoanuts; there were fans for the ladies on which the wine list had been painted. As favors there were beautifully engrossed vinaigrettes for the ladies, and jeweled matchboxes for the gentlemen. To provide music, six Neapolitans in native garb played guitars. And the dinner, which was served on gold plates, went as follows:

Buffet Russe
Cocktails
Small Blue Point Oysters
Lemardelais à la Princesse
Amontillado Pasado
Green Turtle Soup
Bolivar
Basket of Lobster
Columbine of Chicken, California Style
Roast Mountain Sheep, with Purée of Chestnuts (the sheep having been brought to New York by fast express in small, portable refrigerators)
Jelly
Brussels Sprouts Sauté
New Asparagus, Cream Sauce and Vinaigrette
Mumm's Extra Dry and Moët & Chandon Brut
Diamond Back Terrapin
Ruddy Duck (likewise rushed by express in small refrigerators)
Orange and Grapefruit Salad
Fresh Strawberries
Blue Raspberries
Vanilla Mousse
Bonbons, Coffee, Fruit

What did the evening's pleasure cost? Ten thousand dollars—$250 a head. (Again, these were 1899 dollars; the cost in today's terms

was $750 a head.) So said Oscar of the Waldorf, who should have known because he planned and staged the party for Mr. Guggenheimer.

One further word may not be wholly superfluous to some readers in the nineteen-fifties: these great feasts and elaborate balls did not go on anybody's corporate expense account. They were paid for by individuals, out of their own vast incomes.

III

In those days the word Society (with a capital S) carried much more definite connotations than it would today. In every community, probably, and in any generation, there is social emulation: there are certain families, or certain individuals, association with whom will seem to other people to number them among the elect. You will find this emulation in its most acute form today in the fraternity systems of some colleges; in adult communities the lines are less inexorably drawn. The smaller and less fluid the community, the clearer this phenomenon is likely to be; in larger cities, and in suburban communities where there is a constantly changing population, it is usually confused and obscured. One may find a great variety of groups, such as the old, tradition-bound leading families; the fashionable group; the newly prosperous who are not yet admitted to fashionable standing; the well-bred professional people and intellectuals who touch these other groups but do not quite belong to them; the earnest business people who are pillars of the churches and charities; the second rank of business people who live comfortably but have little traffic with these other groups; and so on through the whole vaguely defined spectrum—the pattern being sharply modified in each community by factors of national origin and of religious, professional, and business association. What was striking about the social pattern of 1900, as we look back upon it today, was that in most communities it was much clearer and simpler, the stratifications more generally recognized; and especially that they were generally taken much more seriously than they are today.

Visitors from England or France would explain to their countrymen that Society in the United States was not centered in any one

metropolis such as London or Paris, but that each big city here had a Society of its own; yet that of New York was pre-eminent. When Ward McAllister, in 1892, made his famous remark to the effect that even if Mrs. Astor's ballroom held only four hundred people it was big enough, since there were only about four hundred people in Society, there was much scornful laughter; but there were also great numbers of people to whom McAllister seemed to be defining the limits of the most select and enviable company in the land.

A few years earlier, Henry Clews had written fulsomely about the attractions of Manhattan life, asserting that "New York . . . is really the great social center of the Republic. . . . Here is the glitter of peerless fashion, the ceaseless roll of splendid equipages, and the Bois de Boulogne of America, the Central Park." Clews had insisted that "it does not take much of this kind of life to make enthusiastic New Yorkers of the wives of Western millionaires, and then nothing remains but to purchase a brownstone mansion, and swing into the tide of fashion with receptions, balls, and kettle-drums, elegant equipages with coachmen in bright-buttoned livery, footmen in top boots, maid-servants and man-servants, including a butler and all the other adjuncts of life in a great metropolis." Clews's enthusiasm may have been comic, but he was describing a recognized phenomenon. While the socially established were striving to hold the ranks of Society intact against the inroads of the new rich, the new rich in their turn were striving even more furiously to gain recognition by irresistibly lavish but carefully correct entertaining; and there were uncounted women to whom an invitation to one of Mrs. Astor's massive dinners would have seemed a ticket of admission to paradise.

For sidelights on the drama of social climbing and social exclusion at the turn of the century there is no better source than the satirical drawings of Charles Dana Gibson. Here one will find, over and over again, the beautiful girl of socially secure but financially insecure family trying to decide between the bald-headed, aging millionaire and the handsome young man who is a penniless nobody; the ungainly little middle-aged man whose wife and daughters drag him to enter-

tainments where they hope to meet the right people; the foreigner whose sole attraction is his title, but whom the millionaire's wife wants her daughter to marry; and the misery of the social climber to whose sumptuous party nobody will come. In one graphic picture Gibson shows a fat, coarse-looking woman sitting all alone at the edge of a great empty ballroom. The picture is captioned "Mrs. Steele Poole's Housewarming," in obvious reference to the combinations of steel manufacturing companies that were making new millionaires right and left as the nineteenth century closed. What is most impressive about these Gibson sketches as a social commentary is that hundreds of thousands of Gibson admirers were impressed with the significance of what he was satirizing. It is difficult to imagine *The New Yorker*, let us say, finding in our own time any such eager audience for a series of cartoons of the drama of social aspiration; not enough readers would care.

The same sort of drama was going on in other cities the country over: there was the same eagerness for admission to the gatherings of the socially elect, whether these were assemblies, cotillions, sewing circles, the gatherings of some local association, or a leading family's annual ball. It continues today, of course, in somewhat altered forms; the difference is that today comparatively few people take the drama seriously as involving social ranking, and that the whole phenomenon is complicated by the preferences of news photographers, gossip columnists, television audiences, and publicity-hungry restaurateurs and entertainers. In 1900 Society was Society indeed. It was scornful of public entertainers. It was scornful of the attentions of the press; indeed, there were fathers who told their sons that "a gentleman's name appeared in the papers only three times: when he was born, when he was married, and when he died." And it was confident that it represented what was most patrician, most brilliant, and most important in American life.

That is one of the explanations for the international marriages between American heiresses and foreign noblemen that were so frequent in those days. The first important one had taken place in the

eighteen-seventies between Jennie Jerome of New York and Lord Randolph Churchill (it had produced one of the great men of a future day, Winston Churchill). By the nineties they were becoming epidemic. In *McCall's* magazine for November, 1903, there was a list of fifty-seven of them to date, including the matches between Miss Mary Leiter and Lord Curzon, Miss Anna Gould and Count Boni de Castellane, and Miss Louise Corbin and the Earl of Oxford; in that very month of November, 1903, Miss May Goelet married the Duke of Roxburghe, and outside St. Thomas's Church on Fifth Avenue great crowds gathered in the hope of getting a glimpse of the Duke and his new Duchess.

For this spate of international marriages there were two reasons. One of them was that to a Prince or Duke or Count it was very agreeable to get both a charming girl and a lot of money. And sometimes there was nothing conjectural about the money. Read, for example, these sentences from a contract signed November 6, 1895, the day when Consuelo Vanderbilt married the Most Noble Charles Richard John, Duke of Marlborough:

> Whereas, a marriage is intended between the said Duke of Marlborough and the said Consuelo Vanderbilt . . . the sum of two million five hundred thousand dollars in fifty thousand shares of the Beech Creek Railway Company, on which an annual payment of four per cent is guaranteed by the New York Central Railroad Company, is transferred this day to the trustees. And shall, during the joint lives of the said Duke of Marlborough, Consuelo Vanderbilt, pay the income of the said sum of two million five hundred thousand dollars, unto the Duke of Marlborough for his life, and after the death of the said Duke of Marlborough, shall pay the income of the said trust fund unto the said Consuelo Vanderbilt for life. . . .

Yet there was another reason for such alliances. The American girl's parents felt that a noble wedding set upon them the authentic stamp of aristocracy. What if the country was traditionally a democracy and its Constitution decreed that "no title of nobility shall be granted by the United States"? There were, of course, wealthy and socially impeccable Americans who took these traditions seriously and regarded the collecting of ducal sons-in-law with amused contempt; but there were others who felt that in truth the people of the

United States constituted a social pyramid, with Society at its apex, a peerage in all but name; and that if the families of this peerage intermarried with the lords of other lands, the alliances gave fitting recognition of their true patrician worth. Just as some Americans of wealth, for all their patriotism, felt that the best art and culture were European, so they recognized that the insignia of aristocracy, too, were European—and equally worth embracing. It was good to feel sure one belonged to the American nobility.

IV

Somewhat below these Himalayan heights of affluence there were hundreds of thousands of Americans who might have been classified as rich, prosperous, or well-to-do—ranging from the families of the less glitteringly successful manufacturers, merchants, and businessmen, and the top-of-the-heap professional men, down the income scale to the families of, let us say, minor business executives, shopkeepers, run-of-the-mill lawyers and doctors, and the better-paid professors and ministers. Naturally any group so inclusive and ill-defined as this represents at any time such a great diversity of occupations, incomes, and modes of life that to generalize about it is risky. What, one might ask, did a family with a 1900 income of $20,000 (equivalent to something like $60,000 net today, or $100,000 before taxes) have in common with a family with a 1900 income of only $2,500 (equivalent to something like $8,500 today before taxes)? Or what did an ill-educated but canny speculator in street-railway stocks, who delightedly leaped into sudden wealth and bought the best trotting horse in town, but still was free with the toothpick, have in common with the members of old families who were trying to maintain a polite mode of life of which he had no inkling? Yet for all their variety, most of the members of this group—which we might very loosely identify as the upper middle class—did have one thing in common, as we look back at them today. Though many of them suffered intermittently from acute financial worry, their general position seems to people of similar status today to have been amply comfortable.

One reason for this becomes apparent the moment one begins to translate 1900 income into 1950 income. Assuming that the cost of living tripled in the interval, one figures at first that, let us say, the holder of a professorship which paid $3,000 a year in 1900 would have to receive $9,000 a year in 1950 to be as well off; but this calculation takes no account of income taxes: actually, the 1950 professor would have to receive $9,000 *after taxes,* or probably between $10,000 and $11,000 before taxes, to be as well heeled as his predecessor was. The chances are slim that the salary of his professorship has jumped at that rate. The same thing holds for a great many salaried jobs in businesses and other professions; and for the income from any but the most cannily chosen and carefully watched securities. By and large, salaried people and those living on inherited means or on savings have lost financial ground as a result of our progressive inflation.

A further advantage these people undoubtedly had over their comparably circumstanced grandchildren. They had more room to turn round in.

Because wages in the building trades—and the costs of building materials—were much lower than today, they could live in much larger quarters. Because servants' wages were much lower and candidates for servants' jobs were in abundance, they could staff these larger quarters amply. Furthermore they were spared many of the expenses which most of their descendants take as a matter of course: the cost of an automobile (much greater than that of a horse and carriage); the cost of such extra gadgets as electric refrigerators, washing machines, radios, television sets, or what not; the cost of a college education for children of both sexes; and very likely the cost of an extra home for week-end or summer use. (As we have seen, fewer reasonably well-to-do Americans had "summer places" then than now.) So the man whose salary now would command a rather cramped apartment might then have occupied a house which today would seem grandly large.

Wherever you may live today, you probably know some street which at the turn of the century was the abode of the prosperous and

which has not been wholly rebuilt since then. As you walk along it, you may wonder how anybody with an income of less than princely size could have afforded to live in one of those big houses (most of which have probably been broken up into apartments within the past generation).

Take, for example, Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, from Arlington Street to Massachusetts Avenue, which in the main looks today very much as it did in 1900. Consider that although its residents in those days included many of the very rich, there could not have been enough very rich Bostonians to occupy all those hundreds of brick four-story-and-basement houses. Look at the hulking corner mansions, three windows or more wide on the Avenue side and five or six windows wide on the side street. Look at some of the extra-width houses in mid-block, with broad steps leading up to a front door flanked on either side by two amply-spaced windows. Or glance at the much more numerous houses of comparatively modest dimensions—a frontage on the Avenue of something like twenty-five feet, with only a single bay window beside the front door; even these lesser buildings have four stories above the basement, and must have contained some fifteen to twenty rooms, plus several bathrooms and many ample-sized closets and storage rooms. You may be sure that some of these houses were occupied in 1900 by families with incomes of well under ten thousand dollars a year—the equivalent of forty thousand or less before taxes today. That is a handsome income, but it won't command in the nineteen-fifties anything like so much space on the finest street of a big city. How did these families manage?

Here are some of the answers. They employed a cook at perhaps $5 a week, a waitress at $3.50 a week, a laundress at $3.50 a week; the waitress and laundress shared the upstairs work. They could add the once-a-week services of a cleaning woman to come in at $1.50 a day, and also the very part-time muscle of a choreman who served several other houses, and they would still be able to keep up the house (and get most of their laundry done at home, too) at a total annual cost of perhaps $800 a year—the equivalent of say $2,400 today. Some of the clothes for the women of the family were bought ready-made

in the stores, or were made by professional dressmakers who had their own establishments, but the chances are that most of them were run up at home by dressmakers and seamstresses who came in at $3.50 to $1.50 a day. (One room would be set aside for this work; the floor would be covered with a sheet, which by the end of the day would be littered with pins and snippets of cloth; and here the dressmaker, with the aid of French fashion books and patterns, would improvise and fit the dresses.) Even when one added the cost of materials bought by the yard, clothes thus made were not expensive. This family probably owned no carriage, but got about on foot and by trolley—or, in bad weather or on festive occasions, by hired cab.

The head of the house would probably have been outraged if his daughter had even thought of taking a job: wasn't he able to support her? But on the other hand he saved money on her education. She would go to a private school, but in all probability not to college, though her brother would be sent to college as a matter of course, and perhaps would go to boarding school as well.

With these various savings such a family would be able to live a life of spacious and well-served comfort. And because the house was so large, they would accumulate more possessions—furniture, rugs, ornaments, pictures, books, china, silver, linen, and keepsakes of every sort—than their grandchildren would ever dream of burdening themselves with.

The pattern varied endlessly, of course, by communities and according to individual tastes. Even in a row of almost identical houses, the scale and manner of living were anything but standardized; in order to underline the contrast with present conditions, I have been describing the living scheme of the sort of people who preferred space and service to other comforts. Wages and prices tended to be lower in the smaller communities, and wages in particular were still lower in the South. Well-to-do families in the West were less likely to send their children to private schools than their counterparts in the East. But this was the general nature of life among the comfortably prosperous.

One should add, too, by way of a footnote, that such a way of living could be approximated by people who had much smaller incomes with which to gratify their genteel tastes. A college professor on a salary of $2,000 to $3,000, for example—roughly equivalent to $6,500 to $10,500 today before taxes—had to watch every penny and forego many satisfactions which he felt were the natural right of well-educated people, but he could afford a fair-sized house and at least one maid. In 1896, when Professor Woodrow Wilson of Princeton was trying to persuade Professor Frederick Jackson Turner to join the Princeton faculty, Mrs. Wilson set down a reasonable budget for a professor on a $3,500 salary. It included food and lights, $75 a month; rent, $42 a month; coal, $12 a month; water, $4 a month; and servants, $29 a month. This was for two servants, and was presumably figured at a rate of $3.50 a week per servant.

By dint of the most scrupulous economy it was even possible for a family with an income of only $1,500 (read perhaps $4,800 today) to play a part as a "member of society" in a town of 20,000 people, living in a modest two-story house on the best street in town, employing a full-time colored maid who came in for the day at $4 a week, entertaining graciously though modestly, and being invited to the most enviable functions of the local elite. Such a family could afford no travel at all; for us in the automobile age it is difficult to realize how circumscribed geographically was their life. But within limits they could follow, without great discomfort, the pattern of the prosperous.

Elderly people who look back today upon childhoods lived under any of the circumstances which I have just been describing sometimes regard them with nostalgia. Life seems to have been much simpler in its demands then, and certain of the amenities seem to have been much more accessible. It was easier then than now, these people feel, to maintain a sense of the identity of the family. People who live in ample houses are better able to take care of old or invalid or ineffective relatives than families with less space at their command. Indeed it is quite possible that part of the social security problem of our time—the widely expressed need for pensions, medical insurance,

unemployment insurance, etc.—arises out of the fact that many families no longer can shelter those whom they used to consider their dependents—grandma, who used to have a third-floor room, or eccentric Cousin Tom, who was tucked away in the ell. (Part of the problem today, of course, results from what inflation has done to savings, and still more of it is a product of the revolution in social concepts which this book is attempting to outline.) Even when one makes every allowance for the many good things of today which the prosperous of 1900 (and those who approximated their way of life) had to go without, one must admit that there is a basis for the nostalgia. Space and service add up to a good deal.

Yet we must remember that the Commonwealth Avenue family's ample life in their big house was made possible by the meager wages of the maids who lived in narrow rooms at the very top of the house, four flights above the level on which they did most of their interminable work; by the meager wages of dressmakers and seamstresses, of the carpenters and masons who had built the house, of the workers in factories and stores who produced and sold the goods they used; and that the space and service which were at the disposal of even the $1,500 family were likewise made possible by low wages. There is another side of the shield to be looked at.

Let us travel clear to the other end of the economic and social spectrum—by-passing on the way the majority of the Americans of 1900—and take a glance at life as it was lived on the other side of the tracks.