



October, 1958

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An ex-socialite, who dared to be herself, reveals the emotional and intellectual sterility of the world she left behind



The low state of high society

by **CATHY O'BRIEN**

as told to Robert J. Levin

RECENTLY A social register family I know became upset over the behavior of their youngest daughter. Like all well-bred young ladies who are being prepared to take their places among America's social elite, she had been given piano lessons. Unlike the other girls, however, she enjoyed playing and practiced diligently.

Her parents grew alarmed. The girl's love of music was clearly setting her apart from the rest of her pre-debutante set—and so the parents called in a psychiatrist to find out what was wrong with her.

In high society today no one dares to be different. No one even dares be himself. As a result, socialites are lost souls.

If you are born into the social world, as I was (my ancestors include a signer of the Declaration of Independence, an adjutant to General George Washington, and the vice-president of the Confederacy during the Civil War), you are taught from the outset to conform to rigid but sterile standards.

Little matters except appearances. Whether a person is emotionally and intellectually alive or dead is of less

importance than the fact that she is seen in the right places at the right time, wearing the proper clothes. No girl would dream of attending a country club cocktail party, for example, unless she wore the customary "uniform": black dress, one-pearl earrings and a single strand of pearls. Two strands would be considered vulgar.

What makes this sad is that those girls who meekly live out their lives in this dull social world dread what normal girls desire—the exciting sense of their own uniqueness.

So they hide behind impersonal black dresses or dark gray suits in the winter, and plain cotton or linen dresses in the summer. These clothes must never seem brand new.

This training isn't easily overcome. I felt miserable when I went to the opening night of the Jean Anouilh play, *The Waltz of the Torreadors*, wearing a flaming red chifon dress with a halter neckline. Everyone around me wore conventionally subdued clothes, and I simply didn't have the courage to remove my coat.

LIFE for America's so-called social aristocrats is colorless and uninspired. Our education, now that I look back at it, seems to have produced a frightening number of properly mannered, emotionally passive and intellectually sterile young snobs. I wasn't aware of this at first, of course, for I didn't know there was any other way to live. As a child, I associated only with children who came from homes like my own. We all moved together along the time-honored line: Lincoln School,

Marymount School, Finch Junior College.

What saved me was my interest in drama and art. I majored in these subjects at Finch, despite my father's strong objections. When he warned that he might cut off my allowance, I got a job, under an assumed name, in the chorus line of New York's Copacabana nightclub. I planned to use my earnings to continue my dramatic studies.

But I never danced a step at the Copacabana. My father surrendered.

As I explored the world of the theater, the world of high society became more and more insipid. Even conversations with my old friends grew strained. They talked of nothing except the clubs they belonged to, the date and place of their "coming out," or social events at Newport, Southampton or Palm Beach. Their activities rarely extended beyond dancing or playing bridge, canasta, golf or tennis.

Life, for them, was orderly and predictable. Eventually a "proper" marriage would be maneuvered by their parents, and a wedding would follow. Love? I never heard *anyone* in my circle speak of being in love.

A boy I'd known for many years once confided to me how he felt about his recent bride. "Of all the people I've ever met," he said, "I like her best."

And how many times have I heard the remark that a particular couple obviously had a good marriage "because they get on well together." This, apparently, is all young socialites can hope for.

When I married, I was very much in love. But life in our circle proved

unbearably dull, and soon this affected our marriage.

We lived in an attractive East Side apartment in Manhattan and spent our summers in Southampton. In New York, I would arise about 10 A.M., eat a quick breakfast, and instruct the maid on the day's menu. I had next to no domestic work to do myself. Then I would be off for a visit with my family, have lunch at the Colony or some other expensive restaurant, sit around talking with friends until late afternoon, and finally put in an appearance at a committee meeting—for the New York Infirmary, perhaps, or Boys' Towns of Italy.

Occasionally, to everyone's surprise, we actually planned something worthwhile. But a more characteristic session would see us killing time gossiping, or—much more exciting—politely fighting like mad to be chosen to pose for publicity photographs that would be published in local newspapers to promote these charities.

Afterward, I might have dinner at home, or at a private club like The Lynx. Then a game of bridge at someone's apartment would bring the limp day to an end. Several nights a week I either dined alone or with friends, since my husband was attending club meetings, where the men, having happily shed their wives, bolstered their egos with drinks and spent endless hours debating whether to admit a new candidate or planning a social function that would be precisely the same as the one held the previous year.

On winter weekends, after sleeping late, my husband and I hopped

from one party to another, managing somehow to avoid seeing each other almost all the while. During spring and summer we would weekend out of town, but the routine never varied. Except for eating, almost everything I did was unnecessary and without meaning.

On the rare occasions when I discussed this with intimate friends before obtaining my divorce, they invariably replied that I was lucky to "get along" with my husband. They claimed that being bored, after all, was better than being unhappy.

Behind such a depressing point of view lies a subject that is infrequently discussed: sexual love. The idea that the pulse of passion may be part of the very pulse of life fills socialites with dismay. So they deny it by learning to neutralize their emotions.

This is particularly damaging to the male. He becomes passive and withdrawn, incapable of asserting himself. Seldom does he succeed in business. It must be more than coincidence that in social circles I have met a disproportionate number of men who stammer or stutter, who constantly ask a girl what she wants to do instead of making suggestions themselves, and who have never learned to lead their partner firmly on the dance floor.

Sex, for them, becomes an incident, not a relationship. As might be expected, they often seek satisfaction in a fling with a pick-up, not so much because this can be arranged more easily but because they can use their money and social prestige as proof of superiority. Thus they can think of themselves as *men*.

I know one man, for instance, who



Cathy reigns as Queen of the Irish Linen Show (right) and chats with actor Bill Holden (left) at movie premiere. Since making her break with the past, she has found a new life as an actress.



lives with his aged but domineering mother. She supports him financially and has kept him from marrying. But she permits him to pay a different call girl to stay with him each summer, and this apparently keeps Junior—who is almost 50—quite happy.

If sex is considered something mechanical, and love is a passion to be feared, what other basis for marriage remains except convenience? Many a high society wedding has coupled a man and woman who have nothing in common except their names in the Social Register. No deep feelings are invested in such marriages; and divorce, instead of being a painful experience, is often considered as simply the next logical step. Almost everyone I know has had at least one divorce. Interestingly enough, in most of the second marriages, each partner chose a mate outside the Social Register.

This represents more, however, than just a reaction. For 30 years or more, two separate groups have been trying, rather successfully, to break down Old Guard resistance and enter the supposedly charmed circle. One group consists primarily of men, who buy their way in; the second consists of women, who marry their way in.

The men are wealthy business tycoons, generally prodded on by their wives and daughters. From what I have observed, though, the men themselves are equally eager to belong. Newspapers recently headlined the suicide of one such magnate, who squandered a fortune trying to make the grade and yet was never really accepted by the social world.

When these intruders do succeed, it is because the Old Guard is financially strapped and must sell villas at Palm Beach or Newport, and memberships in exclusive clubs—all of

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which may lead even to listings in the Social Register itself.

The army of invading women includes many types: models, singers, dancers, actresses—and even call girls, junior grade. What they have in common is beauty and a willingness to barter it. Many come equipped with ambitious mothers, and more than a few pay press agents to trumpet their virtues.

Within the past ten years, these girls have made headway. Originally they set their sights on the debutante cotillions, at which young ladies with a proper background were presented to society. The newcomers, who lacked this background, offered beauty and glamor as substitutes. Their pictures decorated newspapers, they themselves decorated resorts, clubs and charity balls, and they snapped up eligible bachelors.

Each year more and more glamor girls elbowed their way into the cotillion until finally they swamped the true debutantes and transformed the affair into a commercial farce.

I remember a strikingly beautiful girl who made a lavish debut several years ago. Some months later the truth was out: her father owned a small store in some suburb, her unconcealed charms were displayed in a Broadway musical, and her bills were paid by a well-heeled, middle-aged admirer.

Another method was used by someone whose audacity won my

grudging admiration. An attractive girl, she dressed magnificently and frequented Southampton, one summer, seeking company among married men whose wives were away.

An engineered introduction led to the conquest of a prominent socialite—and then the girl got what she wanted: not money, not mink, but a season's membership in an exclusive club. Once she possessed this, the outcome was inevitable. I read of her marriage, not long afterward, to a wealthy blueblood.

A measure of the extent to which outsiders have infiltrated the Old Guard ranks can be found in classes at a fashionable New York private school. Twenty years ago, the only children who attended were the offspring of high society families, being groomed for their debuts. Today, however, less than five percent of the enrollment has any such standing.

Whether this is for the better or not, I can't judge. But there is one thing that seems ominous. In a class of 30 girls, of which I have personal knowledge, *only two* still have their original parents.

It strikes me that in today's mongrelized social world, the relationship between parents and children has steadily deteriorated. Mothers, for example, apparently think it would be degrading if they went to pick up their youngsters at school. Even when the family is hard pressed for money, someone — doorman,

cabdriver or boy—is paid to call for the children.

Years ago, rarely did a wealthy family do without a governess. She was a woman of culture and breeding, and she contributed a great deal to the upbringing of the children entrusted to her care. Often she held the position for a lifetime and thus helped stabilize the family.

In today's topsy-turvy world, however, all this is reversed. Families seek governesses because having one adds to their prestige. But since they cannot afford to pay adequate salaries, they are forced to hire incompetent and unreliable women. The children experience a succession of such individuals, from whom they learn little and who leave them emotionally upset.

I know of one case where this hiring and firing was no accident. The mother, as neurotic as they come, kept rotating governesses so that her only child wouldn't form any rival attachments.

High society has been slipping downhill, in my opinion, for 30 years; and it hasn't much further to go. The choices before the Old Guard now are plain. They can stay put at Southampton and Palm Beach, at Newport and Tuxedo Park, throwing in the sponge and letting the invaders rule the social realm. Or they can retreat to isolated spots, safe from intruders and

out of touch with the rest of the world.

Or they can counterattack. They can take stock of their talents, as their pioneer ancestors once did, and plunge back into the mainstream of American life. They can learn to live instead of vegetating. They can start a new high society, basing it not on birth or money but on talent and ability.

As for myself, I knew that I could no longer live in the smothering atmosphere of what passes for society today. Since making the break, I have appeared in summer theater plays, been on television innumerable times (including a show of my own that originated in Baltimore), and I hope to make my Broadway debut in a drama called *Celia*.

These accomplishments please me; but what sets me singing is something else. It is the conviction that I am doing worthwhile and constructive work. That I am capable of standing on my own two feet. From this I can draw renewed strength and courage and confidence—emotions I never felt in the world I left behind.

I'm not likely to forget this difference. I'm reminded of it whenever I observe today's socialites at firsthand. The contrast seems most striking at Southampton. You'd have more fun at Coney Island. Take it from me—I know.

