



The
**HUSBAND
HUNTERS**

Social Climbing in
London and New York

ANNE DE COURCY

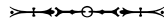
THE HUSBAND HUNTERS

SOCIAL CLIMBING IN
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Anne de Courcy

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INTRODUCTION



For me, one of Edith Wharton's most intriguing novels is *The Buccaneers* – the story of four American girls, not in the 'right set' in New York, who come to England and marry into the peerage. 'The St George girls were beautiful, and their parents rich, yet fashionable New York had rejected them,' says Wharton in her book. 'It was bitter to be left out of all the most exclusive entertainments, to have not a single invitation to Newport, to be unbidden to the Opera on the fashionable nights,' thought the elder girl, Virginia St George; and still more did this ostracism rankle with her mother, desperate to see her daughters make good matches.

So when the suggestion was made of a London season, with the aid of one or two good contacts, it was eagerly taken up by Mrs St George. It was not long before her daughters' looks, beautiful clothes, confident American naturalness and sense of fun had landed them their titled catches.

Wharton, herself born into this 'right set', based her novels on what she saw around her, from personalities to places, from clothes to customs, so that they are virtually a biography of the times. In the period between 1870 and 1914 – Wharton was twenty in 1880 – 454 American girls married titled Europeans. One hundred were to British aristocrats – sixty to eldest sons, forty to younger sons, six to dukes, with 1895 the peak year for such marriages. By any standards, this was a staggering number.

It was a real invasion, and recognised as such. So well known was it that when Sir William Gordon-Cumming spotted Leonie Jerome, the youngest of the Jerome sisters, walking in Hyde Park on her first visit to London in 1882, he went up to her and said:

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‘Over here husband-hunting?’ The year before, the *Punch Almanack* had featured a group of ‘New York Millionairesses’ about to start for Europe, shown studying ‘not Murray and Baedeker – oh dear no! – but Burke and Debrett’, making notes of all unmarried peers and bemoaning that photographs are not published as well as ages and titles. There was even a magazine to help them do this: *Titled Americans* was a New York quarterly, with a list of eligible single noblemen at the back.

For me, the interesting thing was not so much that they made these marriages, as why. Why should so many of these young women troop across the Atlantic when there were plenty of good-looking and much wealthier young men in America (where males still outnumbered females)? The obvious answer, that it was a case of cash for coronets, is from many points of view too simplistic. And what were the social and economic factors behind these marriages that made such a lasting impact on British society?

There was, on the face of it, no reason why American girls, spoiled and cosseted in their own country, should wish to spend the rest of their lives far from their families and the friends they had grown up with, plunging into marriages that surrounded them with strangers, reduced them immediately to the property of a man whose right to control their lives and money was unquestioned, and whose country was the embodiment of much that their background had taught them to disapprove of.

After all, it was only just over a hundred years since the fiercely fought War of Independence that had created the United States and given birth to its Constitution. America had supposedly freed itself from the idea of hereditary aristocrats; the Republican credo of its citizens’ equality was trumpeted forth at every opportunity – often contrasted with the effete and decadence of these scions of the Old World – and yet here were its daughters turning eagerly towards them. It was the meeting of a whole set of diametrically opposed ethics.

The first surprise to me was that ‘the husband-hunters’, as they quickly became known, were often the mothers rather than the daughters. Some girls, it is true, had a firm idea that they wanted

to marry an English aristocrat, and led the way towards their potential target, but more often than not it was the mothers who took this decision.

Some brought their daughters over to Europe in their early teens, sometimes because it was less embarrassing to say: 'I'm educating my daughter in France,' than 'Mrs Astor hasn't asked me to her ball,' sometimes to put a gloss on them so that these girls would shine more brightly in the marriage market when they returned to New York, and sometimes to establish a foothold so that if New York turned its back on their daughter when she made her *début*, she could be taken back to Europe and then, with the right connections and enough money, filtered into English society where, it was hoped, she would make a brilliant match.

Modern women might find it difficult to understand just how much of a role the mother of a marriageable girl played in finding her daughter a spouse. Although love was desirable, it did not play nearly such a large part in the mating game as it does today – far more important were other factors such as family background, money, probity and general 'suitability'. Thus many of these marriages were just as much a creation of the American mother as of the American daughter. For often, as I show in this book, it was the American mother who was the true husband-hunter, who took the initiative in seeking a match for her daughter in the Old World, rather than an adventurous daughter suggesting a trip to Europe – and who realised that a peeress daughter would be the key that allowed her *mamma* to unlock the gates of society back home. Even Mrs Astor would not refuse admittance to the mother-in-law of an earl. *Punch*, always a mirror of its times, has an 1890s cartoon of an American mother holding her daughter on a leash so that she has no option but to marry the insignificant little peer beside her as both stand in front of the altar.

Another aspect that emerged equally strongly from my research was the clash between the matriarchal society of the US and the patriarchal society of England, often resulting in a rude shock for the American bride, who had grown up seeing her mother

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do more or less what she wanted, paid for by an unquestioning husband, and who expected to do the same. For American upper-class society was run by women, for women; whereas in England it was fitted around the demands and expectations of male lives. Women may have fulfilled a vital role, but it was a secondary one – secondary to the demands of husband, estate, Parliament and sport.

The alien horde, as such girls were sometimes dubbed, was eagerly welcomed by some, in the main those who hoped to profit by it, while others felt that much of English life was being polluted. ‘Seadown – marry Seadown?’ says the baronet Sir Helmsley Thwarte in horror when his son Guy tells him that Lord Seadown is interested in the eldest St George girl. ‘There won’t be a family in England without that poison in their veins.’

Looking at it from the other side: why should a peer marry one of these girls who came from a culture so different from the one in which he had been brought up? Again, money was the obvious answer; again, it was not quite as simple as that. Today, no one would raise an eyebrow if a peer married an American girl. Then – for the peer – it was a completely different matter. ‘Society’ was a closed circle of around 1,500–2,000 families, most linked through marriage or cousinage. ‘You were either in it or outside it,’ said the critic and novelist George Slythe Street. And to stay in it, you married within it.

For centuries, the patriarchs of these families, almost invariably peers, owned most of Britain and, because of the system of primogeniture – their heirs were always the eldest son or the eldest son of the nearest male relative – the great estates remained largely intact. Not only that; through the rents raised from them or the produce of the farms on them, their owners were assured of an income that was sizeable to vast. All they had to do was pick a suitable bride from a similar family; although she might inherit comparatively little, she had the necessary breeding and training in the ways of a large house and the rest would be supplied by her bridegroom’s large income.

Producing these incomes were the agricultural poor, who

worked the land and for whom life was constant hard labour. Even children helped, lifting potatoes, scaring crows, milking cows or leading horses. 'When I was ten I left school to work on a farm for £3 a year,' wrote Tom Mullins in 1873. 'Before bridges were built we often had difficulty getting our horses and wagons across flooded streams. Often my clothes were quite wet when I took them off at night and still wet when I put them on again next morning. On Sundays I walked ten miles to have dinner with my parents, and then walked ten miles back to start milking.'

Then, towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was an irreversible change in the settled order of things. From around 1873 England, and especially its countryside, suffered what became known as the Long Depression, accounted for by several interlocking factors. It began with a series of appalling harvests for seven or eight years from 1873 to the end of the decade, accompanied by a drift from the land to towns and cities,* partly because of increasing industrialisation, partly because of the dwindling number of agricultural jobs. Local trade, which had relied on the custom of these workers, migrated from the small market towns to the larger county towns, putting many small traders like bakers or haberdashers out of business, while those that were left, now in a more commanding position, began to bargain, so that landlords were forced to reduce the rents they charged tenant farmers.

Contemporaneous with the poor harvests and loss of labour on the land came a dramatic fall in the price of grain. Vast fields of wheat now waved on the prairies of America, with different types grown to extend harvest time. Early settlers from Minnesota, Ontario and Wisconsin brought spring wheat; in the Central Great Plains the original bread-grain crop, soft winter wheat, was grown, to be harvested in summer; with Turkey red wheat, brought to central Kansas in the early 1870s by German Mennonite immigrants from southern Russia, in the autumn. When refrigeration came (in about 1870), farmers who had relied on

* By 1871, 65 per cent of the population was urban.

livestock were also hit, as this meant that meat could be shipped from the great meat-producing countries like North and South America, and Australia. During those twenty years of change, the price of English wheat and barley fell by half – and landowners' incomes dropped like stones.

'That summer [1879] was followed by a severe winter,' wrote Mary Elizabeth Lucy, *châtelaine* of Charlecote in Warwickshire, of one of the decade's dreadful harvests. 'The Avon rose to such a height covering the marble vases on the lower steps of the terrace that Spencer lost all his meadow hay to the value of £700. The previous year too all the hay in the Place Meadow was carried away by a flood and for the last three years the harvest had been so bad that farmers were unable to pay their rent and many had thrown up their farms: Spencer had five in Hampton Lucy parish on his hands. Many of his tenants were asking for a reduction of rent, which he was obliged to grant for fear of having more farms on his hands.

'The times for agriculture are too sad! Spencer's income was reduced by more than half.'

So parlous had the state of agriculture become that in 1885 Joseph Chamberlain, then President of the Board of Trade, said that 'almost universally throughout England and Scotland agriculture has become a ruinous occupation'.

As for the aristocrats to whom this land belonged, many simply watched helplessly as their estates became burdened with debt and their houses began to crumble around them: the idea of earning a living was not something they could comprehend. They were not educated to work, they had no family business to go into (to be 'in trade' was to be outside society) – in short, they could not change their ways.

'Behind him was the English squirearchy, generations of it stretching back, his justification for the only sort of life he knew how to live,' wrote Mary Elizabeth Lucy of her son. 'When unpaid bills mounted he sold [his father's] collection of paintings piecemeal. The houses in London, taken in order to give the girls a chance to find husbands, the hunters, the shooting parties, the grouse moors in Scotland – all these were looked on

as necessities; old masters were expendable.’ For some of these men, an American wife, with her dowry of dollars, was a lifeline.

On the other side of the Atlantic strikingly different factors were at work, hinging largely on the idea of élitism. Where British society had its natural pecking order, its pinnacle being the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII), no such system operated in the US; there was therefore a constant struggle not only over acceptance but also pre-eminence. It was a class system based on exclusion, but none the less rigorous for that.

For generations New York society had been run by the ‘Knickerbockers’ – descendants of the original Dutch and English founders. Although rich, they lived quietly, managing their affairs and largely seeing only each other. No outsider was let in. Then came the great fortunes, made through speculation, mining, railways, shipping and banking, and, with them, the spending of this wealth to such an extent that it almost became a *métier* (something that in many ways resonates today). The Gilded Age was born.

The wives of these men, who had the same enterprising, energetic, winner-takes-all spirit as their husbands, battled for supremacy in salon and ballroom, their ambition not simply to outdo each other but to climb over the stockade into that inner circle where the absolute élite had their being. Wharton’s Mrs St George was possessed by an ‘almost religious zeal . . . to fight for entry into the circle of Knickerbocker families whom she revered as “aristocracy” superior to any in the Old World’. For such women, money was of no avail: they had to find another way in.

Often, their daughters – married to a peer willingly, cajoled or forced to do so – were their ultimate weapon. For once a daughter had become Lady XX, the respect for a title among New York’s inner circle ensured that she would now be welcomed by them . . . and with her came her mother, who had now achieved her objective: she was ‘in society’.

As Edith Wharton put it near the end of *The Buccaneers*, ‘Mrs Elmsworth, Mrs St George and Mrs Closson had long since taken

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for granted their acceptance . . . by the best New York society as mothers of daughters who had married severally, a duke, an earl who would become a marquis, a courtesy lord who was the earl's brother, a prominent young British statesman widely regarded as a future Prime Minister . . . ?

What I aim to do here is to examine the reasons behind this social phenomenon; and its lasting impact on British life.

Of the 'real' 'buccaneers', several rose to the topmost peaks of British society while others, through their marriages, enabled their families to enter the much more exclusive circle of American society – then almost impenetrable to those whom its leader, Mrs Astor, chose not to know. Much has been written about a few of them, such as Consuelo Vanderbilt, who became the unhappy Duchess of Marlborough, bringing with her an enormous dowry that would today be worth around \$100 million. But there were many others who, though lesser known, achieved their titled goal – and, sometimes, even love.

So let me introduce the girls whose stories I shall be tracing here, their mothers and the major figures in their backgrounds. The one who could be called the pioneer of these Gilded Age brides was the stunningly gorgeous Jennie Jerome, daughter of 'the King of Wall Street', financier Leonard Jerome. She married Lord Randolph Churchill and became the mother of Winston Churchill.

She came from a New York where the pre-eminent family was the Astors, whose fortunes had been founded three generations earlier by John Jacob Astor, who began by trading in furs. By the time Caroline Schermerhorn Astor (*the Mrs Astor*, as she was always known), from an 'old New York' family, had married John Jacob's grandson William Backhouse Astor Jnr, and begun to reign over New York society, the Astors were primarily property-owners and landlords, their immense wealth transmuted into 'old money' by the passage of time. Carrie, Caroline's youngest daughter, later married Orme Wilson, thus raising him to Astor heights.

Helping to keep Caroline on her throne, and laying down

the rules that governed her kingdom, was Ward McAllister, self-created social arbiter.

Caroline Astor's brother-in-law, her husband's older brother John Jacob Astor III, had one son, William Waldorf Astor who, because he was descended from the senior branch of the family, believed that his wife Mamie should be the reigning queen. Finally, after years of unsuccessful and increasingly bitter struggle with his aunt Caroline to achieve this, he gave up and left for England, where he became a British citizen and was later raised to the peerage.

On the other side of the fence surrounding the *élite* was an equally famous and almost as rich family, the Vanderbilts. The man who had made them wealthy was still very much alive, the tough, combative, coarse-tongued Cornelius ('Commodore') Vanderbilt, a man who would never have been welcomed in the polite society that he himself scorned. The Commodore's eldest son, Cornelius Vanderbilt II and his wife, the icy Alice, had never managed to crash the barricades. It took another daughter-in-law, Alva, married to a younger son, William Kissam ('Willie K') Vanderbilt, to do so.

She did this with a ground-breaking ball, talked of for years afterwards, ostensibly given in honour of her best friend Consuelo (née Yznaga), a 'buccaneer' who had married the Duke of Manchester's heir, Viscount Mandeville. In England Consuelo Mandeville became a close friend of the Prince of Wales.

By the time the next generation of Vanderbilts came along things were a little – but not much – easier. Alva had destined her daughter Consuelo from birth to an upward marriage and when Consuelo was seventeen Alva settled (successfully) on the Duke of Marlborough. When Alva herself had been ostracised by New York society after divorcing Willie K, Consuelo's marriage secured Alva's re-entry: as the mother-in-law of a duke she was *persona grata* once more.

Consuelo's first cousin Cornelius ('Neily') Vanderbilt III, son of Alice and Cornelius Vanderbilt II, did not have the same success when he made a marriage of which his parents disapproved. He was cut off from the Vanderbilt clan when he married Grace

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Wilson, whom they thought an adventuress. Nevertheless, the cool and clever Grace managed to succeed Mrs Astor as the ruler of society.

Grace herself was the youngest of the ‘marrying Wilsons’, so known because all five of the siblings made matches that lifted them effortlessly upwards. They were the children of the handsome, dashing Richard Thornton Wilson, entrepreneur and Civil War profiteer and his wife Melissa. The eldest, May, married Ogden Goelet,* scion of a rich ‘old New York’ family; their daughter, also known as May, carried on the family tradition by marrying the Duke of Roxburghe. Orme Wilson, eldest of the two sons, achieved a major coup not only by marrying Carrie Astor, daughter of *the* Mrs Astor, in the teeth of her disapproval, but by winning her and the rest of the Astor family round. The next daughter, Belle, married Michael Herbert, the fourth son of Lord Herbert, and settled happily into English aristocratic society, while the younger boy, Richard, married into a rich Boston family.

Perhaps the ‘best’ marriage of all was made by Mary Leiter, daughter of Mary Theresa and Joseph Levi Leiter, of Marshall Field fame, who married George Curzon, to become a marchioness and Vicereine of India, where her sister Marguerite (‘Daisy’) met her own future husband, the Earl of Suffolk.

Others who figure in my account of those Gilded Age days are Mrs Paran Stevens, the pushy wife of hotelier Paran Stevens, and their daughter Minnie, taken round Europe to find a titled husband before marrying Arthur Paget, a close friend of the Prince of Wales. Mrs Stevens’s son Harry was engaged to Edith Wharton, then Edith Jones, before Mrs Paran Stevens succeeded in bringing the romance to a halt so that she could continue to benefit from her son’s trust.

Adèle Beach Grant was an American heiress who became Countess of Essex after a broken engagement to another peer, while Maud Burke, from San Francisco, married Sir Bache Cunard – later calling herself Emerald Cunard – and revolutionised the

* Pronounced Goo-lett, with the accent on the second syllable.

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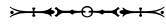
face of British opera. Mr and Mrs Bradley Martin migrated to Britain, marrying off their daughter Cornelia at only sixteen to the Earl of Craven, while Tennessee Claflin's shady antecedents did not prevent her from becoming the wife of baronet Sir Francis Cook. Fanny Work, Alice Thaw and Anna Murphy, who married respectively the Hon. James Burke Roche, the Earl of Yarmouth and Sir Charles Wolseley, were examples of marriages where the exchange of title for fortune brought neither partner happiness.

Other American notables were the social leader Mamie Stuyvesant Fish, a plain woman, almost illiterate, with a raucous laugh but witty, lively, irreverent and gay, the heiress Elizabeth Drexel, from an 'old New York' family and her husband Harry Lehr, social pet and jester, notably to Mamie Stuyvesant Fish.

The story of the beautiful Virginia Bonyngé, later Lady Deerhurst and stepdaughter of Charles Bonyngé and his wife Rodie Daniel, and the battles between Charles Bonyngé and the 'Bonanza King', John Mackay and his wife, were avidly discussed in drawing rooms on both sides of the Atlantic.

Finally, commenting on all that was going on, and, thanks to its immense network of informers, an unrivalled source of information to the members of that society (and to me as well), was the witty, scurrilous and uninhibited magazine *Town Topics*.

CHAPTER I



Where They Came From

The year was 1873 and the Gilded Age was roaring into life. New York seemed to be growing by the minute, new and ever more splendid buildings rising in the centre with ramshackle housing filled by the tide of immigrants spreading outwards. (One tenement in Mulberry Street, home to eighty people, half of whom were children, saturated with filth and vermin, strewn with garbage, was typical. Here raged typhus, diphtheria and smallpox – only nine years earlier, smallpox alone had killed more than 800 New Yorkers.)

In a display of the untrammelled wealth* now pouring into the city, gorgeously dressed women, their huge hats wreathed with flowers and feathers kept in place by jewelled hatpins, strolled down Fifth Avenue in the first of the Easter Parades after attending a service in one of the city's fashionable churches, before returning to the houses past which they sauntered. Great palaces of marble, stone and brick, domed, crenellated, with balconies, spires, canopies, were springing up all around, some so huge that they took up a whole block, as did the largest New York town house ever built, that of Cornelius Vanderbilt II on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street.

As the green shoots of spring appeared, so did the inhabitants of these Fifth Avenue palaces. Between four and five in the afternoon, women put on their smartest dresses and drove in

* Income tax did not start edging its way in until 1894.

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carriages along Fifth Avenue, sometimes stopping for a walk in Central Park. On the first Saturday in May the Coaching Club held its annual parade. Coaches lined up at the meeting place, the Brunswick Hotel (diagonally opposite Delmonico's) until given the starting signal by the president of the Club, women in their best dresses and most beautiful hats, men in their Coaching Club livery of check suits with black coats, tan aprons and red and white buttonholes. Even the horses wore bouquets, attached to their throat-straps.

In the winter there was sleighing and 'everyone' would drive in horse-drawn sleighs in Central Park, Mrs Cornelius Vanderbilt's sleigh a dark red, with dark red liveries for coachman and footman, dark red plumes and red and gilt tassels.

The air was full of noise, from the clashing of horses' shoes on the cobbles to ships' sirens, the postman's whistle and the explosive noise of one of the countless loose-fitting iron manhole covers as a carriage wheel passed over it. Although rubbish disposal had become a problem and manure, dried to a powder, blew into open windows and the faces of passers-by (the rich, who could afford to transport it, got rid of the manure in their stables by donating it to the city's parks and gardens), there was nothing like the sooty pollution of London.

Gone were the days just over a decade earlier when Central Park was full of Irish squatters, goats, pigs and dogs with them, and piles of rubbish – everything from tin cans to old hoop skirts – who had come to America after the potato famine had struck Ireland. With no hope at home, dying in the fields, the villages and the mountains, millions of Irish* had emigrated to America – with a good few speaking only Irish. Many of them were women, young and unmarried, for whom domestic labour was a way out of penury, as well as providing room and board. They were a prime source of servants for the rich of America, whose countrymen and women in general scorned the idea of working as a servant to someone to whom their Constitution declared them equal.

* Between 1846 and 1851 Ireland lost about a quarter of her population through death and emigration.

Now the poor had been pushed out of sight and the rich were busy spending their new wealth. That year saw a banquet so extravagant that it made even New Yorkers gasp: its cost was estimated at \$3,000* a guest. The host, Edward Luckmeyer, was a rich importer/exporter who had decided to blow a rebate he had received from the government on a single evening.

Down the centre of the table, in a thirty-foot lake surrounded by violet-bordered brooks, grassy glades and lush plants, glided four swans. Around it, a mesh of gold wire from the city's most illustrious jeweller, Tiffany, stretched to the ceiling to prevent their escape. Inside, over the lake, hung golden cages holding songbirds. The only sour note was caused by the swans (borrowed from Prospect Park), which spent most of the evening either fighting or mating.

It was held at Delmonico's,† the most famous of New York's temples to extravagance. 'Everyone' went to Delmonico's. Lunching there daily was Mayor Oakey Hall, who might appear in an embroidered waistcoat under a green frock coat with pure gold coins for buttons; Colonel William Mann, proprietor of the society magazine *Town Topics* and anonymous author of 'The Saunterer', the magazine's dreaded, witty, malicious gossip column; and the glamorous actress Lillian Russell and her paramour 'Diamond Jim' Brady, while the most respectable and exclusive of New York's Gilded Age balls took place regularly in its red and gold ballroom.

Not all New York approved of the rash of new palaces – or new people. 'I wish the Vanderbilts didn't retard culture so thoroughly,' sighed Edith Newbold Jones (later the novelist Edith Wharton), from an 'old New York' family. 'They are entrenched in a sort of *thermopylae* of bad taste from which apparently no forces on earth can dislodge them.' (She was not much kinder about the brownstone houses in which most of the families like

* An 1873 dollar was worth about \$20 in 2016. In later years this figure rose, so a rough-and-ready way of calculating the vast sums spent in the Gilded Age in today's money is to multiply by twenty-five.

† This great restaurant finally closed in 1923 as a result of Prohibition.

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hers lived, saying they made the city look as if it had been coated in cold chocolate sauce.)

The words ‘nouveau riche’ began to be flung about and as Blanche Oelrichs, another ‘old’ New Yorker, noticed, her parents and their friends were constantly asking, in plaintive bewilderment, ‘Who *is* he?’ or ‘Who *is* she?’ of these wealthy incomers from unknown backgrounds. For in the grandest houses lived the ever-growing band of the city’s millionaires and their wives – the would-be upper echelon of the greatest city in America. ‘Would-be’ is the right adjective: their struggle to achieve social success was long, hard, bitterly fought and often unsuccessful. Money, it seemed, did not always talk.

The then upper echelon of New York society consisted of the families who had lived there for generations. They were mainly of Dutch descent – the name Knickerbockers came from the knee-length trousers worn by these early settlers. They had the Dutch virtue of thrift: their solidly based fortunes were mainly in banking and large trading firms or amassed as lawyers, though increasingly real estate played a part.

The leader of this élite group was Mrs William Backhouse Astor, whose husband’s great fortune had been founded a good fifty years earlier, thus classifying the Astors as ‘old money’. William was a man dedicated to pleasure – horses, drink, yachting and womanising (the last two often together). His wife Caroline (‘Lina’) Astor was a descendant of one of the original Dutch settlers; née Schermerhorn, she came from an old-established shipping family and she was so determined that she and her husband remained socially impeccable that she tried hard to ensure that his middle name disappeared into oblivion (‘backhouse’ was one term for a privy).

She was tallish, dark-haired and olive-skinned, plump and imposing, and had those essentials for leadership, a commanding personality coupled with an ability to keep her thoughts and feelings hidden. Her single-minded determination to remain at the pinnacle of society was helped by the fact that her husband was seldom around.

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Her 'subjects' lived in solid, unpretentious and heavily curtained brownstone houses between Washington Square and Gramercy Park, with plumply upholstered rosewood furniture and thickly patterned wallpaper; they guarded their privacy and had set ideas about what was 'done' and what was 'not done', such as appearing in public when visibly pregnant. 'We dined at Bessie Sands the night before New Years with Gen'l & Mrs Barton & with Mrs Pellow – but it is my last appearance in public,' wrote one of this caste, the pregnant Anna Robinson, to her sister Pauline du Pont in January 1880. 'I enjoyed it very much, but I think it must be so disagreeable to other people. Minnie Jones* wanted us to dine there next, but I told her to ask Beverly without me & then he would come.'

The people they entertained to their plain dinners, eaten at around 7.00 p.m., were each other; after dinner, there were often evening calls, perhaps by some suitable young man interested in the daughter of the house. The idea of a social season, of grand balls in the ballrooms of private houses, of showy, ornate carriages, of driving out to see and be seen, would have produced baffled stares.

Once married, they dressed in dark colours. 'I send you a sample of my dinner dress – it is made of gray silk,' wrote Anna Robinson to her sister, adding, 'did I tell you of my new bonnet? It is jet with two black ostrich tips and a bunch of pink roses on the side & black velvet strings.' Even if the richer among them ordered Paris dresses, these lay unworn in the trunks in which they had been sent over for a year or so – it would not do for a Knickerbocker lady to be up-to-the-minute fashionable – and were usually of sober colours. 'I took my velvet jacket from its repose & my black silk dress & appeared in them,' wrote Anna Robinson. 'I don't think they are more old-fashioned than two years ago.'

After the American Civil War ended in 1865, huge fortunes began to be made, in steel mills, steam engines, oil, mines, railroads, the

* Edith Wharton's aunt.

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grain from the prairies and cattle from the west, preserved meats to feed soldiers, the installation of the telegraph, armaments and real estate. And for those with social aspirations – which meant most of the wives of these men – there was only one place to be: New York. It was quite true that the seat of government was Washington, from which emanated federal laws, but few of the newly rich were interested in politics – in any case, they were too busy making money – and their wives certainly were not. For them, New York was the most exciting and cosmopolitan city in America; and with their millionaire husbands, whose fortunes were growing daily, allowing them free spending on whatever they liked, surely all doors would be open to them?

They soon found that this was not so. If Mrs Astor did not know you, no invitation would ever come your way. Sometimes a son would slip in: an enormously rich young man could perhaps be a husband for one of the plainer or less choosy among the Knickerbocker girls, helped by the fact that there was a perennial shortage of men in New York. ‘Poor Victorine has had a dreadful time about the ball tomorrow night,’ wrote Anna Robinson. ‘It appears it was arranged (without contacting her) that she should take Emily Lesser, Minnie Dale, Clara Elliot & Marie Gothout . . . Mr Mane, who is head & front of it, flattered himself that all the ladies are buying new dresses for it . . . Of course it will be a great sight but I am afraid apart from that it will be pretty sad not to know a man.’

Huge fortunes did not always help towards social inclusion. Many of the wealthiest families, such as the Rockefellers, Carnegies and Goulds, had to remain outside the palisades. If Mrs Astor did not want to know you, she did not know you.

One such family, the Stewarts, went as far as building a mansion opposite that of Mrs Astor so that she could not avoid seeing them. What perhaps they did not realise was that she so guarded the exclusiveness on which her myth was founded that she would not even go near her own windows lest the crowds that thronged Fifth Avenue hoping to catch a glimpse of the rich and famous should see her.

*

Yet at that very moment, as the Gilded Age began, a new social format was being created that would give shape and structure to the fashionable world for the next few decades – and launch those daughters of the newly rich, the real-life ‘buccaneers’, across the Atlantic. At the heart of the stratagem designed to create what would become known variously as ‘Society’ and the ‘Four Hundred’ was one man, a Southerner named Ward McAllister.

As a young man McAllister had been remarkably handsome. At the time he began his remodelling of New York social life, his brown hair was receding and beginning to go grey. His eyes were blue and kindly, his forehead high, his nose aquiline, his chin firm. He was not tall – he was about 5ft 9ins – but he was square-shouldered and stood straight, so that his clothes hung well. He dressed conservatively, with a tall hat and cutaway coat of dark material. Even in an age of social striving, he was known as a snob.

Connected by birth to some of the old New York families, in 1852 he had married an heiress and a few years later had settled in Newport, where his style of entertaining soon began to be copied. He had had a good deal of relevant experience, gained from looking after his family, even down to going to the market – followed by a couple of boys each carrying a huge basket – and thus acquiring a thorough knowledge of game, fish and vegetables, the best time to eat them, and the best way of cooking them. He had also travelled extensively in Europe, where he soaked up everything he could about court and aristocratic customs. On his return to America he determined to become the self-appointed arbiter of its society and the customs it should follow.

He had already been successful in shaping the society of Newport.* Now, he decided, it was time to tackle the one city in America pre-eminent in wealth, drawing power, sophistication and general glitter: New York. A man might have made a fortune by planting a Midwest prairie with wheat – but it was to New York that his wife, avid to spend this new wealth, now insisted they move.

* See Chapter 8.

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McAllister's cleverness lay in realising that the newly rich were there to stay; more and more millionaires appeared each year and the relentless tide of wealth would soon flood the passive Knickerbockers completely – unless something were done about it (not for nothing were these newcomers known as 'the Bouncers'). He also recognised that any society had to have a leader, whom everyone would accept without question – if not, it would degenerate into a formless mass riven by bitter internal struggles.

There was only one person fit for this position and she, although beleaguered by the strivings of 'Bouncer money', as parvenu wealth was called, already occupied it. Caroline Astor would continue to be the queen.

He decided to use the most desirable members of both old and new as the foundation stones of the new order. To select these, he formed a small committee ('there is one rule in life I invariably carry out – never to rely wholly on my own judgment'); a little band that met every day for a month or two at McAllister's house, making lists, adding, whittling down, forming judgements.

Eventually, twenty-five men, all wealthy, some from old families, some from the new rich but all considered to be men of integrity, were chosen and invited to become 'Patriarchs', as they would in future be known. They would give two and sometimes three balls a season, as exquisite as possible, with each Patriarch in return for his subscription of \$125 having the right to invite to each ball four ladies and five gentlemen, this number to include himself and his family; all distinguished strangers (up to the number of fifty) would also be asked, their names to be run past McAllister. Everyone asked to be a Patriarch accepted immediately.

As McAllister had rightly foreseen, the exclusiveness of these balls was what gave them their magnetic power. 'We knew . . . that the whole secret of the success of these Patriarch Balls lay in making them select . . . in making it extremely difficult to obtain an invitation to them, and to make such invitations of great value [so that] one might be sure that anyone repeatedly invited to them had a secure social position.'

The first of the balls was given in the winter of 1872. With

them, McAllister achieved absolute social power.

Applications to be made a Patriarch poured in, the great majority turned down but often with the door left tantalisingly ajar. Soon McAllister realised that there was one significant omission from his otherwise highly successful plan. With places at the balls at such a premium, most of the women who came were married – you could not ask an invited husband to leave his wife behind – so that the daughters of even the top families were squeezed out. Such was the press of those anxious to be part of this inner circle that it was clear something would have to be done if rival upstarts were not to launch competition.

Accordingly, McAllister introduced the Junior Patriarchs – known as the Family Circle Dancing Classes – in which all the debutantes were to dance in identical white tulle or, sometimes, in fancy dress. One result was that every morning he was besieged by a stream of mothers desperate to get their daughters in. Well aware that, as for the senior Patriarchs, exclusiveness was vital if the balls were to maintain their prestige and the cohesive social nucleus were not to splinter, he used all his charm and diplomacy to keep mothers at bay.

‘My dear Madam,’ he would say as he sprang up from his chair and bowed low. ‘Say no more . . . you have a daughter and want her to go to the Family Circle Dancing Classes. I will do all in my power to accomplish this for you but please understand that in all matters concerning these little dances I must consult the powers that be. I am their humble servant, I must take orders from them.’ Upon which he would delicately try to find out more of the family’s background – a grandmother from one of the great families, say, might mean the door should be left open a chink. Jewish blood, divorce or an appearance on the stage meant instant exclusion; when the internationally acclaimed actress Sarah Bernhardt came to America in the 1880s the hostesses who gave receptions for her would not allow any unmarried girls to be invited to meet her.

McAllister’s remoulding of society occupied his whole life. He had studied the customs of every court in Europe, he had read

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books on heraldry and precedence, he was aware of many of the nuances of English society. As a social arbiter he watched carefully to see who was being received by whom, he made the rounds of all the boxes at the opera on Monday nights, he gave advice on everything from the flowers to choose for a ball to the colour of writing paper.

Every afternoon at the same hour he would walk up Fifth Avenue with a fresh flower in his buttonhole, his moustache and imperial brushed to the correct courtly point, greeting those he was prepared to recognise and cutting dead those outside the Astor perimeter. An ordinary business acquaintance, whom he would greet affably in his downtown office, he would pass with a cold stare on his walk to the Union Club. He declared that he would not recognise plebeian people on Fifth Avenue.

He sent the fashionable to the opera on Monday and Friday nights, always to arrive at the end of the first act. During the second interval they would visit the boxes of friends and converse – ‘chat’ is too flimsy a word for this ritual social intercourse – with their friends. On some Mondays ‘everyone’ went on to one of the Patriarchs’ Balls, an Assembly Ball – chic subscription balls that gradually superseded the original Patriarchs’ Balls – or a Family Circle Dancing Class, all held at Delmonico’s. If a dance floor of wood was too slippery to dance on, McAllister would order it to be sprinkled with powdered pumice stone (‘nothing else to be done’), if covered with a heavy coat of varnish, corn meal put down then swept away.

The third Monday in January was devoted to the most sacred and exclusive social event of all: Mrs Astor’s annual ball. The initial list of names was pruned and pruned again by Caroline Astor and her faithful acolyte Ward McAllister until those left were the *crème de la crème*. Then the invitations, written in Gothic script, were sent out.

Even receiving an invitation written so elegantly was an upward move in the status game. The only woman capable of these stylish superscriptions was Maria de Baril, the scion of an old but impoverished Peruvian family, who was herself extremely

conscious of social gradations. Only if she decided that those to whom she was addressing invitations were sufficiently ‘bien’ did she consent to write and address such cards, so that receiving an envelope embellished with her decorative calligraphy was in itself a sign that you were one of the elect.

Those who did not receive this coveted bit of pasteboard resorted to various stratagems to prevent their friends from finding out. Some would persuade their doctors to recommend trips to the Adirondacks for health reasons, others invented funerals of distant relatives or took to their sickbeds; still others left for Europe.

For the ball itself the keynote was lavishness and ceremony. The huge and magnificent Astor mansion blazed with lights and was filled with flowers, the servants were in their full livery of green plush coats, white knee breeches and red whipcord waistcoats with brass buttons stamped with the coat of arms and motto (*Semper fidelis*) that the Astors had bestowed upon themselves, and Caroline received like a presiding goddess.

By now her rule was supreme and unquestioned. Even the man – or more likely, the woman – in the street knew this. ‘She ruled with a strong hand,’ said the *New York Times*. ‘Her visiting list was the index of the socially elect.’*

Caroline Astor filled her role admirably. A woman of commanding presence and deportment, she was made more impressive by whatever magnificent Worth gown she wore – education in a French-run school and visits to France had given her a love of French clothes, cooking, furniture, paintings and architecture. Her hair was always done high on her head – in later years, this effect was achieved with a black wig – emphasising the appearance of majesty, as, even more, did her jewellery, worn in intimidating abundance. She was hung about with diamonds – a diamond tiara finished with diamond stars, a triple necklace of diamonds, a stomacher of diamonds originally worn by Marie Antoinette and so large that it was almost a breastplate flashed

* The phrase ‘the Four Hundred’ did not become shorthand for ‘society’ until 1892, when McAllister provided the press with the names of 400 of society’s most distinguished members.

rays of light through the chains of diamonds embellishing her corsage.

She wore this great fortune in gems with the air of an idol bedecked for a ceremonial, carefully cultivating the mystique that had served her so well by refusing interviews, never allowing photographers into her home, keeping her opinions to herself and almost never dining out; if she did, she insisted on having the seat of honour at the host's right hand. Her splendid entertainments had the air of regal receptions: you did not go there for the conversation – it was enough just to be there.

Night after night there were parties – balls, dinners, musicales, the opera, in houses filled with the spoils of treasure-hunting in Europe and smothered in flowers. At the first Patriarchs' Ball in 1872 flowers were hardly thought of, but within thirty years massive displays of blooms, shrubs and tropical palms were mandatory in the houses of the rich. Caroline Astor draped chandeliers and filled window seats with roses as well as splashing them over tables and mantelpieces.

Everyday life for the smart set was hedged about with ritual. Dinner invitations were always sent by hand, although invitations to a ball or reception could go by mail. Calling had an etiquette all its own. Posture was all-important: backs had to be straight, heads upright; if invited into a house the visitor only stayed a set number of minutes. 'Children, remember that no lady crosses her knees,' said one teacher. 'She may cross her ankles, but never her limbs.'

While men could go anywhere, certain areas were forbidden to respectable women. One favourite place for them was the 'Ladies' Mile', which intersected Broadway, Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street, and had fashionable shops, hotels, the jewellers Tiffany and restaurants where smart women would meet each other. Even this had its dangers in those days when reputations had to be hyper-clean: it was also the haunt of demi-mondaines, usually as elegantly dressed as society women and frequently the mistresses of their husbands.

So well known had McAllister become that his comments on

matters social had the force of canon law.

‘A gentleman can afford to walk; he cannot afford to have a shabby equipage.’

‘If you want to be fashionable, be always in the company of fashionable people.’

‘If you see a fossil of a man, shabbily dressed, relying solely on his pedigree, dating back to time immemorial, who has the aspirations of a duke and the fortune of a footman, do not cut him; it is better to cross the street and avoid meeting him.’

‘The value of a pleasant manner is impossible to estimate.’

‘When you entertain, do it in an easy natural way as if it was an everyday occurrence, not the event of your life.’

‘A dinner made up wholly of young people is generally stupid.’

‘If you are going to refuse, do so at once, but remember that a dinner once accepted is a sacred obligation. If you die before the dinner takes place, your executor must attend the dinner.’ After every lunch, dinner or ball, calls had to be made.

‘If you are stout,’ he told his male audience, ‘never wear a white waistcoat or conspicuous watch chain.’ ‘If you go to an opera box with ladies, wear white or light French grey gloves, otherwise gloves are not worn.’ ‘A boutonnière of white hyacinths or white pinks is much worn, both to balls and the opera.’

And the clincher: ‘My dear sir, I do not argue, I inform.’

What was to be eaten – or not eaten – at a dinner was equally important: never two white or two brown sauces in succession, one soup rather than (the more usual) two, hot salmon only in spring and early summer. For a dinner of only twelve or fourteen, ‘one or two hot entrées and one cold is sufficient’, sorbets should never be flavoured with rum but always with maraschino or bitter almonds, omit a pudding but serve an ice, ‘preferably Nesselrode, if good cream is used’.

There were even instructions for icing champagne, beginning to be the favoured drink for all lavish or ceremonial occasions on both sides of the Atlantic, thanks to an unremitting sales and publicity campaign by the French. ‘Put in the pail small pieces of ice, then a layer of rock salt, alternating these layers until the pail is full . . . keep the neck of the bottle free from the ice . . .

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if possible turn it every five minutes. In twenty-five minutes from the time it is put in the tub it should be in perfect condition and served immediately.’

The society over which Caroline Astor reigned was one built on exclusion.* As McAllister had foreseen, to be a success in New York or Newport society meant constant social striving and a rigorous adherence to the forms and customs deemed correct. Where an English grandee, his wife and their children could retire to his estate for several months, confident that their place in society would be unaltered when they returned, the American social leader could not afford to be absent: the ferocious competitiveness of American society ensured that in her place, others would instantly rise up – and how to struggle back?

The result was that ‘everyone’ did the same thing at roughly the same time in a routine of what – seen from the perspective of today – seems not simply pointless but, without any other distractions, ineffably dull. The sole sport – if sport it could be called – lay in watching the struggles to be accepted by those on the outside.

Already the daughter as social weapon was coming into her own. Great beauty accompanied by faultless style (and, of course, great wealth) was a powerful lever into the top social circles. Each season usually brought forth one or two such girls, known as ‘belles’.

To be a belle was the equivalent of having the necessary patrician background. As belles were a recognised feature of American society a girl tabbed as one could gain entry to it by dint of her looks and general air of distinction, even if not from a society family. The belle had to be seen everywhere, her presence was required at all important dinner and dances. No ball was complete without her; it was considered her duty to be present at all public or semi-public events – and where she went, of course her parents had to come too, for whereas in England a daughter’s place in society was dependent on her parents, in America a

* The census of 1900 showed that there were more than three million inhabitants of New York but no more than .001 per cent were ‘in society’.

ANNE DE COURCY

daughter could often elevate the status of her mother.

Mary Leiter, the daughter of Joseph Levi Leiter, was the supreme example of the belle who swept all before her. She was a tall girl with a curvy figure, large grey eyes, glossy chestnut-brown hair and small, elegant hands and feet; almost as important was her poise, charming manner and air of distinction. Her family was neither old-established nor, originally, particularly wealthy. Her father had begun life as a clerk in a dry-goods company and then made most of his fortune in real estate; as a self-made man with wealth of such recent origin, and without benefit of any connection to the New York élite, neither Leiter nor his wife would have had any hope of a welcome from them. But Mary's beauty, presence and accomplishments – she had learnt dancing, singing, music, French and art at home from tutors and a French governess, history, arithmetic and chemistry from a Columbia professor – took her effortlessly over these hurdles. Her grace and polish charmed everyone including, later, her future husband George Curzon. She finished up a marchioness and Vicereine of India.

But for those outside the charmed circle of society, what then? For the more enterprising and determined, it was a case of an assault on another front. A visit to Europe was an excellent excuse for not being seen at, say, an Assembly Ball or a Newport picnic – especially as rich, good-looking American women were warmly welcomed on the Continent. The 'buccaneers' were on their way.