

The Reasons for Washington Society

Dec. 1944

SOON after Pearl Harbor, a number of newspapers sounded the death knell of Washington society. The Capital, as well as the nation as a whole, was preparing for drastic changes.

There was an especially good reason why Washington society, which had been oversold to the country for years, should be the first to be submitted to surgical treatment. From the minute war clouds started rolling, American readers began to read ominous meanings into published accounts of Capital carousals, and as the picture grew gloomier, so did any number of small-town editors who suddenly suspected that the Neros were fiddling while the world burned. The Capital felt the repercussion with sickening swiftness, the overtones of revelry died overnight, and old-fashioned society reporting, which had long been too generously crusted with synthetic glitter, went out with dispatch.

But Washington society has not been curtailed a whit. If anything, it has expanded, in order to take in a flock of newcomers who, but for the war, would rather be almost anywhere else, thank you. So long as there is a Washington, there will always be plenty of social activity. Administrations may change, old faces may give way to new ones, and stock figures may be replaced by stockier ones—but Washington parties go on forever.

For Capital society is a deadly serious business; and almost any party may be almost anybody's road to a better mousetrap.

One of the reasons for this is Henry. Henry is an old beau of mine with whom, after ten years of total separation, I caught up the other afternoon at a cocktail party. He stood beaming at me with a wholly new brightness, a cheerier beam than the heavy load of vermouth in his Martinis, or even the pleasure of having me back in his life again, would have warranted.

"Listen, Hope," he said when we finally settled down in a corner. "Do they always have parties like this in Washington?"

"I gather so," I said. "This is my third today within the fifty-cent taxi-zone of the War and Navy Departments. And yesterday I knew of three others. And the day before—"

"Well, all I've got to say is," he broke in, "that

I came here under protest, and already I've met four brass hats in my outfit who wouldn't let me talk to 'em in all the three weeks I've been in Washington. And I've made four office appointments and two business-luncheon dates this afternoon that I didn't think I could bring off for two months at least."

Since Pearl Harbor, a quarter of a million Henrys have come to the national Capital; every one of them with an administrative job like his has had precisely the same need of getting acquainted and getting the job done.

Naturally, old-timers and some old New Dealers deplore the confusion war has wrought in society. Alice Roosevelt Longworth, for example, stays away most of the time, and when in town attends only small parties given by her closest friends. Secretary of State and Mrs. Cordell Hull haven't accepted an invitation, except for highly official affairs, since the war began.

"Nobody can quote what I said at a dinner, or tie me up to any promises I might make at a dinner, unless I'm there," is House Speaker Sam Rayburn's privately-expressed reason for avoiding society as such.

While he served as Rubber Czar, William Jeffers consistently declined invitations. He is one of the few celebrities never to appear at the Sunday dinners given by Mrs. Evalyn Walsh McLean. Jeffers had hardly arrived before Evalyn asked him to dine at Friendship, her magnificent Georgetown home. Before the invitation was answered, his name accidentally got on the list of acceptances and later appeared in the newspapers as among those present. Society editors the following day received terse notes from E. G. Schmidt, assistant to Jeffers in his capacity of President of the Union Pacific Railroad Company. Mr. Jeffers had not attended the dinner, he had declined the invitation, and had dined with Mr. Schmidt at the Mayflower.

Apparently what neither Mr. Jeffers nor E. G. Schmidt realized was that a meeting of the Supreme Court, the Cabinet, Congress, the WPB, or any other important Washington agency could be whipped up at almost any of Mrs. McLean's enormous dinners. (Continued on page 164)

 by Hope Ridings Miller

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SOCIETY, D. C.

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If my old friend Henry ever gets an invitation to a dinner at Friendship, you may be sure he will be there. He has now been around Washington long enough to discover that social gaddings-about can be amazingly useful professionally. He has found out that if he goes to enough important parties he will soon begin collecting dividends in efficiency.

He will accumulate, for example, a list of scores, perhaps hundreds, of fellow officials, not only in his own outfit but all over the government, whom he knows on a first-name basis, who, when his name is announced over the telephone, will say, "Sure, Miss Snodgrass, put him on." Better still, through his list of new pals (and Henry could do worse than card-index them) he will be finding his way in the mazes of Washington's social subdivisions. These, too, he will discover are admirably arranged for his operating needs.

As a rising young man in a war supply agency, let us say, he wakes up some bright morning to realize that he ought to have a few information sources for countries from which his raw materials come. Very well. He calls up Ernie


de Dantes of the State Department—whom he met at the Turkish Embassy a few days ago, he remembers—and tells him quite frankly that he would like to collect a few acquaintances among a given brand of diplomats.

Within a day or two Ernie has arranged for him to go to a party where he meets just the right Uruguayans and Brazilians. Thereafter, if it suits his business purposes, he can trail around with the South American set until they take their hair down.

Since he is smart and charming, it is quite possible that a few Cabinet members and top agency chiefs, now and then a general, an admiral, or an ambassador, may be calling him "Hank" regularly. It happens all the time in Washington. As needs come up, Henry can get "close to" the budget crowd, the economists, the social planners, the Army, the Navy, the Senatorial and Congressional politicians, the newspapermen, and even the lobbyists. Granted the right master list of acquaintances he can arrange to circulate in almost any special group where his interests call him—or in several.

To be sure, when the novelty of meeting a few big names several times a week has worn off—and it wears off pretty quickly—Henry


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and Mrs. Henry may find that it palls; indeed, they may go through a period of being fairly cynical about it, and may repeat to visitors from the provinces the old local saying that nobody has a good time at the average Washington party except by accident.

But at the same time the chances are that the Henrys will keep on going. Once having discovered a utility as convenient as Washington society, nobody in his right mind stays home—long.

Fiction writers dote on picturing our social goings-on as exclusive and glamorous, with just a dash of the wicked and wanton—enough, anyway, to put across the idea that the razzle-dazzle of pre-war Continental court life had nothing on wartime Washington's highjinks. But if Henry wants to get the main outlines straight, he will have to remember first of all that the Capital is populated almost entirely by employees, many of whom have top-drawer titles, unlimited expense accounts, and boundless ambition—employees who are either trying to keep the jobs they have or are angling for better ones, employees who may speak with an accent and send their Washington clippings back home by diplomatic pouch—employees all, and each one keenly aware that at practically any party he may see his boss, or someone who may become his boss tomorrow, or someone whom his boss would like to do business with sometime next week.

WASHINGTON society really is nothing more or less than company-town society, with the average participant pressing either his own or his country's claim for profit, dividends, and dues.

In contrast to society in other cities, there's no problem of getting "in it" in Washington. It is not exclusive like that of Charleston, where family counts first; it is not a paradise for parvenus like that of Chicago's Gold Coast; nor does it demand a two-or-three-generation background of both money and family as does New York's. Capital society represents everything under the sun, from the Kingdom of Afghanistan to a jeep factory. Thus it can't be any more exclusive than politics or Civil Service. Everybody with the slightest title to an administrative position—and his wife—is "in it."

Washington has almost forgotten the storm of indignation last year centering on that "big red house in R Street."

"That R-Street-house case proves what you can do here with a telephone and free chow," observed the late Irvin S. Cobb, who was in a Washington hospital at the time.

For months, notables who controlled wartime contracts had been purposefully entertained at that Georgian mansion by a self-styled manufacturer's agent called John P. Monroe (born Kaplan) and Mrs. Eula Smith, his \$700-a-month researcher and hostess, who, as he said in court, put him "in touch with the right people." Now, although no Washington society reporter had ever heard of either Monroe or Mrs. Smith until the House Military Affairs Committee began to investigate them, the record showed they were thoroughly on to the workings of Washington society. They knew

that the average official is gregarious and curious; that being personally acquainted with one's host or hostess is unimportant; and that anyone who provides free food and drink and displays a lack of sensitivity in distributing invitations can have a ring of celebrities round his table every night if he wishes.

Perhaps if Monroe had played his cards a little closer to his chest he might have enjoyed a lengthy fling at swinging contracts and influencing legislation. He was well under way when his luck turned. "If there were a roll call of all members of Congress who had been to the R Street house, they'd have a quorum," said Senator A. B. ("Happy") Chandler during the investigation. "Sure I went," he added. "Monroe kept pestering me with invitations and finally I went around. So did practically everybody else."

Though career- and name-chasing has long been the main objective in Washington's social life, its methods and atmosphere have shifted with each Administration. The most startling change came shortly after March 4, 1933, when society for the first time boldly faced the fact that its purposes were strictly utilitarian.

Before that, and especially during the years of Coolidge and Hoover, career-making by the social route had been pursued in a mood of penance. Public servants on the make concealed their efforts and climbed in proportion to the decorum with which they preserved official grandeur. All this was ended by a twist of the wrist—and a bare one at that—when Eleanor Roosevelt appeared at her first formal White House reception gloveless and in a trainless evening gown, and the President began booming out first-name greetings. From then on, in White House reception lines formerly noted for their dignity, wisecracks cracked up and down like the popping of snappers at a children's party.

The Old Guard gasped and wondered what Washington was coming to; the New Dealers adored the irreverence of it all. The White House's example spread outward and downward. First names, personal wisecracks, and antic parties set the tone.


"Washington is a city of unfinished conversations," sighed the dapper Portuguese Ambassador, Dr. João Antonio de Bianchi, after being interrupted a dozen times while talking to a charming woman at a diplomatic reception. He was right. Social meanderings are a beginning, never an end, just as are contacts between salesmen and prospective customers on golf links all over the country.

(Incidentally, I am convinced, the company-town aspect keeps Washington society's sin-voltage well below the national average. My friend Henry, for example, no matter how much he goes out, actually does less drinking, less kitchen necking, and less open philandering than was permissible to him at home. He watches his step because he has discovered that at practically any gathering there is probably someone of importance who might disapprove of a young man bent on being the life of the party.)

Society has also solved the prob-
(Continued on following page)



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lem of what to do about the endless parade of Latin American presidents and foreign military chiefs who have visited here during the last four years.

"I've nearly run my legs off, going out to official dinners," said party-loving Representative Sol Bloom, who, as chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has been invited to everything. Senator Tom Connally, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, could say the same thing; so could Secretary Hull, Secretary Morgenthau, General Marshall, and Admiral King.

During a Capital sojourn, every visitor of U. S. Government, Inc., meets scores of Washingtonians at dinner that he might not see otherwise. A steady stream of monarchs without thrones, Good Neighbor presidents, and military chiefs on purposeful missions has poured into Washington to press claims with every Cabinet member, senator, admiral, or general who might help. In every instance negotiations have started on a social basis; gracefully and quickly.

Second only to the importance of Capital parties in a business way is recognition of what publicity can do for anybody in Washington. From the minute the brakes were off on informality, they were also off for wily performers who staked their careers on the unusual, early in the New Deal, and got plenty of headlines.

There was Evie Robert, for instance, who is still known as the New Deal Glamour girl, though the deal has not been new for years, and her husband, Chip Robert, former secretary of the Democratic National Committee, hasn't been a New Dealer for longer than that. The carping diehards have insisted that Evie's genius was merely a matter of doing the unexpected. Evie made the grade by riding down the conventions of the Hoover "rugged individualists." Both photogenic and unself-conscious, she first began to attract attention by wearing jodhpurs practically everywhere except to the White House. She gave a party for her horse, John the Baptist, rode an elephant in the circus, and gave a completely off-the-record party for the Duke and Duchess of Windsor (naturally, it got into headlines the next day).

Shortly before the war began, Louise Brooks MacArthur Atwill (Now Mrs. Alf Heiberg) came back from Hollywood, a rekindled social spark. She knew the film city had nothing on Washington. As the wife of General Douglas MacArthur she had combatted Washington stuffiness on its dreariest summits. But this was another, and a more knowing, Washington. Her parties were soon drawing big names by the dozens, and reports got about that you actually had fun there because of her lively personality. She got several extra sticks in print when she knocked out a general—General Allen Gullion, to be exact, who at the time was Provost Marshal General. It was only a playful tap on the cheek, according to reputable witnesses, but she caught him off balance, and over he went.

It would be unfair to insinuate that Washington society did not shift its stance considerably with the advent of war.

For several weeks party plans were abandoned and invitations to at least three top-name functions were recalled. This was followed by hectic reaction. "We must carry on. It's a matter of morale, you know," explained one hostess after another as dinner invitations were issued.

By early January, both the gloomy and feverish periods were over, and company-town society revived. If parties just for the fun of the thing were not to be countenanced, there were plenty of ways to get around that. Soviet benefits, China benefits, fund-raising dinners, dances, concerts, and luncheons took over the town. Purposeful partying came out into the open, and the calendar has been jammed ever since.

In some respects the new rules have made social gadding easier. To dinners set before eight, both sexes nowadays can usually go in their office clothes. Even for eight-thirty formal parties at embassies and the White House, a black tie and practically anything in the way of a long dress will do. You can leave any host's table before the coffee is served if an important conference calls you. In an emergency, you can even turn down a White House invitation.

Some of the new conventions, though, are less effective than they sound. Suggestions from the top that Army and Navy officers should not be seen at afternoon parties have mainly resulted only in keeping the uniformed contingents away from cocktail gatherings until seven or later—and thus prolonging the cocktail parties.

Neither is it really important that, by example of the White House, the giving out of invitation lists has practically stopped for the duration. It has made society curiously anonymous—and given social reporters headaches.

Today there is as much kudos in running a war-cause party or getting on a good war-work committee as there ever was in knocking over a general or riding an elephant. The chief difference is that the place to ride your elephants these days is a war-relief circus.

Thus society has to go on. It is more than a business of getting Henry on clubby terms with his bosses. Generals and Admirals need to know the key men in the WPB and OWI who are running the business end of their war, and vice versa. Both groups need to know the Latin Americans who are playing such an important part in their supply problems, the British and Russians who are so interested in supplies, and the Chinese who could use more of them. Even distinguished figures like Winston Churchill, Queen Wilhelmina, and the kings, prime ministers, and presidents who have made the pilgrimage to the White House, have come less to advertise and endear themselves to palpitating debutantes and dowagers than to "meet the management."

It is perfectly true that a good deal of the old American sport of grinding axes goes on in the process. But by and large, Washington society sticks close to the business of grinding the Axis.