

NEW OUTLOOK

MAY, 1933

All The Sad Young Vice-presidents

By

Marie L. Darrach

The story of the readjustment of America's moneyed aristocracy under the stress of the depression is told by Marie L. Darrach, magazine and newspaper writer.

THE LAST REPORT of the Bureau of Internal Revenue furnishes conclusive evidence that many of the families who were maintaining our social front during the delirious decade ending in 1930 have been reduced to incomes that are negligible. And from other authentic sources we learn that the shrinkage in the spending capacity of this portion of our suddenly submerged citizenry is causing much of the distress in the segment of the population which now has its head on the Community Chest.

The collapse of our moneyed aristocracy in 1929 was a sociological phenomenon different from the gradual disintegration of England's rich families after the war which was due to excessive taxation and a chronic strain on incomes. The attitude of the English to adversity, therefore, has been different from ours. Their adjustment has resulted in a revolutionary reaction to the old regime, with the dole as a remedy at the bottom of the social scale; and the adoption of living standards in the middle and upper classes, completely at variance with tradition and in violent contrast to old-established custom.



In this country we are adjusting to depression and negotiating the road to recovery largely by returning to economic sanity in our home life.

According to the 1932 report of the Bureau of Internal Revenue the front rank of our social structure still includes seventy-five individuals (reduced from 545 in 1929) with an annual income of a million or more, together with thousands of lesser financial luminaries bracketed as low as what once would have been called the humble, hundred thousand class. And since the press continues to carry accounts of elaborate social affairs—that strings of polo ponies and expensive racing stables are still maintained in the East and South—it is obvious

that we still have a substantial coterie on the top stratum, functioning much as it has done for three generations. This cannot be said of any other country in the world today.

But it is not of this stable element in our social structure that Europeans inquire most frequently. Their concern is for those high-powered Americans who figured so prominently on interna-

tional playgrounds prior to 1929, the men flashing large bankrolls in every Continental capital and the women



OldMagazineArticles.com

All The Sad Young Vice-presidents

spending money recklessly in Paris for gowns, millinery, perfume and cosmetics. It seems incredible to sad-faced Frenchmen, who once fed heartily on the bounty of these, that people so substantially weighted with gold could vanish suddenly and completely into thin air. Hence their constant query—"What has become of them?"

For a time we wondered ourselves. The abruptness with which these people ceased to circulate socially, after having kept the world at high economic gear for nearly ten years, was largely responsible for pitching the country through the windshield in the first place. The retrenchments which they immediately inaugurated slowed up the wheels of industry and precipitated the initial unemployment which has been rolling up like a snowball ever since. Consequently their reaction to the depression, and their changed standard of living as it affects our economic recovery, should be matters of considerable concern.

But their whereabouts is no longer a mystery. In every city in the United States, thousands of the high lights of the Prosperity may be found, occupying again the position in life from which they so miraculously sprang in the 1920's. Some of them, as white collar recruits, are even swelling the ranks of our 13,500,000 unemployed. The majority are living in environments vastly different from those in which they took temporary rest after finding the pot of gold at the end of the war rainbow. But, with the resiliency and infinite capacity for change characteristic of the American people, the majority are adapting themselves to the economically restricted life of the intermediate stratum, between the very rich and the very poor, and apparently benefited by the lessons learned from their embarrassments.



In this cross-section of our population, to which the new rich of the 1920's were so swiftly returned, are people of every calling. Among them are erstwhile millionaire authors, who had practically stopped writing to disport themselves in Southern Europe on the proceeds from their stock investments. Also movie stars whose fabulous salaries supported sumptuous homes in Beverly Hills, or Long Island and in Florida, and still gave these artists a margin to speculate in Wall Street. But most of them are business men and women who participated in the deals, which in 1929, netted a profit to the government of \$1,578,000,000 on the sale of real estate, stocks and bonds held for less than two years; and who shared in the profits that poured into the coffers of the United States to the sum of \$2,240,000,000 on other speculative transactions. They are in many cases the former executives, junior partners, and employees of the commercial and industrial enterprises which in the same year piled up a net corporation income tax for the country of twelve billion dollars, and whose pay checks often ran into six and seven figures.

Many of these once-moneyed aristocrats are now living on dwindling savings accounts, reduced salaries, or on incomes from investments which have shrunk to sub-normal proportions. Well-worn suits, cobbled shoes and re-inforced linen is what the quondam well-dressed man of 1929 is now wearing, even when he still appears at such country clubs as have managed to survive by waiving dues rather than close their doors.



Families once housed in imposing domiciles are living in modest rented apartments; in homes that the banks are threatening to take from them; or in simple cottages built originally for week-end outings. Most of them have one car, but it is of inexpensive make, and seldom a current model. A single telephone sometimes serves three families who share the expense, and long distance calls to London, Paris and ships at sea are no longer indulged in.

OldMagazineArticles.com

All The Sad Young Vice-presidents

Middle-aged matrons, who for a few years reveled in a retinue of retainers, are now doing their own work, with occasional "help" at fifty cents an hour. They have become budget-conscious for the first time in their domestic careers, and keep an eagle eye on the laundry and cleaning bills and on the kitchen commissary, where extravagance once ran riot. They shop for cash in neighborhood stores instead of ordering from the city over the telephone on charge accounts, and they are as excited when spinach goes down a point as they were a few years ago over the antics of General Motors and A. T. & T. They shampoo their own hair, manicure their nails, and "reduce" by running the vacuum, wheeling the perambulator, and preparing the meals.



It was these people, reduced to the precarious condition of just getting along, after having reached undreamed of financial heights, and tasted the joys of social significance, who originated the slogan "It's smart to be thrifty." And with the stamp of fashion upon it, economy became so popular that it well-nigh ruined the country. Servants were discharged without warning; expensive cars were stored; household maintenance was drastically reduced and women who had been buying quantities of expensive wearing apparel refused to purchase even a pocket handkerchief. At first, as a result of the wholesale dismissal of household help, only butlers, maids, governesses, chauffeurs and foreign chefs cluttered up the employment agencies. These were soon joined by manicurists, store employees, bank clerks, doctors' and dentists' receptionists, trained nurses, secretaries and stenographers. Then teachers, librarians, newspaper men, advertising writers, and steamship officers were searching the Want Ads. And as the process of retrenchment grew more concentrated, prices went down, more retrenchment was precipitated, and wage cutting and unemployment became general, until industrial workers everywhere were idle, and great numbers of well-dressed men and women were out looking for employment. It is the realization that an astonishing number among the unemployed in every city in America once lived beside them on Easy Street that has finally roused those who still have jobs and incomes, although reduced ones, to realize that this generation, as Walter Lippmann said in his recent Charter Day address at the University of California, "has an appointment with destiny."



While a return to the simple life has been bad for business, the restoration of a sane regime after their orgy in the realm of high finance has been good for the souls of this generation of money-makers. Because of their participation in the common struggle of making ends meet, the impersonal attitude of one woman to another, so long the vogue in America, is passing, and something of the old camaraderie of pioneer America has been restored to their social relationships. They are interested in their neighbors as they have never been before—cultivating the people in the next apartment, whether or not they have mutual friends. And human beings in distress are no longer starving Armenians, impoverished Russians, or plague-ridden Orientals, but the family around the corner whose bread winner has been out of work for several years.

Hospitality is simpler and more sincere in the homes of young married couples, reduced to counting their pennies, after a snappy interval of burning up banknotes. When the salary and bonuses of the husband

All The Sad Young Vice-presidents

were of princely proportions and the wife had a generous allowance from prosperous parents besides, ostentation was the keynote of their entertaining, and elaborate menus and gallons of "drink" were imperative even for an informal dinner. Now, soup, salad, a casserole dish, dessert and coffee is considered adequate for any occasion. Nevertheless, the mild orgy of contract bridge recently precipitated by a dapper young card expert as a coast-to-coast diversion shows that the social atmosphere has begun to thaw, and the quantity of small change it has put into circulation in feminine circles is finding its way to department stores and specialty shops.

However, these one-time sponsors of ultra-modern entertainment are still listening to the radio and working jigsaw puzzles, instead of going to the theater or even to the movies. In consequence the lights have not only been dimmed on Broadway, but legitimate drama is just about dead all over the country, and the motion picture industry has been stricken with paralysis. But as a critical air audience they are becoming a boon to the country. Their concentration on radio is creating a demand for better programs, less raucous voices, more correct pronunciation, and less blatant advertising. There is even an indication that this class of "listeners-in" will eventually demand that advertising be curtailed, or returned to newspapers and magazines, and that further use of the air be denied as a medium of ballyhoo for business and private interests. They already claim that the radio should be a government agency as it is in England, for the broadcasting of such cultural, educational and informative matter as the public now gets only as an adulterated sugar coating for advertising, and because they tune in oftener on symphony concerts and lectures on current events than on crooners and nit-wit comedians, their taste is already being reflected in what is put on the air by the managers of manufactured products.

"You'd be surprised how many people never tune in for anything but the news, any more" said a mechanic, complaining of his lack of employment as he repaired a radio set, "and it ain't so much that they're economizing as that the programs are so terrible."



The women of this coterie have long since sacrificed expensive illnesses to such a degree that private hospitals and doctors with fashionable clienteles claim that they have been saved from bankruptcy for the past two years, only by the surprising number of maternity cases in the young married set. In spite of the claim that the birth rate is low only in hard times, in the gaudy life inaugurated by this period of Prosperity there was no place for children. But now with the graph of depression still low the birth rate is rising rapidly in that group which still patronizes an exclusive medical fraternity. Whether it is because the young women have fewer social distractions, and this unoccupied time seems opportune, or because the price of having babies has been so greatly reduced in fashionable circles, it is difficult to say.

Also a report from Reno states that divorce in the class that could once afford excessive alimony has fallen off appreciably. The total number of divorces filed in Reno in 1932 was only 3,214 as against 4,745 in 1931—about one fourth less. And while this means a loss of approximately \$40,000 in filing fees to lawyers, and so registers as a professional depression, it, nevertheless, indicates an improvement in the morale of those who once made lucrative the business of restoring single-blessedness to the unhappily married.

But it is the readjustment of the youth of the prosperity era to the depression that is most significant. As the offspring of the money maniacs of the 1920's they began life as prospective heirs to millions still to be made in Wall Street and were equipped only for a career of fantastic prosperity. Now they find themselves facing conditions verging on bankruptcy, in a world that seems to have little use for their talents.

All The Sad Young Vice-presidents

Not long ago, against a background of colleges and fashionable boarding schools, they were making things hum. Splendidly financed with checks from home, and believing with their parents that they could "eat their cake and still have it," these striplings put on a spectacular show of their own. Duplicating all the extravagances of their elders, they developed an ego unsurpassed by the youth of any time, or country; established a reputation as a generation of free spirits, and became the exponents of a modern school of manners, morals, speech and dress, which threatened the country with a future aristocracy of vulgarity.

Their first reaction to the slowing down of life in 1930 was like that of a man from whom strong drink has been suddenly removed. Dazed by changed home conditions, inarticulate as a result of empty wallets, and unable to move without motor cars, they were the most pitiable spectacle of the panic for a while. Later, when they actually wanted to work, and could find nothing to do in business, industry, the arts or the professions, their bewilderment was complete. The idleness that has been forced upon them has put a great strain upon the philosophy which was the boast of this section of the post-war generation. Young men in a like predicament in former times hiked West in search of fame and fortune. But there are no longer western frontiers to conquer, and "taking to the road" has a sinister implication never associated with the adventurous trek of the old pioneer. "Going to sea" was another old time outlet for the youth whose horizons had closed in upon him. But ocean channels no longer lead to alluring opportunities in foreign lands or to the golden chance that appears once in a life time. So "What to do?" has become an acute problem for regiments of young people, who so short a time ago were finding twenty-four hours all too short into which to crowd a day's breath-taking activity. They have practically abandoned pocket flasks, necking, sex experimenting, and joy riding as having no place in their future program, but are preserving all the hard-boiled theories formulated while they were sophisticated participants in a life of prosperity.

They are no longer contributing to the consumption of commodities to the extent they were when even subdebs were speeding up the sale and manufacture of sports cars and cigarettes, and every small educational center was a miniature metropolitan center reflecting the whirlwind activity of New York. But according to vocational authorities who have been watching their struggles, the young collegian of today is a sounder proposition, and a greater asset to the country, than his elder brother, who in the 1920's was making a spectacular success as a bond broker, customer's man, or shoestring speculator in Wall Street.



The president of an eastern college said recently, "They have no illusions about Big Business; no fear of its bogies; no awe of corporate interests' amalgamations and mergers; nor any belief in the sophistries of people wealthier than themselves. And they are talking things over with each other rather than consulting those who have been tracing old government patterns instead of designing new ones to solve our modern muddles."

A Leland Stanford University graduate who has been keeping the wolf from the door by collecting bills and making out income tax blanks for bewildered old ladies, instead of defending prosperous clients at the bar as he had expected, says:

"Every college man I know is going in for politics. We can at least do the spade work in making it the respectable profession it's always been in England, and open it up as a future career for the finest brains of both sexes in this country. If the United States were at war we'd all be rushing to enlist, at least people would expect us to, so why not wrestle with the domestic enemy that is driving us to the last ditch? After all, bad gov-

All The Sad Young Vice-presidents

ernment is at the root of most of our troubles; and if we dedicate our educational equipment to politics, divorced from Big Business (of which we are heartily sick), we ought to be able to pull the country out of the hole into which our bungling progenitors have pushed it. Anyhow we are getting into the scrimmage from now on, with the idea of improving the rules of the game and crowding out the rough-necks who have made a coster-monger's sport of politics and government administration."

Verification of this young man's remarks was furnished by inquiry in San Francisco. There is a concerted movement on the part of college graduates in this California city to open up the field of politics as a dignified career for the educated young men and women of the country, and to pour new blood into our governmental system. They are studying and discussing economics, attending evening classes and lectures in a School of Social Research, heretofore monopolized by Russian, Chinese and East Indian students. They are also viewing with a critical eye the wrecked reputations and the dimmed effulgence of industrial leaders and Wall Street magnates, and are commenting with intelligence on the shattered devices and demolished ideas once lauded as invincible. And they have not dismissed as an operabouffe joke the survey of the Technocrats.

And this is not in any sense a local movement confined to the far West, but part of a combined action on the part of the educated youth of the nation to create for themselves a field of action, which will be a substitute for the business arena.

"The very rich and the very poor in this country have had their inning," remarked one of their spokesmen; "it's our turn now." And so the representative youth of the intermediate stratum, many of whom were forced back to this position by the depression, are preparing for a sortie into affairs of government. And during the inevitable interval between their present period of preparation for public service and that of actual participation in political administration they are tackling any job from inspecting gas meters to grooming airplanes. Husbands and homes are what most of the girls are seeking, and the career of housewife takes precedent over all others, according to the latest college questionnaires.

This portion of our population, which went into eclipse four years ago and is again beginning to show light around the edges, was no such privileged class as that which has been sunk for all time in England under a weight of debt and national obligations. Our younger fore-rank, augmented for a decade by thousands of men and women, grown suddenly prosperous through speculation, was an aggregation of joy-riding individuals, with financial water on the brain, who crashed on the highway from reckless driving and have been petrified with fright ever since.

The rich new-comers to this class were people who, following the war, had been in good circumstances. They had weathered the minor financial depression of 1921-22, and had come out of it with money in the bank. The men had positions with salaries of from five hundred dollars a month to perhaps thirty-five thousand a year. They had comfortable homes, well-tailored wardrobes and moderately expensive tastes in haberdashery, cigarettes and musical shows. They belonged to country clubs, rather than metropolitan ones, played golf regularly on Saturdays and holidays and traveled only when conventions attracted them to other American cities. As participants in the World War many of them had been to Europe and hadn't thought much of it. Sizeable bank accounts and substantial life insurance policies were among their tangible assets. They were rather stodgy, with prohibition as their sole topic of conversation, and, except for their maddening devotion to business, gave their wives little cause for divorce.

The women were obviously extravagant. They spent as much as they could possibly afford on clothes, and had acquired expensive personal habits. They preferred foreign brand commodities, English lecturers and im-

All The Sad Young Vice-presidents

ported cars. Rest.cures in fashionable sanitariums, treatments in beauty salons and playing bridge at half a cent a point consumed much of their time. They also experimented in divorce, indulged in expensive operations, cultivated a taste for Cook's Tours, and were only mildly interested in adding to the country's population.

These were the people who were transformed almost without warning into the world's greatest spenders.

Then, with the suddenness of a tropical storm, the financial cyclone of October and November 1929 blew the lid off and submerged thousands who had been occupying "dilatory domiciles" on the top for less than a decade. The debacle was so spectacular, and carried so many casualties in its wake, that it seemed for a time as if our whole superstructure had been swept away. It appears now, however, that there was a more effective retreat to cyclone cellars than we had at first supposed, and that the ultimate result has been merely a redistribution of the members of the top layer.

"Human nature being what it is, there will always be hot-cats on top,"—says the Princeton undergraduate, voicing the opinion of a well known author, in a popular novel—"the only question is—Who will they be?" This is merely an inelegant way of stating the sociological fact that stratification is a permanent feature of social organization, and that population circulates vertically as well as horizontally.

Ordinarily redistribution of membership in the upper strata is the result of a normal replacement of those who have died out socially or biologically. But in the 1920's which were marked by the social rise of the money-making classes, vertical circulation was erroneously stimulated, and there was such an intensive infiltration of new rich that Society became an annex of Big Business rather than an exclusive organization for entertaining in the grand manner. The permanency of its nucleus, however, has been proved, as, even with the submergence of all this rich material since 1929, it still retains its pre-war outline.

And into this well-populated superstructure many of the submerged dwellers on the intermediate strata will again scramble, better fitted for a long time occupancy. People can't live in a state of fear forever, and this "rich for a decade" contingent has recovered from its coma, spiritually and mentally strengthened. The man reduced by adversity to wearing a four-year-old suit, the woman to trundling the baby in the park, and the college youth to working at a service station are already stimulating vertical circulation, which will carry an entirely different type into the upper stratum and from the depression will probably be evolved a new intellectual aristocracy unknown in the history of the United States.

