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CALEB CRAIN

The early literature of New York's moneyed class

Because a June thunderstorm had washed out the railroad tracks ahead, the pleasure party would not be able to reach Saratoga that evening. Fortunately, a stone's throw from the stalled train was a hotel. It looked improbably grand, but the travelers – Harry Masters; his wife, Clara; and their friend Edward Ashburner – decided to stay there for the night. They were going to be roughing it. Despite the eight columns in the hotel's portico, the bedding turned out to have bugs, and the other guests were not the sort of people Harry and Clara Masters socialized with back in the city.

Ashburner, who was from England, was still learning the customs of the American leisure class. During dinner he observed a new one. All the guests ate at a common table, and in order to shut out the diners not of “our set,” Harry and Clara spoke French. They spoke it rather freely, in fact – so freely that a man across the table began to stare. Ashburner was afraid that the staring man spoke French too and didn't like what he was hearing. But then the man ate some pound cake and cheese, together, and Ashburner knew they were safe.

“Oh, that's nothing,” said Harry, when told of Ashburner's fear and how it had been dispelled. “Did you never, when you were on the lakes, see them eat ham and molasses?”¹

So went the class war in mid-nineteenth-century New York. If you live in dread that the syrup will trickle over and contaminate the bacon, now you know why.

Harry, Clara, and Edward are fictional characters created by a writer named Charles Astor Bristed in 1850. Two years earlier, Bristed had inherited a Manhattan house, ninety city lots, and a country seat from his grandfather, John Jacob Astor, at his death the richest man in America. In other words, Bristed didn't write for money. He wrote because he wanted to record for posterity (or at any rate for the English, who doubted) that in New York there existed “a set of exquisites – daintily-arrayed men, who spend half their income on their persons, and shrink from the touch of a woollen glove.” The word *metrosexual* had not yet been invented, but Bristed did have a name for the men and women he was describing. He called them the “upper

ten thousand” – a phrase coined in 1844 by another chronicler of New York high society, Nathaniel Parker Willis. Bristed qualified the term, because he found it a bit too inclusive. Actually, he explained, “the people so designated are hardly as many hundreds.”²

He was being snooty. But it was an important part of the myth of early America that its rich were puny in numbers and insignificant in the broader scheme of things. “In America there are but few wealthy persons,” the French nobleman and amateur sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1835, adding that “In America most of the rich men were formerly poor.” Even Herman Melville, who took few of America's myths about itself for granted, wrote in his 1852 novel *Pierre* that “In our cities families rise and burst like bubbles in a vat.”³

For more than a century historians agreed. But in the late 1960s, when flattering generalizations about American equality came in for vigorous disrespect, a historian named Edward Pessen decided to sift through New York City's tax assessment records to find out if wealth had in fact been as evenly distributed and as unstable as Tocqueville thought. He discovered, among other things, that New York City had had approximately 113 millionaires in 1845.⁴ And he rediscovered Bristed's world, in which wealthy New Yorkers were dyeing their mustaches and elaborating rules about cocktails while Henry James was still in short pants.

In his 1973 book *Riches, Class, and Power before the Civil War*, Pessen titled his chapters with Tocqueville-discomfiting questions: “Were There Truly Rich Americans in the ‘Era of the Common Man?’”, “Were Rich Americans ... Self-Made Men?”, “Did Fortunes Rise and Fall Mercurially During the ‘Age of Fluidity?’”, and “Equality of Opportunity?” Yes, no, no, and forget about it, he answered, dourly and statistically. Furthermore, compared to their contemporaries, the rich of 1845 were not just rich but oppressively, disproportionately rich. By Pessen's reckoning, the top 1% of New York families then owned half the city's wealth. (For comparison's sake, consider that in 2004 the top 1% of American households owned 34% of the nation's wealth.) Despite Tocqueville's belief that “wealth circulates with inconceivable rapidity” in America, when Pessen checked the backgrounds of wealthy New Yorkers of 1828 and 1845, he found that 95% had been born to “rich and/or eminent” parents. In 1982, a scholar named Frederic Cople Jaher attempted to debunk Pessen, but his not altogether convincing analysis of the “vintage of fortune” in New York City in 1828 and 1856–57 only lowered the proportion of wealth that was inherited to 70%. In short, the way Charles Astor Bristed came into his money was the rule not the exception.⁵

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New Yorkers of the day would not have been terrifically surprised to learn any of this; citizens were then fascinated by socioeconomic extremes and read about them avidly. The trend had begun in the 1830s, when a new breed of newspapers, known as the “penny press,” sought to win a mass readership with lower prices and a lower moral tone. In search of cheap laughs, the *New York Sun*, the *New York Transcript*, and the *New York Herald* sent reporters to the police courts to collect funny things said by drunks, and in search of cheap thrills they published verbatim the transcripts of murder trials. In particularly sensational cases, such as that of Helen Jewett, a prostitute killed with a hatchet in 1836, the papers competed so fiercely to add detail that, almost incidentally, they invented investigative journalism – the practice of going out to find stories instead of waiting for them at one’s desk.⁶ Edgar A. Poe took an interest in the 1841 murder of Mary Rogers, an attractive twenty-year-old who sold cigars in downtown Manhattan. He transposed the case to Paris, renamed the victim “Marie Rogêt,” and set his fictional creation C. Auguste Dupin, the first detective in literature, to solve the fictional case – which Poe carefully distinguished, in a metaphysical postscript, from the real one.⁷

In Britain and Europe, writers known today as flâneurs (French for “strollers”) combed cities for urban vignettes – humorous, outrageous, or poignant – and in America, too, such essays appeared in relatively sophisticated magazines such as the *Knickerbocker* as early as the 1830s. Poe hated the *Knickerbocker* for its tame and genteel conservatism – of its editor he was to write that “an apple, in fact, or a pumpkin, has more angles” – and though he himself sometimes wrote as a New York flâneur, he questioned the premises of the genre in his 1840 story “The Man of the Crowd,” in which the wish to find meaning in urban flotsam leads to a wild goose chase and the brink of a psychological abyss.⁸

The New York slice of life survived Poe’s analysis, however, to be taken up by a very different literary genius, Charles Dickens, who visited the city in 1842. In *American Notes*, Dickens described fiddling and tambourine-playing at a mixed-race dance hall and squalor in a slum district known as Five Points. Taking a dim view of the young democracy, the novelist noted that swine ran free in the city. “He is in every respect a republican pig,” Dickens wrote of a representative porker, “going wherever he pleases, and mingling with the best society, on an equal, if not superior footing.” New Yorkers were appalled and mesmerized.⁹

Despite Dickens’s pioneering example, however, down-and-out New York did not really come into its literary own until 1848. In February of that year, Benjamin A. Baker’s play *A Glance at New York* introduced the character of Mose, a butcher and volunteer fireman who spoke in dialect,

brawled readily, saved abandoned babies, and enjoyed minstrel songs (see *Figure 4* on p. 50). “The fire-boys may be a little rough outside, but they’re all right here,” Mose told the audience, touching his hand to his heart. New Yorkers loved him. Not only did *A Glance at New York* have a long run and more than a dozen sequels, but Mose leapt into American folklore.¹⁰ That same winter, a journalist and former sailor named Edward Z. C. Judson, who called himself Ned Buntline, began to write and publish a novel titled *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*. Mose appears in it, though his girlfriend, Lize, has a larger role, as a big-fisted thief with a soft heart. Buntline also borrows con men from Baker’s play, the dance-hall and slum visited by Dickens, and the murdered cigar girl fictionalized by Poe. Though at least one scholar has rightly called *Mysteries and Miseries* “a remarkably bad novel,” it’s a treasury of slang (“You look as if you’d just been dragged through a sick Frenchman,” one character says to another, upon recognizing his hangover) and can still offer vulgar readerly pleasures.¹¹ Its revelations of criminal life were plundered in turn by a third writer, George G. Foster, in the summer of 1848, for a series of *New York Tribune* vignettes collected as *New York in Slices, by an Experienced Carver* and soon followed up by a similar collection, *New York by Gas-Light, with Here and There a Streak of Sunshine*. Less cheery than Baker’s play and less sentimental than Judson’s novel, Foster’s sketches offer journalistic precision: the cries of waiters in cheap restaurants (“biledamand cabbage shillin, ricepudn sixpnce, eighteen-pence – at the barf you please – lobstaucensammingnumberfour – yes sir!”), what prostitutes really think of their profession (“I feel as if I ought to be pretty well satisfied with the way I have managed to get on in the world”), and the dark truth about couples who go to ice-cream parlors (“They are evidently man and wife – though not each other’s!”).¹²

The explosion of interest in New York’s proletariat and lumpenproletariat was to touch writers of all kinds. When Walt Whitman self-published his book *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, the look that he affected in the frontispiece – a work shirt with the collar open, a broad-brimmed hat, and a rakish sideways slouch – owed something to Mose (see *Figure 6*, p. 77). Whitman’s reference to “foofoos” (“Washes and razors for foofoos ... for me freckles and a bristling beard”) may puzzle readers today, but New Yorkers of his time would have known the word from *A Glance at New York*:

GEORGE. What’s foo-foos?

MOSE. Why, foo-foos is outsiders, and outsiders is foo-foos.

GEORGE. I’m as wise now as ever.

MOSE. Well, as you’re a greenhorn, I’ll enlightin you. A foo-foo, or outsider, is a chap wot can’t come de big figure.¹³

Herman Melville seems to have painted from Judson's and Foster's palette in the second half of his novel *Pierre*, when the hero takes two young women to an unnamed metropolis and they land on their first night in a police station full of prostitutes, drunks, and thieves. And though Melville shifted the setting from Broadway to a steamboat, he devoted an entire novel to one of the city's most colorful criminals, the Confidence Man, who first began asking citizens to trust him with their watches in 1847 and was given his name by the *New York Herald* as early as 1848.¹⁴

New York low life became a literary staple. Readers with a taste for it could turn to new, more subjective guides to the city like Joel H. Ross's *What I Saw in New-York* (1851) or William M. Bobo's *Glimpses of New-York City* (1852) and later to such compendia as Matthew Hale Smith's *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (1868; see Figure 9) and James Dabney McCabe's *Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (1872). Urban crowding was satirized in Thomas Butler Gunn's *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses* (1857), and urban childhood was sentimentalized in Solon Robinson's *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (1854) and Charles Loring Brace's *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872).¹⁵ In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the genre has been studied by such scholars as Hans Bergmann, David Reynolds, Karen Halttunen, John F. Kasson, William Chapman Sharpe, Dell Upton, and Luc Sante, and thanks to Martin Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York* (2002), the image of the city projected in it has become widely known.¹⁶

But as it happens, the literature of New York's overclass in the decades before the Civil War was nearly as prolific as that of its underclass, though it is less well known. It was for the most part written by the rich themselves, and perhaps because of that, the touch of these writers was lighter. They were, however, just as prodigal with detail.

Bristed was an insider. At his death, one obituarist noted that he had "made himself a sort of champion of the cultivated minority of his countrymen." Another remarked that "It was pleasant to see him with his horses." He did not write about his world to share it with the poor and the middle classes. He wrote because he liked to show off.¹⁷

Like most people who write about their own class, Bristed gestured toward critique and reform. But in his case, the gestures were exceptionally mild. "Sometimes you will see *slices* of lemon put into a cobbler – nothing can be more destructive; avoid everything but the yellow peel," he cautioned those who aspired to mix his favorite drink, the sherry cobbler.¹⁸

It does not seem to have occurred to Bristed that readers who happened to lack a trust fund might find his tone off-putting. "There is something

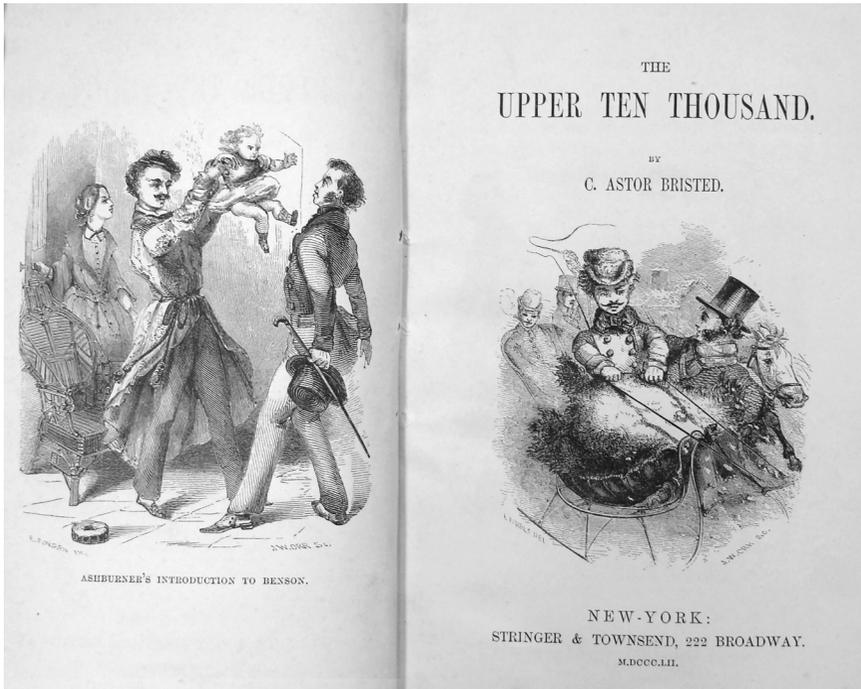


Figure 8: Frontispiece from Charles Astor Bristed's *The Upper Ten Thousand* (1852). Bristed, the heir to a New York real-estate fortune, drew his fictional self-portrait in the character of Harry Masters, who here shows off his son to an English visitor. "Isn't he a beauty?" Masters boasts. "Isn't he a whole team and one horse extra?" Bristed, for his part, seems even prouder of what Masters is wearing: an orange cashmere and rose silk dressing gown, tied with "a tasselled cord that looked like a very superior style of bell-pull."

peculiarly disagreeable in an American crowd," he complained, when Masters and Ashburner visited a racetrack, "from the fact that no class has any distinctive dress. The gentleman and the workingman, or the 'loafer,' wear clothes of the same kind, only in one case they are new and clean, in the other, old and dirty." It is so vexing of the poor to resist wearing something nicely distinctive, like sackcloth. Bristed's compassionless conservatism is strangely refreshing, if you are in the mood to indulge a fantasy identification with socioeconomic evil. And the sherry cobbler does sound nice. A sugared lemon peel, half a cup of pounded ice, and dark sherry. Shake in a tumbler and drink through a straw, *only* on a hot summer day. According to Bristed, three glasses an hour "will be enough."¹⁹

For a recognizably modern ambivalence toward the upper class, a reader must turn to the writer who invented the concept of the upper ten thousand, Nathaniel Parker Willis. The ambivalence may not at first be apparent,

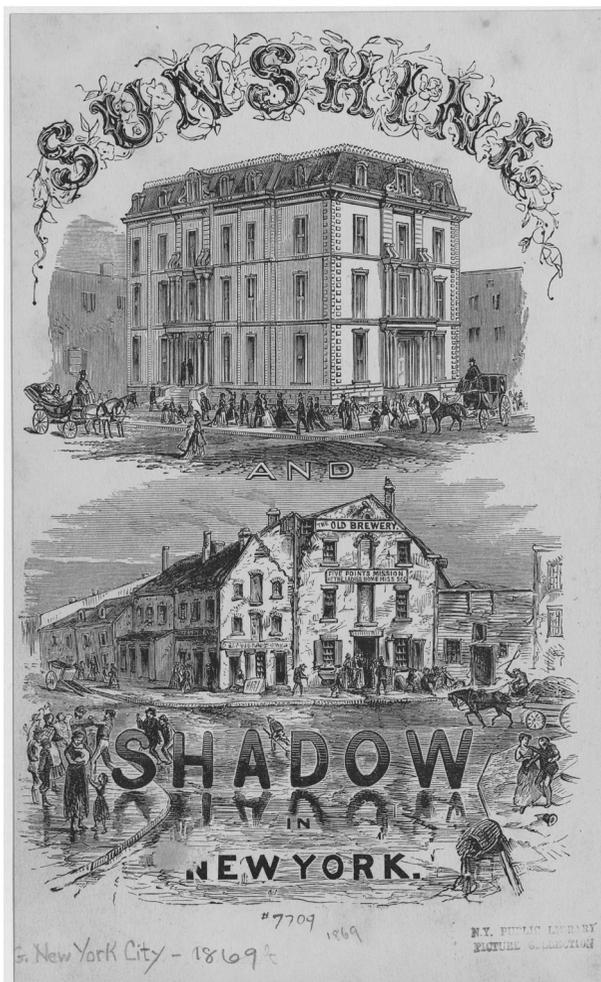


Figure 9: Frontispiece from Matthew Hale Smith's *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (1868). Smith's compendium treats such varied subjects as politics, religion, publishing, crime, and entertainment. Smith views New York as a city of extremes: its religious philanthropists are the world's finest, but at the same time a "worse population than can be found in New York does not inhabit the globe." Smith treats his readers to detailed discussions of high and low.

because Willis had a weakness for the trappings of wealth at their most fey. "Unmitigated new hat is truly frightful," he would advise a hypothetical college boy, while impersonating a decadent uncle. "Short hair on a young man looks to me madhousey. Ugh! Straight or curly, leave it long enough to make a bootlace for a lady! And see that it looks threadable by slight fingers." As for shoes: "Patent leather, of course, till death."²⁰

But there was a serious mind beneath the camp and frippery. Or, as Willis put it, addressing himself in the voice of one of his friends, "Ah, mi-boy! that pious infancy of yours! It oozes through the after crust of your manhood in drops of poetry!" Willis was a child of New England, the eldest son of a strict Congregationalist deacon and his indulgent wife. The deacon had edited a religious newspaper in Boston, and he and his wife somehow endowed their offspring with all the genetic and cultural equipment necessary for ruthless ascent into New York literary celebrity.²¹

In capturing the attention of high society, the Willis siblings were formidable. Nathaniel founded and edited the *Home Journal*, ancestor to today's *Town and Country*. His brother Richard composed "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" and became one of the city's most respected music critics. Sister Sara, under the name Fanny Fern, became the highest-paid newspaper columnist in America.²² And brother Edward, after serving a prison sentence in Ohio for rape, served briefly as publicist and agent for Lola Montez, dancer and femme fatale. (The details are murky, but Edward was fired either because he embezzled or because he lapsed into family habits and wrote an unauthorized account of his employer for the *New York Herald*. After Montez recovered her temper, she hired him back. And then she fired him again.²³)

High society's respect, by contrast, often eluded the Willises. It didn't help that they quarreled with one another. After Nathaniel discouraged his sister's literary ambitions, she took revenge by caricaturing him in her autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall*. When the heroine is widowed, her brother frets that in her mourning she has given in too easily to a bad hair day. No one had any trouble recognizing Nathaniel. "Fashion is his God," another character says of him. "Sorrow in satin he can sympathize with, but sorrow in rags is too plebeian for his exquisite organization."²⁴

This was accurate. Fashion was Nathaniel's god. But he wrote about it with more insight, nimbleness, and edge than any of his contemporaries. On a city without an opera: "Like a saloon without a mirror." On the depreciation of courtesy in New York: "Politeness has gradually grown to be a sign of a man in want of money." On a sudden vogue for a fabric still posh today: "'*She had on a real Cashmere*' would be sweeter, to a number of ladies, as a mention when absent, than 'she had a beautiful expression about her mouth,' or 'she had such loveable manners,' or 'she is always trying to make somebody happier.'"²⁵

For all his talent, Willis never wrote a solid book. The need to earn a living fettered him to magazine ephemera, a fate he accepted with a pose of tragic resignation: "The hot needle through the eye of the goldfinch betters his singing, they say." After he abandoned sacred poetry in early youth,

Willis's ambition took a conventionally serious form only once, in a public lecture on fashion at the Broadway Tabernacle in 1844. In the lecture, Willis made explicit his peculiar, and peculiarly democratic, understanding of fashion, which he called an "inner republic."²⁶

He began by defining fashion as "a position in society" that different cultures awarded to different traits. In France, it went to intellectual and artistic achievement; in England, to beauty and coxsureness. In both countries, according to Willis, the "first principle" of fashion was "rebellion against unnatural authority," because fashion forced the ruling class to acknowledge people of merit born outside it. The particular acknowledgment that he had in mind was sexual, although he didn't say so explicitly. Through fashion – that is, through a selection of spouses prompted by fashion – the English upper class ensured that their children would be attractive and bold, and the French, that theirs would be intelligent. Although the principle of fashion might be revolutionary, its effect was conservative, by a kind of sexual engrossment.

What did American fashion reward? "*Conspicuousness in expense*," Willis wrote with dismay. (A few years later, he would identify New York as "*the point where money is spent most freely for pleasure*.") He hoped that this preference was temporary and that Americans could change it by force of will. But he feared that no one would bother to take the problem seriously. Like Willis himself, fashion seemed trifling to most people. He insisted it wasn't, because it determined which virtues the ruling class would welcome into their beds and thereby into the elite.²⁷

Willis was an outsider. Nothing shows it so clearly as the frankness with which he analyzed how the insiders reproduced themselves. To observers who genuinely belonged to the elite, such a problem remained politely invisible. They found other issues much more urgent and alarming. It was, for example, a catastrophe that the standard New York brownstone was only 25 feet wide.

Because of it, New Yorkers could not throw parties in their home city as exquisite as those they threw in Paris, complained Régis de Trobriand, who knew whereof he spoke because he was a baron and was married to a daughter of the president of the Chemical Bank. Trobriand made his lament in the *Revue du nouveau-monde*, a biweekly journal that he edited and published in New York in 1849 and 1850. The French-language journal reprinted Lamartine's poetry and Sainte-Beuve's criticism, in the hope that Americans might come to know French culture directly rather than through "the deceitful veil of British lucubrations," as Trobriand put it. It also featured Trobriand's own commentary on New York high society.²⁸

Given the miserable dimensions of a New York house, "one may guess what feeble resources are available to a host for assembling a dancing multitude inside it," Trobriand wrote. "He can only offer two or three rooms, with no passageway between them other than a narrow corridor, half of which is encroached upon by a staircase." Supper had to be served upstairs, and before a guest could make her formal entrée to a party, she had to climb as far as the third floor to deposit her coat. (Once she made the climb, however, she would discover a room where she could repair her toilette – a much-appreciated innovation that had not yet reached Paris, Trobriand admitted.) There was nowhere for the men to stand and talk, or sit and play cards. What was to be done? Fortunately, the baron was able to report that the revolution was *en marche*. Along Fifth Avenue a few altruistic New Yorkers had taken it upon themselves to build houses whose floorplans stretched across two, three, and in some cases four traditional lots.²⁹

Not everyone recognized the tragedy of the "twenty-five-feet-front-and-take-off-your-things-in-the-third-story balls," as Willis called them. Bristed agreed that narrow buildings were "very inconvenient," but he saw a much graver threat to social order in the "foreign dances of luscious and familiar character" that were taking New York by storm – the polka, the redowa, and the schottisch. The polka, in particular, seemed to him as infectious and deleterious as a disease, and his dislike was widely shared. In fact the middle-aged rich men of 1850s New York hated the polka almost as consistently as they hated abolitionists. In his diary, the merchant George Templeton Strong denounced it as "a kind of insane Tartar jig performed to a disagreeable music of an uncivilized character." In the *Lorgnette*, another biweekly journal of New York high society, the satirist Donald G. Mitchell wrote that "I ... think it highly probable that the movement may have found its way into domestic arrangements, and the baby be lulled, the dumb waiter rise and fall, and the cook stove rotate – polka-wise."³⁰

The polka was athletic. Sometimes a woman who danced it was obliged to borrow a gentleman's handkerchief to pat her neck dry. Sometimes the case was much worse. After "polking" with a Miss Friskin, who wore a green silk dress, Bristed's Harry Masters discovered that his white waistcoat, pants, and cravat "were all stained green, as if I had been playing with a gigantic butterfly." When Jonathan Slick, a Yankee hick invented by the novelist Ann S. Stephens, toured New York's high life, he saw a couple dance the polka and felt sure the woman had been ruined by the intimacy. "If the gal means to git married, her bread will be all dough again, arter this," Slick commented.³¹

Almost invariably, polka hatred was accompanied by a further regret, namely, that high society was not really fun for anyone but teenagers. Like the easily fatigued of every era, mature socialites protested that they went to parties to talk not to dance. Or rather, that's why they would go, if they did, but they didn't. According to Willis, a foreigner invited to a New York party was heard to exclaim, "Charming children! but where are the grown-up people?"³²

In addressing this problem, there was not a surfeit of intellectual coherence. Some of the older men seem to have turned prickly because younger ones had sidelined them, and they vented their disgruntlement by deriding middle-aged women who tadpoled. In the *Lorgnette*, Mitchell sneered at women who, "grown a little anxious on the score of their own age, are very willing to commute the stock of years, by balancing the polka with a boy." Bristed concurred, and he argued, in a logic contorted by dudgeon, that since women acquired "world-knowledge" faster than men, equality of age between a man and a woman was in fact "virtual disproportion." Between a twenty-three-year-old woman and a twenty-three-year-old man, there was such an egregious disparity in emotional maturity that if they married, she would be tempted not only to despise him but also to "form a low of opinion of men, as men." Naturally this would lead to bankruptcy, early death, and season tickets to the opera.³³

Bristed knew exactly what to do. Young men should be kept out of society until they acquired the mental wherewithal to dominate women. In the meantime the young women, Bristed generously conceded, could stay. Thus instead of parties where young men danced with middle-aged women, there would be parties where *middle-aged* men *talked* with *young* women. Now isn't that better? Before anyone spends too long wondering why Bristed thought so, it is worthwhile to consult George Templeton Strong's diary entry of April 13, 1852: "Much scandal afloat here touching our New York Society in Paris ... how Bristed keeps a grisette, and how Mrs. Bristed met the couple somewhere and the two ladies clapperclawed."³⁴

As it happens, Willis also knew exactly what to do. According to him, middle-aged women weren't the problem. On the contrary, he exalted them. "The most delightful age of woman, in cultivated society, is ... when she is wise enough to be an adviser and counselor to a male friend, and yet attractive enough to awaken no less respect than admiration," he wrote. He was confident that the conversation of "married belles" would intellectualize the social gatherings now frittered away in carnal dancing, and so he urged them to rebel against the convention that retired women from society as soon as they were married – to resist "the re-podding of the once-shelled pea."³⁵

When outraged husbands objected that Willis was encouraging immorality, he invited them to read an entomologist's description of the life cycle of the coccus:

The males have wings, and, having no care for food, go and come as they please. The females have no wings, and live by suction of plants to which they fix themselves at an early period of their life and remain immovable till death. When impregnated, they spread their bodies over the eggs and so perish into a membrane, or egg, which the young ones break through and destroy, in coming into life.³⁶

Did American wives have to share the fate of female scale insects?

According to family legend, when the Baron de Trobriand was nine years old, he and his classmate Baudelaire debated whether the sins they told in confessional were really kept secret. As a test, Trobriand volunteered to his confessor that he and some friends were planning to burn the school down. He was promptly expelled.³⁷ It would be pleasant to imagine that the incident decided Baudelaire's character, but at the time Baudelaire would have been four, which seems rather young for complicity, even in his case.

Whether the story is true or apocryphal, Trobriand grew up to be a person sophisticated about secrets and skeptical of pieties. (He also grew up to be brave: in the Civil War, he would command the Lafayette Guard, a militia of Franco-Americans, and would fight valiantly at Gettysburg.) In his column for the *Revue*, Trobriand agreed with Bristed, Mitchell, and Willis that New York society was overrun with the young. But his analysis went much further than theirs – so much further that he might qualify as the historical original of the amorous, mustache-twirling Frenchman of popular culture (cf., for example, Jacques, the bowling tutor who tried to estrange Marge Simpson from Homer).

In Europe, a party was a microcosm of the social world, Trobriand wrote. Every important kind of person could be found there, and a boy who attended in search of simple pleasures was soon challenged by complex ones, which inveigled him into a sentimental education. He met mature men he wished to emulate and mature women he wished to please. “La passion, c'est la vie,” Trobriand proclaimed, and it was the romance of these new friendships that ripened boy into man.

Alas, “in America there is none of this,” Trobriand continued, darkly. Parents sheltered their children from passion instead of prompting them to explore it. And they knew almost nothing about it themselves. Custom and a cycle of chores isolated mothers, and business-minded fathers thought socializing was ephemeral and silly.³⁸

The result was the polka; society was insipid. A “good young man” might be satisfied by it, Trobriand supposed (here the reader must silently supply whatever the word for “ninny” is in French), but a passionate one would turn elsewhere. To a brothel, probably. If he could channel his thwarted passion into scholarship or politics, he might save his health and morals, but even then he would never develop the emotional richness that he would have in European society. In some unspecifiable, Jamesian way, he would remain stunted.

“Leave, cross the ocean; go spend a few years in Europe, and you will return from it men,” Trobriand counseled the upper-class adolescent boys of America. But he wondered what would happen if they did. “Having become men, would they want to return?” he asked, anticipating by half a century the plot of *The Ambassadors*.³⁹

In the meantime, on this side of the Atlantic, society would only improve if wives were allowed to indulge “the little passions that are, so to speak, the small change of the great ones.” In Trobriand’s opinion, it was “une injustice flagrante” that New Yorkers looked the other way when a girl flirted but refused to extend the same courtesy to a married woman. And while he was on the subject of passion, he had some advice for American husbands. Providing was not enough. What men gave their wives had to be “ennobled by that multitude of details in private life whose nuances are to the heart of women what tears of dew are to the calyx of flowers.”⁴⁰

Bristed of course objected: Trobriand’s analysis was hopelessly French and largely immoral, and in marriage “if either party has a right to expect amusement of the other, it is the *man*.”⁴¹ So move to the provinces, Trobriand replied. There you will find all the stagnant domesticity and deference to male prerogative you desire. There the polka will not trouble you. Just bear in mind the verdict of the novelist Jules Sandeau: “There is nothing so odious as the race of small towns; it is the last degree of perversion and brutishness that a man living in society may come to.”⁴²

“I look in despairing bewilderment at my white gloves,” the rich, young, bookish George Templeton Strong confided to his diary in 1846, after coming home from a tea party. “Confusion between the ego and the non-ego is embarrassing.”⁴³

The culture of wealth did not necessarily make those who lived in it happy or comfortable. Its best chroniclers, like Strong, are those who could see the existential chinks in the façade. While he was courting, Strong joked that he wished “there wasn’t any such thing as money in the world, or that every one was comfortably supported by the state.” He didn’t really wish any such thing, but he worried that he wouldn’t be able to afford the woman he fell in love with. He was a rising, successful lawyer, and his

father was an established, successful lawyer, who would soon build him a large house on Gramercy Park. But the financial pressures on marriage were enormous. Rich young women went to rich young men, and the historian Sven Beckert has discovered that at least one credit agency reported on financially significant matches. When Bristed's fictional Englishman wondered aloud whether wealthy Americans married for money, his host told him, in a turn of phrase that evoked Mose the fireman, "They don't marry for anything else." For several years after his marriage, Strong's anxiety about money, if anything, increased. "Oh, for \$100,000 – well invested!" he wrote in 1851. "A skillful operation resulting in an enormous profit with no risk has all the charm for me now of poetry or romance."⁴⁴

The intersection of love and money made for "a sadness which can hardly be explained," according to George William Curtis, another keen inside observer of the mid-century elite. In his youth Curtis had seriously considered the socialism that Strong merely joked about. At Brook Farm, the Transcendentalist commune not far from Emerson's Concord, Curtis experienced "manure and dish-water" and debated utopian philosophy. Clothespins fell out of his pockets at the evening dances. He was said to have been so beautiful that boys and girls alike fell in love with him. He continued farming in Concord for a couple of years after he left the community, and in an accident he cut his hand. He carried the scar back to New York.⁴⁵

It seems almost too perfect an emblem. No doubt there were many nights when the hand that Curtis had wounded in the service of idealism was worn inside a white glove like Strong's. *The Potiphar Papers*, Curtis's satire of high society, reads as if it had been written by that gloved hand and shared in its doubleness. In the fiction, each chapter of which is narrated by a different character, Curtis recorded the betrayals he saw among the wealthy, which were for the most part self-betrayals. Of the foppish, unemployed men too old to dance but not yet middle-aged, he wrote, "The seal of their shame is their own smile at their early dreams." Curtis wished to smile instead at the smilers. The humor doesn't quite come off. Despite his sarcasm, which is often cruel, his characters manage to be poignant. Mr. and Mrs. Potiphar feel bullied by the lifestyle that their social position obliges them to buy, but that is the least of their troubles. The worst is, neither of them has married for true love. They have compromised for the sake of money, and each turns now for comfort to a nostalgic fantasy of what might have been. Not even their disappointment is shared with each other – only with the reader. "I shall never be in love again," Mr. Potiphar soliloquizes, as he remembers the girl he didn't marry. Then he echoes the gospel of Mark, in a line that would have pleased Thoreau: "In getting my fortune I have lost my real life."⁴⁶

NOTES

1. Charles Astor Bristed, *The Upper Ten Thousand* (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1852), pp. 91–93.
2. Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 208; Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 28; Bristed, *Upper Ten Thousand*, pp. 6, 271; Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 208 n. 40.
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, Francis Bowen, and Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage, 1990), i, p. 52; Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* (Evanston and Chicago, IL: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1971), p. 9.
4. Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power before the Civil War* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1973), pp. vii–viii, 22.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 85; Edward N. Wolff, “Recent Trends in Household Wealth in the United States: Rising Debt and the Middle-Class Squeeze,” Jerome Levy Economics Institute, Working Paper No. 502 (June 2007), www.levy.org/download.aspx?file=wp_502.pdf&pubid=929; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, i, p. 51; Frederic Cople Jaher, *The Urban Establishment: Upper Strata in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), p. 202. Pessen and Jaher had to make many subjective judgments to compile their statistics. Because they made them slightly differently, comparing their results isn’t straightforward. Pessen felt that he was able to determine the socioeconomic status of the parents of 90% of the individuals in his samples (those worth more than \$100,000 in 1828 and more than \$250,000 in 1845). Jaher only felt sure of parents’ status in 64% of his 1828 sample (those worth more than \$100,000) and 44% of his 1856–57 sample (worth more than \$100,000). Jaher felt that in cases where he didn’t know the parents’ status, the parents were likely to have been poor. Pessen, by contrast, felt that the rags-to-riches ideology of the era would have tainted the evidence in the opposite direction, obscuring information about wealthy backgrounds. To come up with a statistic based on Jaher’s data that is comparable to Pessen’s 90% rate of inherited wealth, I added together the number of wealthy individuals in Jaher’s 1828 and 1856–57 samples known to have come from wealthy backgrounds and divided it by all the wealthy individuals from those years whose backgrounds Jaher had been able to determine. (If I were to accept Jaher’s premise that most of the wealthy whose backgrounds he could not determine were self-made men, I would have used as a denominator the total number of wealthy individuals in his samples for those years, and the resulting percentage would have been significantly lower than 70%.)
6. Hans Bergmann, *God in the Street: New York Writing from the Penny Press to Melville* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995), pp. 19–40; Matthew Goodman, *The Sun and the Moon: The Remarkable True Account of Hoaxers, Showmen, Dueling Journalists, and Lunar Man-Bats in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), pp. 36–41; Andie Tucher, *Froth &*

- Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 7–96; Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Knopf, 1998). For a survey of trial transcripts as a form of popular literature in Victorian America, see Caleb Crain, "In Search of Lost Crime: Bloated Bodies, Bigamous Love, and Other Literary Pleasures of the 19th-Century Trial Transcript," *Legal Affairs* 1:2 (July/August 2002): 28–33.
7. Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
 8. For accounts of New York flâneurs in the 1830s, see Bergmann, *God in the Street*, p. 63; Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1956), p. 162; and Edward L. Widmer, *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 96. Between them, Miller and Widmer offer a portrait of mid-nineteenth-century New York's literary infighting that will probably never be surpassed. (For a briefer account, see chapters 39–41 of Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999]). Edgar A. Poe, "Lewis Gaylord Clark," *The Literati of New York*, in *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 1206. Edgar A. Poe, "The Man of the Crowd," in *Poetry and Tales* (New York: Library of America, 1984), pp. 388–96. For Poe as a flâneur, see Edgar A. Poe, "The Doings of Gotham," in *Writing New York: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Philip Lopate (New York: Library of America, 1998), pp. 91–106.
 9. Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, in *Writing New York*, ed. Lopate, p. 58; Bergmann, *God in the Street*, pp. 115–24.
 10. [Benjamin A. Baker], *A Glance at New York* (New York: Samuel French, n.d.), p. 20; Richard M. Dorson, "Mose the Far-Famed and World Renowned," *American Literature* 15:3 (Nov. 1943), pp. 288–300; Peter George Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820–1860" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984), pp. 388–99; Constance Rourke, "The Comic Poet" (ch. 5), in *American Humor: A Study of National Character* (1931; rpt. Gainesville: Florida State University Press, 1986).
 11. Buckley, "To the Opera House," pp. 431–68; Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: Norton, 1992), pp. 144–48. The best edition of Judson's *Mysteries and Miseries* is Ned Buntline [Edward C. Judson], *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (New York, 1848), which includes a glossary of "flash," or criminal slang, and a running commentary on opposition from real-life criminals that Judson believed his novel was exposing. The book is now rare, however, and for convenience I have drawn the quotation from a later, poorer edition that I happen to own, Ned Buntling [sic], *The Mysteries of New York* (London: Milner & Company, n.d.), p. 43.
 12. George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light, and Other Urban Sketches*, ed. Stuart M. Blumin (1850; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 37, 214, 103, 134; Bergmann, *God in the Street*, pp. 58–59.

13. Bergmann, *God in the Street*, pp. 69–90; Walt Whitman, “Leaves of Grass” (1855), in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 48; Benjamin A. Baker, *A Glance at New York*, p. 16.
14. Melville, *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*; Melville, *The Confidence-Man, His Masquerade* (1857; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1984); Bergmann, *God in the Street*, pp. 181–220; Michael S. Reynolds, “The Prototype for Melville’s Confidence-Man,” *PMLA* 86 (1971): 1009–13; Caleb Crain, “The Courtship of Henry Wikoff; or, a Spinster’s Apprehensions,” *American Literary History* 18:4 (2006): 679, 690 n. 6.
15. Joel H. Ross, *What I Saw in New-York; or, a Bird’s Eye View of City Life* (Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1851); [William M. Bobo], *Glimpses of New-York City, by a South Carolinian, (Who Had Nothing Else to Do)* (Charleston, SC: J. J. McCarter, 1852); Matthew Hale Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (Hartford, CT: J. B. Burr, 1868); James D. McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York Life; or, the Sights and Sensations of the Great City* (Philadelphia, PA: National Publishing Company, 1872); Thomas Gunn, *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses* (1857; rpt. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009); Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: Dewitt and Davenport, 1854); Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York, and Twenty Years’ Work among Them* (New York: Wynkoop and Hallenbeck, 1872).
16. Bergmann, *God in the Street*; David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982); John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990); William Chapman Sharpe, *New York Nocturne: The City After Dark in Literature, Painting, and Photography, 1850–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Dell Upton, *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991).
17. “The Late Charles Astor Bristed,” *New York Times* (January 16, 1874): 4; M. E. W. S[herwood], “Charles Astor Bristed,” *Galaxy* 17 (April 1874): 545–46.
18. Bristed, *Upper Ten Thousand*, p. 67.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 227, 68.
20. Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Fun-Jottings; or, Laughs I Have Taken a Pen To* (New York: Scribner, 1853), p. 343; Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Dashes at Life with a Free Pencil* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1845), p. 19.
21. Nathaniel Parker Willis, *The Rag-Bag: A Collection of Ephemera* (New York: Scribner, 1855), p. 315; Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity*, pp. 17–18.
22. Fanny Fern [Sara Payson Willis], “*Ruth Hall*” and *Other Writings*, ed. Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), p. xviii.
23. This is my interpretation of an ambiguous series of articles by and about Montez and Edward Willis that appeared in the *New York Herald* between December 25,

- 1851 and January 15, 1852. See also Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity*, pp. 126, 212 n. 18.
24. Fern, "Ruth Hall" and Other Writings, pp. 58, 207.
 25. Willis, *Rag-Bag*, p. 343; Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Hurry-Graphs; or, Sketches of Scenery, Celebrities and Society, Taken from Life* (New York: Scribner, 1851), pp. 298, 332.
 26. Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Rural Letters and Other Records of Thought at Leisure* (Auburn, NY: Alden and Beardsley, 1856), p. viii; Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity*, p. 98; Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Lecture on Fashion: Delivered before the New York Lyceum* (New York: Mirror Library, 1844), p. 12.
 27. Willis, *Lecture on Fashion*, pp. 3, 9; Willis, *Rag-Bag*, p. 45.
 28. M. E. W. Sherwood, "Gen. de Trobriand's Romantic Life," *New York Times* (August 14, 1897); Robert D. Bohanan, "Régis Denis de Trobriand," *American National Biography Online*, February 2000, www.anb.org/articles/05/05-00182.html; Marie Caroline Post, *Life and Memoirs of Comte Régis de Trobriand, Major-General in the Army of the United States, by His Daughter* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1910); Régis de Trobriand, "La Revue du nouveau-monde," *Revue du nouveau-monde* 1: 2 (my translation).
 29. Régis de Trobriand, "Les Bals de New-York, premier article (Salons et soupers)," *Revue du nouveau-monde* 2: 8.
 30. Willis, *Rag-Bag*, p. 42; Bristed, *Upper Ten Thousand*, p. 43; Charles Astor Bristed, "New York Society and the Writers Thereon," *The Literary World* 6 (March 23, 1850): 296; George Templeton Strong, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*, ed. Allan Nevins & Milton Halsey Thomas (New York: Macmillan, 1952), i, p. 269; Donald G. Mitchell (pseudo. "John Timon"), *The Lorgnette: or, Studies of the Town, by an Opera Goer* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1850), ii, p. 18.
 31. Mitchell, *Lorgnette*, i, p. 57; Bristed, *Upper Ten Thousand*, p. 219; Ann S. Stephens, *High Life in New York, by Jonathan Slick* (New York: Bunce & Brother, 1854), p. 65.
 32. Willis, *Hurry-Graphs*, p. 270.
 33. Mitchell, *Lorgnette*, i, pp. 30, 58; Bristed, "New York Society," pp. 296-97.
 34. Strong, *Diary*, II, p. 90.
 35. Willis, *Hurry-Graphs*, p. 270; Willis, *Rag-Bag*, p. 62.
 36. Willis, *Hurry-Graphs*, p. 272.
 37. Post, *Life and Memoirs of Comte Régis de Trobriand*, p. 50.
 38. Régis de Trobriand, "Les Bals de New-York. Deuxième article. Les Hommes," *Revue du nouveau-monde* 2: 66, 68.
 39. Trobriand, "Les Bals de New-York," *Revue du nouveau-monde* 2: 70.
 40. Régis de Trobriand, "Les Bals de New-York. Troisième article. Les Femmes," *Revue du nouveau-monde* 2: 137, 132.
 41. Bristed, "New York Society," p. 414.
 42. Régis de Trobriand, "La Société française à propos de la société de New-York," *Revue du nouveau-monde* 3: 125.
 43. Strong, *Diary*, I, p. 273.
 44. Strong, *Diary*, I, p. 264; Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, p. 34; Bristed, *Upper Ten Thousand*, p. 119; Strong, *Diary*, II, p. 67.

45. George William Curtis, *The Potiphar Papers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), p. 15; Henry W. Sams, *Autobiography of Brook Farm* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1958), pp. 134, 229, 241; John W. Chadwick, "Recollections of George William Curtis," *Harper's* 86 (February 1893): 469–70.
46. Curtis, *The Potiphar Papers*, pp. 16, 94.