Chapter 15

The All-American Standard

AS WE enter upon the second half of the twentieth century and pause to take stock of our situation, let us look to see, first, what has happened to the gap that once yawned so widely between rich and poor.

In money terms—income terms—the change has not been overwhelming. There are still islands of deep poverty in the United States, and there are families and individuals by the millions who through illness, age, adversity, or marginal ability, live on the ragged edge of want. And the average represents nothing like affluence. Yet even so, what has happened over half a century, but most impressively since 1940, has been striking enough to be described by the definitely unhysterical director of research of the National Bureau of Economic Research as "one of the great social revolutions of history."

Nobody should produce figures on the current distribution of income among the American people without warning the reader that they are approximations merely. Different groups of conscientious economic investigators, working with different sets of data—such as income-tax returns, census returns, and various special surveys—produce very different calculations. Nevertheless our statistics today are far more accurate than any that could have been produced at the turn of the century, when there was no income tax, when Andrew Carnegie's income was something like twenty thousand times greater than that of the average American workman, when the slums were full of miserable immigrants living in stench and filth, and when many a thoughtful citizen shared with Edwin Markham a vague apprehension of the day when the toiler—"the emptiness of ages in his face"—would rise to judge the world.

The figures I shall cite here are based upon the data reported by a subcommittee of the Joint Committee on the Economic Report of the Congress of the United States, which dealt with the distribution of income in 1948; they are roughly parallel to the figures included in the January, 1951, report to the President by his Council of Economic Advisers, and probably come somewhere near the truth.*

According to them, in recent years some 10.6 per cent of all the families in the United States have been living on individual or family incomes of less than $1,000 a year. That is about one family in ten, trying to make out on a dismally inadequate money intake.

About 14.5 per cent have been living on incomes of between $1,000 and $2,000—approximately one family in seven.

About 20.6 per cent—say one family in five—have had incomes of between $2,000 and $3,000.

A very much larger number, about 33.6 per cent, or something like a third of all our families, have had between $3,000 and $5,000.

Only about 17.9 per cent—say one family out of seven—have had between $5,000 and $10,000.

And a very small group—about 2.9 per cent, or only one family in thirty-four—have been in the over-$10,000 bracket.

There are also a great many individuals not living in any family;

* The Council of Economic Advisers, figuring in terms of "spending units"—which may be families or individuals—say that in 1949 the lowest fifth of these spending units were scrimping on incomes of under $1,280 a year; the next fifth, on incomes of between $1,280 and $2,289; the middle fifth received incomes of between $2,290 and $3,199; the next-to-the-top fifth, incomes of between $3,200 and $4,499; the top fifth, $4,500 and over.

If you compare the Council's figures with those of the Joint Committee's subcommittee, remember that the Council's calculations are loaded downward by the fact that in the lower brackets there is a heavy concentration of single people (as distinguished from families). But you should then bear in mind another fact: that what is a deplorable income for a family of five may be a manageable one for a single person. If you will also meditate upon the infinite diversity of human circumstance, and the difficulty of drawing a clear line, even among your own acquaintances, between dependents and separate spending units, you will begin to realize why such figures give us only a very smudgy outline of the actual state of affairs.

in 1948 there were estimated to be some eight million of them in all. Their incomes follow more or less the same pattern, except that they are more numerously represented in the lowest brackets.

Now let us look for a moment at the lowest of these groups: the 10.6 per cent of the families (or thereabouts), and also the individuals, who are living on annual incomes of less than $1,000. Who are they?

They include, to begin with, some farmers and private businessmen who have simply had a bad year—have had to sell crops or goods at a loss, let us say. But some or most of these have savings enough to tide them along. (No grinding poverty there, in most cases.) They include a great number of rural poor: people working poor and worn-out land, tenants, sharecroppers. (A good many of these—we don't know how many—may be able to raise enough food for their own use so as to manage somehow on even a grimly small money income.) Another group, not quite so large, consists of old people, who in some cases have families depending on their meager savings or earnings, and in other cases are fending for themselves alone, with or without old-age relief. (One out of every four families dependent on elderly people and two out of three single elderly men and women had to get along in 1948 on less than $20 a week, said Robert L. Heilbroner in a study of American poverty in *Harper's Magazine* for June, 1950.) Others of the lowest group are victims of broken families—women, for example, who have been divorced or deserted and are unable to support themselves properly. Some are disabled people—the crippled, the mentally ill. (Many of these, to quote Mr. Heilbroner, "will be wards of the community as long as they live.") Some, probably, are chronic ne'er-do-wells, useless derelicts of society, seldom hired and then not for long. One should add that among the rural poor and the stranded old people and suchlike a disproportionate number are Negroes.

Step up into the next lowest rank of poverty, the group with family or individual incomes of between $1,000 and $2,000 a year, and we find more businessmen who have been encountering tough sledding, more marginal farmers, more old people, more divorced or deserted wives, more disabled people, more marginal laborers who have been laid off again and again, and also some members of another group: those whose wages, even in this time of plenty, have been so low as to keep them in a constant struggle with poverty. Again, among most of these groups there is an unduly large representation of Negroes.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the make-up of these two groups, comprising the lowest third of the nation, income-wise, is that —with the partial exception of the Negroes whose special situation I have discussed in Chapter 12—these are not "the masses." They are not a proletariat. They are a great number of people, very widely scattered, who are in very different sorts of trouble, economic and otherwise.

They may range all the way from the elderly man who lives so neatly and proudly that you would never guess, to see him, that he sometimes goes hungry, and the upstanding farmer whose crops for this year have been ruined by storm, to the bum who panhandles to buy himself another drink, and the moron who hasn't the wit to hold a job. Our facilities for helping these misfits and victims of adversity are far from ideal, heaven knows, but they are far more adequate than they were at the beginning of the century. And there are no such huge pools of mass misery as existed then.

During the Depression Stuart Chase once wrote something to the effect that in a fluid society there would always be people climbing up the economic staircase and others tumbling down it, but that if it was a decent society there should be some way of preventing the latter from falling all the way to the cellar. What with the helpfulness of relatives and neighbors, and the efforts of private charitable organizations, and our city and county relief organizations, we succeed nowadays in catching most of them at the ground floor.

It is when we examine the next two or three brackets—those representing incomes of $2,000 to $10,000—that we encounter the central fact of our present prosperity. This is that millions upon millions of families have risen out of the under-$2,000 class and the

$2,000-$3,000 class and have climbed a bracket or two. These fortunate families have been getting their money from a wide variety of occupations; among them have been farmers, office workers, professional people, semiskilled and skilled industrial workers; but it is the industrial workers who as a group have done best—people such as a steelworker's family who used to live on $2,500 and now are getting $4,500, or the highly skilled machine-tool operator's family who used to have $3,000 and now can spend an annual $5,500 or more. Consider a single salient statistic: that the *average* earnings of workers in all manufacturing industries in America in 1950 were $59.33 a week. During the past decade these earnings, as they climbed, have been pursued by rising prices, but on the average they have kept well ahead.

What do these figures mean in human terms? That millions of families in our industrial cities and towns, and on the farms, have been lifted from poverty or near-poverty to a status where they can enjoy what has been traditionally considered a middle-class way of life: decent clothes for all, an opportunity to buy a better automobile, install an electric refrigerator, provide the housewife with a decently attractive kitchen, go to the dentist, pay insurance premiums, and so on indefinitely.

Whether these industrial workers, farmers, and other assorted people have been the ones most deserving of such a lift in fortune is uncertain. One might have wished that intellectual workers—teachers, for example—had been among the principal beneficiaries of the new order. (They certainly have not.) Nevertheless the effect upon the rest of us of the dwindling away of what used to be the lower class has been impressive. For as the families which have moved up a bracket or two have been able to buy more goods, their expanded purchasing power has given an immense lift to business in general. America has become more prosperous by making the poor less poor.

At the top of the scale there has likewise been a striking change. The enormous lead of the well-to-do in the economic race has been considerably reduced.

Let us see what has happened to the top five per cent of the population, income-wise—roughly speaking, the people who have been living on incomes of $8,000 or over.

According to the elaborate calculations of Simon Kuznets of the National Bureau of Economic Research, during the period between the two wars the people in this comparatively well-off group were taking a very big slice of the total national income—no less than 30 per cent of it, before taxes; a little over 28 per cent after taxes. But by 1945 their slice had been narrowed from 30 to 19½ per cent before taxes, and from 28 to 17 per cent after taxes. Since 1945 this upper group has been doing a little better, relatively, but not much.

As for the top one per cent, the really well-to-do and the rich, whom we might classify very roughly indeed as the $16,000-and-over group, their share of the total national income, after taxes, had come down by 1945 from 13 per cent to 7 per cent.

A question at once arises. Have we, in reducing the slice received by these upper groups, and increasing the slice received by lower groups, simply been robbing Peter to pay Paul? (It often looks that way to Peter, especially around March 15.)

The answer is that Peter has been getting a smaller relative slice of a much larger pie. Even after one has made allowance for rising prices, one finds that the total disposable income of *all* Americans went up 74 per cent between 1929 and 1950. That is a very considerable enlargement. So that although the well-to-do and the rich have suffered *relatively*, it is much less certain that they have suffered *absolutely*.

And one might add at this point an interesting footnote. The big hike in wages that we were speaking of a moment ago has not, by and large, reduced profits. In fact when we compare the 1929 totals with the 1950 ones, we discover that total profits rose in the interval a little more sharply than total wages and salaries! To quote the apt slogan of the New England Council: "The rising tide lifts all the boats." (And why did the rich not gain heavily thereby? Because the profits were in part retained for business expansion; because dividends were more widely distributed; and also, of course, because taxes were much higher.)

Nevertheless the shift in the position of the rich has been very striking. It has been cynically said that there are no legitimately rich men any more; there are only tax-dodgers and people who live very well on expense accounts. That is by no means true. One can hold on to most of the profit from some financial deals by adroit and quite legal use of the capital-gains provisions of the federal income-tax law. Oil men have made out very affluently indeed with the advantage of the 27½ per cent allowance for depletion in the same law. And there are still some tax-exempt securities which are very useful to those whose capital is large enough to provide them with a goodly income even at low interest rates. But by and large, the big incomes are hacked to pieces by the Collector of Internal Revenue.

To offer a somewhat hypothetical example, the highest compensation listed in the public records of the Securities and Exchange Commission for the year 1950 was $626,300 earned by Charles E. Wilson, president of General Motors. Part of this was in stock and cash which he was to receive over the next five years; but let us suppose that it had all been handed to him in cash in 1950 and that he had had to pay a federal income tax on the whole $626,300, and on nothing else—without any exceptional deductions. The government would have taken some $462,000 of it, leaving him only some $164,300. That is not exactly penury, but it is not the sort of income on which one puts aside many millions.

As for those who possess large inherited fortunes, or self-acquired fortunes piled up in a day when taxes were lower, and have big establishments to keep up, and have acquired in the course of time all manner of moral obligations to less well-heeled relatives and friends—and who know furthermore that it is upon the likes of them that colleges and schools and hospitals and charities depend for sizable gifts (since the tax-dodgers, the gamblers, and even many of the worthiest of the newly prosperous recognize no such duty and opportunity)—their plight, as taxes and prices both rise, may often be summed up in the words of one of them who said, "There is no such thing as being rich; there is only being poor on a much larger scale."

Hence the affection of the rich for state and municipal bonds, which bring in a small but tax-exempt return; for the capital-gains tax, which is much lower than the regular income tax; for extra remuneration in company stock, which may appreciate in value; and for various devices by which remuneration is spread over a long term of years. (You make a thirty-year contract, let us say, which includes payment for your full services for ten years and for "advisory" services after that, so that you will still be keeping the wolf a long distance from the door long after your active services have ended.)

Hence, too, the disposition of many people whose winnings are stronger than their consciences to live as far as possible on a cash basis in the hope of eluding the eye of the tax collector—which, if their prosperity is new, they can do for a time. (The known rich, the inheritors of wealth and the executives of big corporations, can scarcely do it, for the eagle eye of the tax collector is upon them.) If I were an investigator for the Bureau of Internal Revenue, I should want to follow up people who pay for fur coats or diamonds by peeling bills off a roll, and I do not wonder that these investigators watch the papers for news of big jewel robberies.

Hence, also, the briberies and implicit briberies of tax collectors which have been such a stench in our nostrils in recent years.

Hence, furthermore, the growing practice, not only among members of the wealthiest class but among many others who consider themselves only modestly well off, of living partly on the company.

You wouldn't need to get any salary at all if everything you might need or want—housing, transportation, entertainment, for yourself and your family and guests unlimited—were provided for you without charge. Some approximation of this enviable state is apparent in the lives of many company executives. They get about by company car, when needed, or company-bought railroad accommodations, or company plane; and if the plane takes them and their guests to the Kentucky Derby or a Rose Bowl game, why that's all right too: that's "making contacts." They hold prolonged business conferences at delightful resorts, with golf or bathing for relaxation, and of course the company pays for everything. They may enjoy holidays at a company camp, or play golf at a company country club. If they want to throw a cocktail party at a fashionable hotel for a couple of hundred people, the company foots the bill for that, too: that, too, is making contacts. The proprietor of a big New York hotel described to me during World War II the lavish parties—shocking, for wartime, in their extravagance—that were thrown in his ample rooms; and I asked him whether they were paid for by individuals or by companies. "Oh, all of them by companies," he said. In the May, 1950, issue of *Flair*, John O'Hara, describing what he aptly called "the new expense-account society," spoke of the difficulty that ordinary visitors to New York had in getting tickets to *South Pacific* except at preposterous prices, and added, "There are customers at $100 a pair, and the customers are the big corporations. . . . The big corporation has first claim on everything, from restaurant tables to Pullman reservations home."

Even somewhat smaller fry can do very well on expense accounts. In the restaurant life of midtown New York, where there is a heavy trade in the prestige that goes with eating or drinking in the immediate neighborhood of movie actresses, advertising big-shots, senators, gossip columnists, successful authors, publishers, ex-champion athletes, and television comedians, there is a wide circle of men and women, some of them on modest salaries, who lunch day after day, and dine often, on expense accounts. Sometimes they are dazzling out-of-town clients; sometimes they are just taking one another to lunch. In either case the company pays. I asked the proprietors of two of the most exalted of these restaurants what proportion of their guests, from day to day, were eating and drinking on expense accounts. One said nearly half at lunch, and also for dinner in his most favored room; fewer for dinner elsewhere in the establishment. The other said three-quarters of the guests at lunch, fewer at dinner, very few in the late evening; but he guessed that at a night spot with entertainment the ratio would again be high. It is quite possible that a good many clients and prospects are really snared by such entertaining; but in any case the theory that this is how clients and prospects are snared makes for delightfully lavish living on the part of both hosts and guests for at least part of the twenty-four hours, at no cost to themselves.

The wife of the Cleveland machine-tool executive or Pittsburgh steel executive who lives so grandly away from home may sometimes find there is something a little lopsided in their family scale of living. "The company has spoiled Jim terribly," said a businessman's wife quoted by William H. Whyte, Jr., in *Life* magazine for January 7, 1952.

Even when he was only earning $7,500 a year he used to be sent to Washington all the time. He'd go down in a Pullman drawing room and, as J. R. Robinson of the General Company, take a two-room suite. Then he used to be asked by some of the company officers to a hunting and fishing lodge that the company kept in the north woods. When he went to New York, he'd entertain at Twenty-One, the Barberry Room, and the Chambord. Me, meanwhile I'd be eating a 30-cent hamburger and, when we went away together on vacation, we would have to go in our beat-up old car or borrow my sister's husband's. This taste of high life gives some of these characters delusions of grandeur.

There are many highly placed businessmen, of course, who will not take advantage of such opportunities. An executive with an income of well over two hundred thousand a year (before taxes) told me that when he was in Florida he was constantly amazed by the number of people who were obviously paying for things on a scale that he couldn't afford. As for himself, his taxes and obligations were such that it was all he could do to keep out of the red for the year. Some of the men and women he had been seeing in Florida may have enjoyed living on a minimum scale for fifty weeks and on a grand scale for two; others may have been tax-dodgers; but it is more than likely that a good many of them had discovered, and were exploiting, the current substitute for real wealth: a company that is willing to foot the bills.

II

Much more impressive, however, than the narrowing of the gap in *income* between rich and poor has been the narrowing of the gap between them in their *ways of living*.

For instance, consider the matter of personal appearance, remembering that in 1900 the frock-coated, silk-hatted banker and his Paris-gowned wife were recognizable at a distance, if they ventured among the common herd, as beings apart. Forty or fifty years ago the countryman in a metropolis was visibly a "hayseed"; the purchaser of inexpensive men's clothing was betrayed by his tight-waisted jackets and bulbous-toed shoes. Today the difference in appearance between a steelworker (or a clerk) and a high executive is hardly noticeable to the casual eye. Not long ago, at a tennis tournament, I sat two or three rows behind the chairman of the board of one of the most famous banking houses in the world, and looking at his veteran Panama hat and his ordinary-looking sack suit I wondered how many of the people about him would have guessed that he was anybody of great financial consequence. And there is many a man with an income in six figures (before taxes) and with thousands of employees who, though his suit may be a little better cut than those of most of the men about him on a New York subway train or a transcontinental plane, attracts no curious notice at all; he looks just about like everybody else.

As for women, the difference in appearance between the one who spends $5,000 a year on clothes and the one who spends only a small fraction of that is by no means as conspicuous as the difference between the woman who has good taste and the woman who lacks it. The fact that the wealthy woman has thirty dresses to the poor woman's three is not visible on the street, and the fact that her dresses are made of better materials and are better cut is observable only by the expert eye at close range. Fashion used to be decreed by Paris, imported by the most expensive dress shops, then modified by the more expensive American dress manufacturers, and finally—after an interval of six months to a year—modified still further, almost beyond recognition, by the manufacturers of cheap dresses. The process is now quicker and the differences much less sharp. Unless the poor woman is exceptionally poor—or indifferent—she like the rich woman has a permanent—probably in her case a home one. And women of every income group wear nylon stockings.

Consider for a moment a contrast with regard to those stockings. At the turn of the century silk stockings were a mark of luxury. In the year 1900, in a nation of 75 million people, only 155,000 pairs were manufactured. In the year 1949 the American sales of nylon stockings—considered by most people at least as fine as silk, if not finer—were not 155,000, but 543 *million* pairs: enough to provide every female in the country, from the age of fourteen up, with between nine and ten pairs apiece. How is that for an example of the dynamic logic of mass production producing luxury for all?

A generation ago the great mail-order houses produced different clothes for the Western farmer's wife and for the city woman in the East; today there is no such distinction, and a friend of mine whose train stopped recently at a small Oklahoma town remarked that the girls on the railroad platform there were virtually indistinguishable in appearance from girls on Madison Avenue or Michigan Boulevard. It could almost be said nowadays that the only easily visible mark of wealth which a woman can put on is a mink coat.

At this point an explanatory word is in order. The trend that I am describing is not a trend toward unirormity. Among both men and women there is a great diversity in attire. The point I am making is that the diversity is more a matter of preference, or of custom among the members of a local or vocational group, than of economic class.

Does this trend toward the breakdown of class lines in clothes seem unimportant? I do not think it is. The consciousness that one is set apart by one's appearance is a great divider; the consciousness that one is not set apart is a great remover of barriers.

Let us proceed from clothes to the equipment of daily living. As Professor H. Gordon Hayes pointed out in *Harper's* in 1947, the rich man smokes the same sort of cigarettes as the poor man, shaves with the same sort of razor, uses the same sort of telephone, vacuum cleaner, radio, and TV set, has the same sort of lighting and heating equipment in his house, and so on indefinitely. The differences between his automobile and the poor man's are minor. Essentially they have similar engines, similar fittings. In the early years of the century there was a hierarchy of automobiles. At the top were such imported cars as the Rolls-Royce, Mercedes-Benz, and Isotta Fraschini; to possess one of these was a mark of lively wealth. There was also an American aristocracy of the Pierce Arrow, Peerless, and Packard. Then came group after group, in descending scale, till you reached the homely Model-T Ford. Today, except for a few survivals such as the obstinately rectangular Rolls-Royces of the old school, and a few oddities such as the new British sports cars, which to the American eye would seem to have been constructed for exceptionally dashing midgets, there is a comparative absence of class groupings. And, although the owner of a big, brand-new car probably has a large income, he may merely be someone who adjusts a slender income to cover the costs of the machines that entrance him.

In the matter of running water and plumbing, the breakdown of distinctions has proceeded much more slowly but nevertheless steadily. There have been, it is true, some injuries to Southern mountaineers who at their first glimpse of a water closet decided that one was supposed to stand in it to wash one's feet; but today only the older and poorer tenements and dwellings in American cities and towns lack running water, bathtubs or showers, and water closets, and these conveniences are fast being installed in farmhouses the country over.

Meanwhile the servant class has almost vanished, especially in the North and West, although servants' wages have a purchasing power today from five to ten times or more greater than in 1900 (and, if the servants live in, offer an exceptional opportunity for saving). Their virtual disappearance, which has imposed upon all but a tiny fraction of American families the chores of cooking and cleaning and washing, not only marks the absorption of the immigrant proletariat of yore into general American society, in which domestic service has been regarded as humiliating, but also removes another contrast between the ways of living of the prosperous and the poor. Today the daughter of comfortably circumstanced parents had better know how to cook well—and their son, too, may find the knowledge pretty nearly essential.

What has been responsible for this convergence between the ways of living of rich and poor? The causes are numerous and complex, as we have seen in previous chapters; some are economic and political, like the income tax and trade-union pressures, or political and social, like the development of public parks and playgrounds. The dynamic logic of mass production is a leading cause, of course; it accounts for the virtual disappearance from the market of one sort or another of luxury goods, whose makers and vendors have found themselves in hopeless competition with the makers and vendors of mass-produced goods of adequate quality. For example, the tailor, bootmaker, and shirtmaker wage an uphill fight for existence. I have a perverse liking for wearing pumps with evening clothes. Of recent years they have been almost unobtainable, and a couple of years ago I had to pay through the nose for a new pair. When next I want one, which would be in about 1960, I shall not be surprised to find they are no longer made—that there has been no market for them that would justify making them. Mass production rules us; and mass production permits diversity only within limits.

Another important factor in the change has been the immense spread of education. In 1900 less than one American boy or girl out of ten of high school age was actually at high school; now over four out of five are. This means not only book learning for them; it means also a considerable social education in the ways of living of a variety of families of the community. Also the number of students at American universities, colleges, and teacher-training institutions has increased eightfold.

Still another factor in the change was World War II, which sent several million young men on foreign travels, gave the teachable ones remarkable chances to learn about other modes of life, and provided some of them—such as flying officers—with opportunities to live on a scale they had never before known. I remember during the war going to a shabby little photographer's shop to get a passport photograph taken, and hearing from the proprietor that his son was a pilot flying planes across the South Atlantic. And I wondered whether, two or three years earlier, that boy would have dreamed that he would ever have a chance to see Brazil and Liberia while enjoying the favored status of an army officer.

Nor should we overlook the immense influence of the mass-circulation magazines, the movies, the radio, and television in imposing upon Americans of all income levels the same patterns of emulation: in other words, making them want to be the same sort of people.

Take, for example, the women's magazines and the magazines of what the publishing trade calls the "shelter field," meaning those devoted to houses and gardens. For decades they have been educating millions of women, month after month, in the techniques of better living—telling them how to tend the baby, how to care for children, how to entertain guests pleasantly, how to prepare well-balanced meals, how to decorate a house prettily, how to make the lawn and garden attractive, and so on. Some of their advice may sometimes have seemed amusing to the experienced; some of the information given has been perverted to the flattery of advertisers, or has been superficial or complacent; but the net educational effect upon people whose horizons have been hemmed in by circumstances has been remarkable. And the mass-audience magazines, with their national circulations, have also done much to break down parochialism; to give the housewife in a dingy city apartment, or the boy and girl growing upon a remote farm or in a factory town, glimpses of worlds outside their routine rounds. It would be interesting to know how many people there are in the United States today who got from popular magazines their first acquaintance with, let us say, vitamins.

The advertisements in these magazines and elsewhere, furthermore, have constantly been providing incentives to work hard in order to be able to buy more goods. There are some workers, in America as elsewhere, who, when they get a wage increase, respond by taking things easier on the ground that they can now afford to relax. But to the extent that this is not the general rule—to the extent that workers keep on driving in the hope of being able to afford even more—we can point to mass advertising as one of the great incentive makers.

This form of journalistic mass education has been a purely twentieth-century phenomenon. At the turn of the century there was no American magazine with a circulation of anywhere near a million; by 1947 there were no less than 38 with circulations of over a million apiece; and the *Reader's Digest* alone, with its plethora of cheerful suggestions on how to live better, had reached by 1951 a total circulation in the United States of over 9½ millions.

Likewise the movies, which date only from about 1905, and the radio, which as an instrument for popular broadcasting dates only from 1920, have been bringing together in their audiences men, women, and children of all income levels to enjoy the same emotional excitements, and have shaped their films and programs to a common denominator of American experience.

In the movies, popular stars like Cary Grant, Humphrey Bogart, Gregory Peck, Montgomery Clift, and Farley Granger may play the parts of men who are supposed to be rich and stylish, or men who are at the end of their economic rope; but whatever role any one of them assumes, his popularity depends upon his representing a kind of charm that any young American male can appreciate and at least approach; in other words, upon his conforming to what old-fashioned people would call middle-class standards of speech and behavior. I prefer to call them classless, or all-American, for that, essentially, is what they are. The Hollywood actresses are subject to the same compulsion; they may be cast in queenly or in humble roles, but their publicity advisers know that if the public is to adore them they must be represented in the film magazines as ready to make a salad, mop the kitchen floor, and hang out the wash—after which they may be shown enjoying some lucky leisure in well-designed bathing suits beside sumptuous swimming pools.

On the radio Jack Benny, for all his big income, plays the part of a Jack Benny who lives in a modest house, owns a wheezy old car, and has for his sole servant a jack-of-all-trades helper with whom he is on the breeziest of terms. And Ozzie and Harriet Nelson find themselves in a series of comic situations which one might label as middle class, but which are common in their essence to the experience of millions of young parents and children of various income levels.

And what is the result? Both the rich man's fourteen-year-old son, who dismays his conservative parents by trying to talk like Humphrey Bogart, and the truck driver's son, who cherishes the same hope, will grow up to be more like their idols—and thus, more like one another—than they would have otherwise. And something else happens. Half a century ago a coal miner who found himself at a fashionable restaurant would not have had the faintest notion of how to behave; nowadays he has only to ask himself, "How would Gregory Peck do it?" In short, the social distance between the extremes of American society is shrinking.

Whenever I think of this change, I think of something I saw not long ago in New York City. A street was being torn up for repairs, and while the workmen were standing waiting for the arrival of new equipment, one of them, who had in his hands an iron rod presumably used for prying off manhole covers, was enjoying a little relaxation. I looked twice to see what he was doing with that rod. He was practicing a graceful golf stroke.

III

To say that the reduced resources of the rich and the trend toward an all-American standard of living have done away with Society would be an exaggeration. Social emulation is a perpetual force in human affairs; in any community, social lines tend to be drawn and snobberies to flourish; in most towns and smaller cities there is an easily discernible social pattern with a local society on top, though its composition may be forever shifting. But as one proceeds from the smaller communities to the larger ones, the pattern becomes today much more complex, multiple, and elusive. It is complicated by the variety of professional and business groupings which are to be found in a big community; and by the special hierarchies within large businesses which impose upon social relationships a set of distinctions which have little to do with the old ones based upon family, fortified by wealth (these business hierarchies I shall refer to again in the next chapter). It is affected, too, by the prestige which attends not only successful business executives regardless of their social status but also, much more dazzlingly, entertainers and other newsworthy or photogenic characters.

In the constantly growing suburbs it is confused by the rapid shift in personnel, as well as by the division of people's attention between the concerns and entertainments of the suburb and those of the city of which it is a satellite. The Sheridans, who gave such delightful parties last year, move to Detroit; the Stanleys are lovely people but go to town for their real social life; the young Edwardses are mighty attractive, but just moved out to the suburb last year when their eldest child was arriving at school age, and may move elsewhere if their income rises, and will probably go back to town anyhow when the youngest child is grown up. The pattern is kaleidoscopic, to the confusion of organized snobbery.

Society—the old Society, with a large capital S—used to center in New York. But it is in New York that the present-day pattern reaches its utmost complexity. Here the well-to-do are in heavy concentration, and few of them know more than a tiny fraction of the others. They form vaguely defined, overlapping groups. There are, for example, the bankers, brokers, and downtown lawyers and their families. There are the publishers, writers, advertising people, radio and television people—a series of groups which in turn overlap a series of Broadway ones. There are substantial business groups operating in wholesale and retail trade. There are the people associated with churches of various denominations—the local Catholics forming an exceptionally distinct set, though it overlaps those whose primary concern is with politics. There are ties of acquaintance between men and women connected with the backing of different sorts of charitable and public-service organizations. There are further ties between New Yorkers who have come from one part of the country or another, or whose summer and week-end life brings them together in local communities on Long Island or in Connecticut or New Jersey or elsewhere. Each of the arts has its devotees and supporters, linked loosely by mutual acquaintance. In some of these areas of interest Jews intermingle with non-Jews; in others, Jews are quite separate. At any dinner party or cocktail party one is likely to meet some people of one's own group along with others, probably previously unknown to one, whose association with the host and hostess has been based upon some other ties of common interest.

To say that in this variegated scene Society is no more would be by no means correct. There are many families of noteworthy lineage and substantial means to whom such a statement would seem preposterous. But that this Society still exists is pretty nearly their secret.

Its assemblies and coming-out parties attract limited public attention. It still offers, for a select number of debutantes, a brief and furious round of social activity, and tries to provide for them the most carefully selected male companionship—the selective process being somewhat vitiated by the necessity of importing for the larger festivities considerable numbers of students, not so scrupulously chosen, from such nests of the young elect as New Haven and Princeton. But as the young men and women grow older, their other interests make such claim upon their time and attention that the status of most of them as members of Society becomes somewhat blurred. And though the more loyal of the elders of Society might turn up their noses at that less ancient emulative group known as Café Society, and at the glare of publicity which surrounds Tallulah Bankhead or Joe DiMaggio or Van Johnson, the fact remains that many of their progeny would rank membership in the Knickerbocker or the Links or the Brook or the Colony Club below membership in the group favorably known to the attendants at the Stork Club or Twenty-One. And the society columns tend to concern themselves largely with the café crowd. One of the things that gave glitter to Society in the old days was that its festivities were brilliantly costly; nowadays a big corporation can throw a party at the Waldorf which few private families could afford. In short, to the extent that Society exists, it is virtually unknown to the general public, and unnoticed.

The advertisers in their turn have taken heed of the change. "It is a sign of our times," Agnes Rogers wrote in 1949, "that glamour is now generally advertised as attainable by all American women, and as very easy to come by—you buy it in a jar. Few manufacturers feel today that to sell their products they must make women identify themselves with the wealthy or socially elect. The snob appeal has become less potent than the appeal of glamour arrived at through purchase of the right products and through careful schooling in their appropriate use. Anybody can have it, whatever her background, for a little money and some effort. Glamour has been democratized."

As for the great houses of an earlier day, those mighty castles in which the rich and fashionable lived on a princely scale, they too have mostly succumbed to the estate tax and the supertax. Some are still occupied, especially in Newport, where the old guard of the socially elect stubbornly try to conduct themselves as if nothing much had happened. But in New York the most famous of the mansions that once made Fifth Avenue the avenue of millionaires —such as those of William H., William K., and Cornelius Vanderbilt—have been razed to make way for business buildings or apartment houses. In Newport itself, Ochre Court is a Catholic college and The Breakers is leased year by year for use as a museum, where one may see if one wishes what it was like to be a Vanderbilt in the grand days. The Frederick W. Vanderbilt house at Hyde Park is likewise a museum. At Lenox, the Henry White house is an inn. Outside Philadelphia, Whitemarsh Hall, the 130-room E. T. Stotesbury house, is a research center for Pennsalt—the Pennsylvania Salt Manufacturing Company. At Palm Beach, the Flagler mansion is part of the Whitehall Hotel. Others have become nunneries, boys' and girls' boarding schools, hospital institutions. And nothing like them has been built for a good many years, not only because of the colossal expense of upkeep at present labor costs, but also because the taste of the prosperous today is for a less princely—or pseudo-princely—kind of living.

One views the passing of these private palaces with mixed feelings. There always tended to be something bogus about the grandeur of the most imitatively European of them. One thinks of the rise in labor costs that has made them so ruinously difficult to maintain today, and reflects that it has brought new comfort and opportunity to a host of men and women. One grants that there is a subtle affront to human dignity in the accumulation of great staffs of personal attendants and flunkies. And yet there was a glitter about some of these great houses that one misses in the less stratified community of today.

Last summer I went through one of the lesser of them—lesser in terms of the number of people it once housed, for it had no more than eight or ten master bedrooms, but sumptuous in the way of life that had once flourished there. It stood vacant, waiting for a purchaser. The tall columns of its portico stood on stucco bases now cracked and chipping away. The wooden columns of a side porch were cracked, the old paint peeling from them. The garden outside had grown up to weeds; the view over a smiling valley was partly cut off by rising undergrowth. Inside the house, vandals had ripped off a telephone box here, left piles of litter there in their hunt for valuable loot. The carved ceiling of the great central hall—three stories high, some sixty feet long—had partly come away as the result of a leak in the roof; there were little heaps of fallen plaster on the hardwood floor. One could scarcely believe that the drawing room and dining room had once been lit of an evening only by scores of candles as men and women in evening clothes gathered in a ritual strange in its graceful formality to the folkways of the present. And one wondered whether the passing of such a way of life was the price of democracy, and whether that price was inconsiderable or high.

IV

Today the cult of informality is pervasive. Its advance has been so long-continued that one would momentarily expect a reaction toward elegance; but for every step taken in the direction of formality, two steps are presently taken in the direction of an easier code of manners.

Look at the male American of today. The cutaway coat is obsolescent, except for borrowed or rented wear at weddings. (At a recent wedding I noted that one of the duties of the groom and best man was to attend to the business of renting cutaways for the ushers, with no more embarrassment than would attend the hiring of a caterer to serve the wedding breakfast.) The tail coat is worn only by a very few of the well-heeled young, at a very few parties; the elder citizen of means seldom takes out of mothballs that full dress suit that he acquired in 1926. The dinner coat is worn less and less, and the number of families whose males customarily dress for dinner has dwindled to the vanishing point. The hard collar has likewise almost completely departed. The waistcoat (or vest, if you prefer) is going; if a man under forty wears one he is marked as conservatively inclined in dress. Hats of any sort are in gradual retreat, especially in summer. As for the hard straw hat, it is virtually a period piece—worn chiefly by elderly gentlemen with unalterable habits, or by young bloods with a zest for the picturesquely antique. And in a recent survey by the National Office Management Association, three quarters of the companies responding to questions about office rules said they allowed men employees to remove their coats at any time, an additional 13 per cent allowed this in warm weather only, and over 58 per cent allowed sports shirts.

Sports attire is gradually on the way in, ranging from the separate tweed jacket and flannel or khaki slacks to the fancy-patterned shirt and slacks favored in California and Florida. Work clothes of various sorts tend likewise to be popular for easy-going wear. Young men shun neckties except as occasional concessions to formality, and the standard costume of an undergraduate out for a day with a girl at a girls' college is likely to be a shirt or T-shirt and slacks, with wool socks and unpolished shoes. If he wishes to follow the very strictest code of aristocratic propriety, he may insist upon wearing a plain white or plain blue shirt with buttoned-down collar (left open, of course) rather than anything of Hawaiian aspect, and dingy white shoes rather than dingy brown ones; but he won't get into a regular two-piece suit, with necktie, until dinner. And on many a campus the two-piece suit plays today almost, though not quite, the part that the dinner coat played in the early years of the century: it is what one wears on a formal occasion. Otherwise one is happy in khaki slacks and a T-shirt, sports shirt, sweater, lumberman's shirt, or windbreaker, the combination chosen depending on the weather. So steady is the campaign of attrition against the formerly orthodox male costume, in fact, that one suspects that its one-hundred-and-twenty-five-year reign may be approaching its end.

Among women the trend toward informality of attire is not so clearly defined. Yet it is amusing to note with what enthusiasm the supposedly omnipotent moguls of the dress trade and the advertising trade decree from time to time the return of elegance, and how widely spaced and brief are their triumphs; while the majority of the younger women, and many older ones too, go hatless all year round, go stockingless in summer, and wear flat-heeled loafers or ballet shoes and peasant kerchiefs.

This informality is well suited to the prevalent code of easy-going companionship between the sexes. Husbands and wives spend more time in one another's company than they used to; with cooking and dishwashing and baby-tending to share, and with the high cost of labor virtually forcing the husband to make a hobby of amateur cabinet-making and of painting the kitchen and repairing the household equipment, they could hardly avoid this even if they chose, and there is not much occasion to dress up for one another. With the steady spread of co-education, boys and girls become accustomed to seeing the opposite sex at work as well as at play, and costume themselves accordingly. Men's clubs succumb one by one to a demand for ladies' dining rooms, or even for the admission of females to club precincts sacred in earlier days to the male; no one appears to fear that feminine eyes or ears will be offended by anything brutish, and there is a general feeling that it is good fun to have the other sex around. In this matter there is, of course, a sharp divergence between the custom of one community or social group and another. In general, the more sophisticated the group, the less do the men and women tend to separate to enjoy themselves. But that the general trend is toward a more relaxed companionship seems beyond a doubt.

Gradually, as servants become rarities, the dinner party at which guests are seated about a table is supplanted by casserole entertaining, buffet style. The hour for dinner becomes more elastic as the hostess waits until the last guest has arrived before putting the finishing touches on the meal—with the result that those who were so injudicious as to come at the hour appointed may have had an unduly prolonged bout with the cocktails. Little by little the formal introduction, in which the identity of Mr. Jones is made known to Miss Robinson, gives way to an introduction of Henry Jones to Barbara Robinson; to which, in all but a few remaining islands of social rigidity, he may respond with, "Hi, Barbara." I have heard a waiter at a metropolitan restaurant with three- and four- and five-dollar entrees on its à la carte bill of fare put diners at their ease with the greeting, "What'll it be, folks?" Rare is the dance given in a private house; and though it is possible to take a group of young people to dance at a hotel or night club, such entertainment is likely to be so crowded and expensive that when the young people are on their own they are likely to go to a roadside tavern, where they can drink beer or soft drinks, dance, play the jukebox, and discuss life at a reasonable cost in a congenially relaxed atmosphere. Square-dancing, once the sport of yokels, enjoys high popularity among various economic groups, and the more rustic and romping it is, the better they like it. "Come in your blue jeans," said the invitation to boys to attend a recent square dance at a highly select girls' school in New York. On a Saturday, in a suburb, one will occasionally see a Catholic girl headed for confession in blue jeans with a fancy hat—the only one she owns. In aspect after aspect of American life, ceremony appears to be in continuous retreat.

Why? Primarily, perhaps, because informality seems to people to be democratic, unpretentious, friendly. Among the sons and daughters of the rich there is a vague, surviving guilt complex: an embarrassed consciousness that during the Depression great numbers of people were resentful of their way of life and suspicious of the origin of the funds that made it possible. This guilt complex takes many forms, and one of them is a preference for the sort of entertainment which won't seem to involve putting on airs. The same is true in some degree of many people in the upper echelons of a business organization: so aware are they of the distrust of them which unionism fosters that they go out of their way, at a company party, to show that they have no princely delusions. Among large numbers of people in other income brackets there is, perhaps, a sort of mystic satisfaction in what appear to be democratic ways; among others there is simply a feeling that formality is a big bore, and outdated, and they are relieved that they don't have to make the effort.

Whatever one's view of the cult of informality, it is distinctly a manifestation of the all-American standard of living and behavior.