Sedgwick, Catharine Maria. "Varieties of Social Life in New York." *Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*, July 1846, pp. 13-16.

VARIETIES OF SOCIAL LIFE IN NEW YORK

BY MISS CATHARINE M. SEDGWICK

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One might imagine from the political equality of our people, from the diffusion of education, from the general condition (from which few are excepted) of business occupation, that we should find uniformity in social life; that there would be a sort of community of character and intercourse—that it would be in New York as it is in some other cities of our Union where in a similar condition of life every body knows every body. But it is not so. The social circles are as distinct as if the walls of caste were built around them. Each system has its sun, moon, stars of the first magnitude, and its own horizon. There are occasional transits made from one little world to another, but not enough to break up their distinctness.

A friend of mine, on a visit to New York, whose position gave him the entreé of various circles, communicated to me the following particular account of one of his evenings:

"My visit in your city being short," he said, "I was compelled to make the most of it. I therefore accepted four or five invitations for an evening, which I could well do, as (the evenings being then at their longest) my social chart covered seven or eight hours. My first invitation was to take tea with a Mr. Ruscit, a mechanic, at five o'clock! Five o'clock, as you know, is the dinner-hour with the fashionable up-town family with whom I staid; so I dispensed with my dinner and took a substantial lunch of oysters and rolls at one o'clock, my dinner-hour at home. This hour, according with my habits and my notions of health, put me into high good humor and appetite too. I met my charming hostess going to her dining-room with her young people as I was passing out to my carriage, which, by the way, Ruscit had sent to me, saying, with delicate courtesy, (nature sometimes teaches better than Chesterfield,) that he wished to save as much of my time to himself as possible. 'So you are going off to the barbarians!' said my hostess. 'How can Mr.----- go to much places?' I heard one of my young friends ask as I shut the door.

"Ruscit himself received me at the door of a modest, comfortable dwelling in East Second street, and introduced me to his wife, who, having been born among the 'Friends," still retains their costume—so fitting the sobriety of middle age. Once seen it would be difficult to forget this good matron's face. Not that there was anything very remarkable in the pure, fair, health-speaking skin, or any thing beautiful in feature or coloring, but there was the record of an ever-dominant kindness of heart, of a sweetness of disposition that had smoothed roughness and plucked out thorns from every body's path, and that had made that great gain of life, 'contentment with godliness.'

"There were some dozen persons assembled, including my host's small family. The sparkling gem among them was his very lovely daughter who, as Ruscit whispered to me, was engaged to a young man present—a rising star in the literary world. This accounted probably for the rather rare books and new publications that were lying on the table. The furniture was plain, but there were three or four beautiful engravings hanging about the rooms. I was pleased to remark the absence of the too common mantle-furniture (even in our mechanics' houses) of bronzed and gilded lamps and other similar decorations.

Instead of these there were casts, and very good ones, of Canova's lions, plaster casts of two lovely Greek heads, and an erra cotta vase and pitcher of exquisite forms. My host saw me examining them. 'I like,' he said to me in a low voice, 'to make such objects familiar to my children—they insensibly educate the eye and give them a taste for refined pleasures.'

"These people are not quite the 'barbarians' my hostess fancied them, I thought.

"The tea-table was spread in the adjoining parlor after the pattern of old-fashioned New England meals, whose substantial and abundant viands fitly closed a day of industry and temperance. There were tongue and smoked beef, bread and biscuits, and various cakes and sweetmeats—all of home manufacture. One might see by half a look at my good hostess that she was thoroughbred in all those little womanly domestic arts which mould into healthful and hospitable forms the raw materials of sugar and flour. Mrs. Ruscit was bred before the progress of civilization had brought down education to the humble levels of

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society. The worlds of science and art were *terra incognita* to her; but she was learned, for she was heaven-taught in the humanities that are after all the life of social life. She saw that every body was comfortably established at table. She was politely attentive to me as, for the moment, the guest to be honored, but it was plain that she gave far more thought to the comfort of a little humpbacked child of a friend who was seated at a side-table with the lovers. Her instincts told her that he might chance to be overlooked by them; and when the poor little child dropped one of her best China cups and broke it, she forgot the dignity of her station to go and comfort him. 'Poor Johnny!' I overheard her say, 'don't cry—it's not the least matter; I have more of these cups than I want, Johnny.'

"Mrs. Ruscit had no high-bred indifference to the entertainment of her guests. She looked out for each and all—was afraid an elderly lady at table was crowded—bid her younger girls sit closer (the buxom lasses were too solid to pack well)—saw that her delicate preparations were offered to every one, and had a pleasure, in seeing them relished even by those who order their refection from Thompson and Weller.

"My host being interested in schools led me after tea to describing those I had seen abroad, and I perceived it was the habit of his family circle to listen to whatever was new and might be instructive to them. They were all flatteringly attentive except the young lovers, who *would* fall into a little by-talk. This seemed to disturb my serene friend Ruscit, and once I saw him touch the toe of his future son-in-law, and I caught a word or two of his reply, half said to the young beauty and half in excuse to the father. I think he quoted,

'In the presence of lovely young Jessie,
Unseen is the lily, unheeded the rose.'

"I said my friend was interested in schools. He is by nature a friend of young people, and being a wise and reflecting man he feels the paramount importance of education in our country. He is a voluntary visitor of the public schools, is acquainted with their teachers, knows half the scholars by name, and all of them *by heart*. He gave me an account of his establishment. He has some twenty apprentices. 'The years they are to pass with me,' he said, 'comprehend the sowing-season of their lives. They ought not to be devoted solely to the acquisition of their trades. It is not fitting that our young men should be bred like the mere automaton workmen of other countries; it is not fitting that any man should be so bred at this period of the world. I had small opportunity of school education myself. I cannot therefore be their instructor, but I pay them for extra work, and they thus acquire a little fund with which they pay their teachers. They have teachers of mathematics, chemistry, natural philosophy, drawing, music, and French and Spanish! I take upon myself the department of ethics. My boys have a court in which they are tried for offences against the lesser morals and manners. They appoint their own juries and make their own charges and defences, and quietly submit, with very rare exceptions, to the verdicts.*

"In the midst of my friend's communication the carriage was announced, and I was obliged, most reluctantly, to break away and go off to my second party at half past seven. These are not quite 'barbarians' I thought, as the door of this hospitable and happy home closed upon me.

"My next engagement was at Mr. Mallark's. This gentleman is in high standing in the legal profession. He is but recently a resident in your city, and having had rather a stormy life up to middle age, he seems now to love and seek tranquility. I found a few guests, and tea and coffee and their usual accompaniments, just being served. The lady of the house is like, alas! most of our women past the robustness of youth—an invalid; but her invalidism, instead of degenerating into fretfulness or inanity, is solaced and embellished by refined tastes. A few of the choicest, rarest plants—not neglected and never-blooming—but radiant with flowers, filled one of her windows. Some among them were brilliant tropical plants which she had brought from their West Indian homes, and which seemed not to miss their birthplace in our hot rooms, tended as they are by instructed, skillful and loving hands. Mrs. Mallark's frequent visits to sea-shores and Southern climes had made her love whatever was native to them. She had cabinets filled with those exquisite shells which seem to have caught and retained in their polished

prisons the sunbeams of the bright sea-shores whence they came. The drawing-rooms were enriched with curiosities from the farthest Indies, and furniture of the most curious workmanship from China. This I thought strange, as I knew my host had never been engaged in commerce and had no relations with commercial people. The riddle was solved as soon as I was made acquainted with my fellow guests. Some of them were missionaries, who had expended the strength of their days in the good service of God

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and man at our antipodes. They were familiar with the spiritual wants of India and the celestial empire; their kind sympathies were as wide as the circle of humanity, but they knew little of the utilitarian activity about us. I doubt if they had ever heard the names of transcendentalism and Fourierism. They had nothing to do with the passing navigation between the Scylla and Charybdis of popular theorists—they had a holy land of their own, and one might be happier and wiser, and should be better for a glimpse at it.

"From Mallark's, I passed to the drawing-room of Miss Evertson. It was her reception evening. I was admitted to a rather dimly lighted hall by a little portress, some ten or twelve years old, who led me to a small apartment to deposit my hat and cloak. There was no lighted staircase, no train attendant, none of the common flourish at city parties. "Up stairs, if you please, sir—front room for the ladies—back for the gentlemen;" no indication of an overturn or commotion in the domestic world; no cross father, worried mother, or scolded servants behind the scenes—not even a faint resemblance to the eating, worrying and tossing of 'the house that Jack built.' The locomotive was evidently not off the track; the spheres moved harmoniously. To my surprise, when I entered, I found two fair-sized drawing-rooms filled with guests, in a high state of social enjoyment. There was music, dancing, recitation and conversation. I met an intimate friend there, and availing myself of the common privilege of a stranger in town I inquired out the company. There were artists in every department—painting, poetry, sculpture and music. There I saw for the first time that impersonation of genius, Ole Bull. Even the histrionic art asserted its right to social equality there in the person of one of its honorable professors. You may think that my hostess, for one so young and so very fair, opened her doors too wide. Perhaps so, for though I detest the duenna system and believe that the unguarded freedom permitted to our young ladies far safer as well as more agreeable, yet I would rather have seen the mother of Miss Evertson present. Certainly no one ever needed an aegis less than my lovely hostess. She has that quiet delicacy and dignity of manners that is as a 'glittering angel' to exorcise every evil spirit that should venture to approach her. How without fortune or fashion she has achieved her position in your city, where every thing goes under favor of these divinities, I am sure I cannot tell. To be sure she has that aristocracy which supercedes all others—that to which prince and peasant instinctively bow—and though unknown in the fashionable world, you would as soon confound the exquisite work of a Greek sculptor with the wax figures of an itinerant showman as degrade her to the level of a conventional belle.

"Yet she does not open her house as a temple to worshipers of whom she is the divinity, but apparently simply to afford her acquaintances the hospitality of a place of

social meeting. She retires behind her guests, and seems to desire to be the least observed of all observers. Though I belong, as you know, to the dullest category, and am an 'old married man'—am not an artist, author or lion of any sort, but only 'an innocent beast with a good conscience,' my hostess was particularly kind to me, and I was so charmed with her and with the animated social life about her that I found myself outstaying all her guests, and at half past ten reluctantly took my leave—noting for the first time that the hours had passed away without the usual appliances of an evening party. I had supposed that war might as well be carried on without its munitions, officers as well live without their salaries, children as well go to bed without their suppers, as a party to go off without its material entertainment. But here was the song without the supper, not even those poor shadows of refreshments cakes and lemonade. Here was a young woman without 'position'—to use the cant phrase—without any relations to the fashionable world, filling her rooms weekly with choice spirits, who came without any extraordinary expense of dress, who enjoyed high rational pleasures for two or three hours, and retired so early as to make no drafts on the health or spirits of the next day. I communicated my perplexity to a foreign acquaintance whom I met at Mrs. Booth's.

"'Why,' said he, 'your fair friend has hit upon a favorite form of society common in the highest civilization. Miss Evertson's soirees are Parisian—only not in Paris. Not in the world, with the exception of the United States, could a beautiful young woman take the responsibility unmatronized of such a 'reception.''

"My evening's dissipation concluded at Mrs. Booth's. The pulse of the *beau monde* had beaten high for a week with the expectation of Mrs. Booth's party. This was partly owing to the splendor of her new house and her new furniture, and partly to the fashion and accomplishments of the lady, to whose modes of being and doing long foreign travel has given authority. Unfortunately, though three thousand miles from the Old World, we cannot have our independent customs, and in certain things we certainly favor the distasteful theories of the author of 'the Vestiges of Creation,' who develops the monkey into the man. There would be something remaining of our imitative progenitors to account for, some of our senseless imitations; such, for example, as going to parties at eleven o'clock, when, in our working-

day world we must rise and be at our business at nine. But this, en passant, I had plenty of leisure to moralize on the spectacle while my carriage awaited others that preceded it. When at last my coach door was opened, I found a covered and carpeted way was made from the front door to the curb-stone so that the daintiest dame had no shock from the cold pavement or the rough visitation of the Winter's wind. The chieftain of your city police, a Magnus Koil in figure, guarded the passage and used his brief authority so well that he seemed more like the herald of a feudal castle than the orderly of a citizen.

"Gas and wax candles did their best to imitate 'heaven's own blessed light.' The whole house was sweet with the perfume of flowers of all seasons and from the four quarters of the globe. The two splendid drawing-rooms, communicating after the

stereotyped fashion by folding doors, were filled with the highest fashion of the city, with a sprinkling of strangers of distinction—and, that crowning grace to our republican parties—a prince and his attachés! Collinet's band gave such eclat to the drawing-room and threw some of the guests, who had recently heard him in Paris, into such extacies that one might fancy he breathed the very air of that 'divine capital' from his little flageolet.

"You may not take my word for it, but it struck me the ladies were marked by that air of taste and elegance which is said to distinguish your New York women, and why should it not be so? for their dress is Parisian, and the Paris toilet gives law to the world. Still I must confess there seemed to me less beauty under all their exquisite coffures than I had seen among Miss Evertson's unadorned guests. Perhaps the gas-light was too strong for dress to achieve its greatest miracle—making 'age seem youth'—for there were world-worn faces where the *couleur de rose* had passed from every thing but the flowers and feathers.

"A buffet in an apartment in the rear of the drawing-room was embellished with costly silver, glass and china, and supplied throughout the evening with every species of 'refreshment,' substantial viands and delicacies, wrought up to such pitch of refinement that they seemed almost to be sublimated out of their materiality. In short nothing was wanting that expense, labor, and fashion could compass; but—the rooms were crowded, the air was loaded; few could hope to enjoy the primary hospitality of a seat; there was no conversation beyond the exchange of half a dozen conventional phrases; and while some twenty fortunate young ladies, who enjoyed the sweet security of parties, monopolized the dancing floor, others, novices in society, or from some other cause (certainly not because they were less pretty or less charming) remained pinioned to the wall silent observers. There were worn men of business dragged into this vortex by parental kindness, while their thoughts still lingered in the warehouse or in Wall street. A few husbands had come forth with reluctant conjugal courtesy; and mamas in plenty were there mere attachées to their daughters. There was no room for ease, no opportunity, were they ever so enriched for it, for conversation. These are the necessary conditions of a party in fashionable life, and its imitations. Mrs. Booth did all that could be done to relieve them. She manifested no ultra modish unconciousness of her guests, but, with the benevolence that has illustrated other places of durance, she 'remembered the forgotten and attended to the neglected,' applying, whenever she could, the balm of her sweet smile and opportune word. The desert has its diamond—she was something quite as precious in her drawing-room. Her husband too, with his frank and cordial manners, did all that could be done to preserve the geniality of his home in this ungenial crowd. No power can achieve impossibilities.

"I laid my head on my pillow between one and two o'clock and repassed in my mind the scenes of the evening. I wondered a little at the 'social ambition' I had often witnessed in your city—at the limitations of fashionable life, and more than all I marveled at the eager aspirations to attain its dazzling heights. I doubted even if the elevation were not rather apparent than real, and when I compared the social meetings at Miss Evertson's, Mallark's, and the 'barbarian' Ruscit's, to the splendid fete at Mrs.

Booth's, it seemed to me that in present and *after* comfort, in actual enjoyment, and in what most marks the advancement of man and society, they had the superiority.

"You may smile at my rustic taste, but I confess that my thoughts finally settled down on my philanthropic friend Ruscit, his large-hearted wife, and their generous and modest hospitality.

"All conditions have their good and beauty. To my thinking, the flowers that grow in the shade are the sweetest."

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* During the prevalence of the Asiatic cholera in New York, it became a question whether Mr. Ruscit and others seized with the panic should close their workshops. He decided to keep his open. The young men were busy in their working hours, and amusements were provided for their leisure. One among them wrote a drama—others painted and arranged scenery and costumes, and all had a part to perform. Not a case of cholera occurred—not a premonitory symptom—not even the usual Summer illness.