



# TOP DRAWER

AMERICAN HIGH SOCIETY FROM THE  
GILDED AGE TO THE ROARING TWENTIES

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# 1

## GENTLEMEN AND LADIES

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THE ROARING TWENTIES

The first day of January 1877, dawned frigid and gray over New York City. It had snowed a few days earlier, and the weather report said it would snow again later that day, heavily. In the greater part of the city, few lights winked on before the dark faded, and there was none of the usual early din of cartwheels and horses' hooves. New Year's Day being one of only three full holidays in the year (the others were Christmas and the Fourth of July), most citizens welcomed the chance to lie abed late.

On Wall Street, the Stock Exchange was as silent as nearby Trinity Churchyard, where the graves of once-important merchants and businessmen lay under crusted snow. Above Fifty-Ninth Street, the Irish squatters who lived in shanties on the empty lots had sealed their windows and doors with newspapers and taken their goats inside with them. No ferries or small craft plied the bridgeless waters of the East River or the Hudson. And at the Battery, immigrants at Castle Garden would have to wait another day before venturing into the solid-gold streets of New York. From the decks of newly arrived ships, they could see only the vague outlines of many tall buildings - some as tall as seven stories.

But in the fashionable part of New York - in the brick rowhouses of Washington Square and the brownstone blocks that lined and flanked Fifth Avenue all the way to the Fifties - gaslights were burning before dawn. At 21 West Nineteenth Street, Dr. and Mrs. John Frederick May were in the dining room by half-past seven, fortifying themselves with oatmeal and cream, steak and potatoes, baked beans, griddlecakes, muffins and jam, and codfish tongues in black butter. They knew that the day ahead of them would be long and difficult - although they did not imagine just how difficult it was going to be.

Dr. May, a florid, cheerful gentleman in his sixties, was wearing the clothes he reserved for weddings, coaching parties, and New Year's Day: a cutaway, a four-in-hand tie, and a waistcoat of plum-colored Chinese brocade. Mrs. May was in a peignoir, but waiting upstairs to be put on right after breakfast were her tightest corsets, and a Paris-made evening dress: sapphire-blue velvet trimmed with yards and yards of Valenciennes lace, dozens of blue silk roses, and seventy-five gilt tassels.

Four pretty May daughters were having breakfast on trays in

their rooms so that they would be ready when a French coiffeur arrived at eight to curl their hair and twine it with velvet bands and swan's-down. As soon as that was done, they would be engineered into corsets so that their twenty-three-inch waists would become eighteen-inch waists. Then they would put on billows of organdy and mousseline de soie in the season's most fashionable colors: amber dust, pink coral dust, bear's ear, and silver-willow.

Edith, the oldest, was engaged to a dashing English guards officer, while the two younger ones were not "out" yet and therefore not ready for the marriage market. Just now the family attention was focused anxiously on the second sister, Caroline, who was being courted by a man of new wealth. "Don't marry for money, but marry where money is" was a favorite precept of Victorian mothers. But the question here was, should one marry where money is but where good family background is not?

The Mays were a top-drawer family, originally from Boston, where a great-grandfather had been one of the merchants who had chucked British tea into Boston Harbor. Their branch had spread out to New York, Baltimore, and Washington and had left behind the plain living and high thinking of their Boston cousins. In New York, it seemed one had to have more and more of everything: clothes, jewels, carriages, servants, tickets to the opera, trips to Europe. Mrs. May often said wistfully that she could remember when the most exciting thing in a young girl's life was a little supper-dance at home, with canvas put down over the carpet to dance on and favors of fresh nosegays and boutonnières. Only people-we-know were invited, and there was no ostentation, But now, private dances were being given in public places, like the fashionable restaurant Delmonico's, and favors were likely to be real gold charms and stickpins.

Two years earlier - on the day after Christmas, 1874 - the annual Patriarchs' Ball, the most exclusive party of the year, had been held at Delmonico's, and the guest list had included at least a dozen persons whom most of the others present had never met before. That occasion had come to be called The Bouncers' Ball - "bouncer" being post-Civil War slang for a person who suddenly acquires a fortune.