



IN DEFENSE OF SNOBBERY

BY MARGARET CULKIN BANNING

NO DOUBT it seems a poor cause to advocate, and I know that I choose a lonely, precarious position. But I have a reason, almost amounting to a purpose, and it is this: most of the people whom I like best are said to be snobs, and often the very qualities in them which are most delightful seem to bring on the accusation. If these pleasant people are snobs I do not think that the word should be in such bad repute. Also, they are offended or insulted when they are so called. It seems fairly certain that there is either something unjust or mistaken in the characterization or else a fault in their own attitude which makes them so resentful of the word and so sensitive to its imputations. Men and women who will laugh at other criticisms of themselves or cheerfully profit by them almost invariably deny that they are snobbish, and they are often distressed or indignant when they refute the charge. Mary Blake, Catherine Eliot, Gerald Palmer, even Mr. Blenker feel the same way. Though these are some of my friends, they are not one another's intimates, and there can be no possible collusion between them. They live in various parts of the country. Their habits of mind and methods of living are entirely dissimilar, so neither the accusation nor the denial has a common basis in those facts.

Snob is, beyond a doubt, a horrid little word, ugly in sound, unsightly in print. Wondering just what its power

was, I hunted out the thickest and most impressive dictionary I could find, one with several thousand amazingly thin pages all decked and set about with knowledge. But the dictionary disappointed and failed me. It offered in explanation, "one who places a false and vulgar over-estimate on material possessions or fashionable standing." That certainly does not describe Mary Blake, who lives in considerable detachment from material things and never can remember what is fashionable and what is not. "Such a one," said the dictionary further, "as modifies his mental or outward attitude towards persons or matters because of wealth, station, or the lack of them." I cannot see how that applies to Catherine Eliot, whose loyalty to her friends in and out of disgrace and bankruptcy has been a shining example. The word probably derives, according to Webster's emporium of definition, from an original meaning of cobbler. Or it may have begun by being a term of contempt for a tailor. That lets out both Gerald and Mr. Blenker, for one is a capitalist and the other a lawyer and both are unconcerned about what they wear.

It would be simple to assume that injustice has been done my friends and close the discussion. But I am not inclined to let it go so easily. If these people are popularly held to be snobs, and the dictionary cannot accept them under that heading, we must see what usage has done to definition. The

trouble is that the dictionary, for once, is not keeping up with meanings. Snob has simply run away from it, taking along a host of meanings that originally belonged to other words and phrases. Its popular usage is more important than its dictionary meaning both to the one who is using the word and to the one to whom it is attached.

Everybody knows snobs in that dictionary sense. Those insecure people, whose pretensions never fit them very well, whose social life resembles the awkward, unrestful shape of a ladder, apparently must be endured. They are not a pleasant lot. They are at once arrogant and servile and they manage to do considerable bullying when they find people whose outlook is even narrower and more fearful than their own. But we all know what they are about, and the technic of dealing with them is simple enough. Like all bullies, they are more insolent than courageous. They are easily frightened, and many of them live all the time in a state of apprehension, and in a manner which approximates a sort of quarantine. They are always afraid of doing the wrong thing, of being with the wrong people. Of course, all their social alliances have to be temporary in a world where individuals may disgrace themselves at any moment. They try to be absolute about standards but they are copyists at heart and never sure of themselves. Indifference to their habits and opinions bewilders them and throws them into confusion. Nor do they ever have a very good time. Indeed, they work so hard at living and get so little fun out of it that perhaps it is better to be sorry for them. For, nuisances though they are, they are more so to themselves than to other people; and some of them keep a great deal of money in circulation, which is an additional reason to tolerate them, especially in hard times.

But the strange thing is that it is

these dictionary snobs who most often have the word resentfully upon their lips, who insist that other people are the snobbish ones. It is they, I believe, who started the rumor about Mary. And when she says, "I'm really not a snob, am I? I don't see why people think I am," she is certainly not to be blamed for wanting to disassociate herself from that nervous crowd of men and women who are completely mistaken about values and who will always be absurd in manner.

Mary is never absurd and rarely confused about values. She comes from a family which, through its interlockings and achievements, has been well known and highly regarded for many generations. Sometimes the members of it were rich and sometimes they were poor, but there seems usually to have been a flavor of elegance in their living. Mary herself is neither wealthy nor handsome. But she has a small income and she had the luck to marry a man she loved and to win his permanent devotion. Their home is not large or especially pretentious but it is always pleasant. They are apt to spend much more on service than most people with a like income and yet they are less self-indulgent than the average young Americans. Mary's evening dresses always remind people of what is no longer worn and of how queer a fashion which has passed can appear. None the less, to be asked to her house or to secure her as a guest conveys a certain distinction.

She makes no such claim, of course. All she wishes to do is to surround herself with the people of whom she is fond. She is excessively kind to strangers who come to the city, if by some chance they know friends of hers in other places. Spreading her acquaintance at random would not interest her at all. She reads a good deal, talks intelligently, and never forgets to vote. She does not belong to

any women's clubs, not because of prejudice but because she sees no reason why she should spend money on dues or time on meetings. Of course, the circle of people who know her well is small, and she has a habit of repeating the same guests at her dinner parties.

In a phrase, she is a woman who is not at everyone's disposal socially. By that same token she is a snob. It is astonishing how often that comment is made about Mary, never by her friends but by those who have not been invited to her house, by those whose invitations she has not accepted, by those who have merely heard that she is "difficult to know."

Mary is aware of what they say and occasionally it troubles her.

"I'm not a snob," she insists. "There's nothing I hate worse than snobbishness. I didn't go to the Harris wedding because I hardly know the girl. But I like many different kinds of people."

So she does. But she chooses them. It is that which is not forgiven her.

With Catherine Eliot the situation is different. Her great fortune has narrowed the paths of her life even while it has extended them. She is a copied, quoted person. Everything she does is apt to be conspicuous. She cannot have a baby or get her tonsils removed without its being an extraordinary event, because whatever happens to her means the diversion of a great deal of money. She has beauty and youth and a genuine talent for friendship. But she has been forced to shake off a good many people who wanted to exploit her acquaintance. In a way she is rather shrewd, though not infallible, about recognizing the difference between people who want her friendship and those who want to use it.

She told me not long ago of an incident that discouraged her. A child-study group had been formed in her city, and she was asked to join it. She

was glad to do so. She is an excellent mother and always glad to learn what she can about bringing up children and guiding them, so she went to a few meetings with considerable eagerness.

"But what was the use?" she asked. "The programs didn't amount to anything. What they really wanted was not to talk psychology but to have an excuse for spending a social afternoon. That was why I was asked."

She stopped attending the meetings and the remaining members rate her as a "fearful snob."

Still, her loyalties know no limit. When a friend of hers disgraced herself by going away with a man whom she could not marry and the affair came to a wretched impasse, it was Catherine who took up the cudgels for the girl. It was Catherine who sent her to a quiet place abroad to get her bearings and Catherine who quoted from her letters, and defended and explained her case, until people began to realize how much fineness there was in the girl. She did all that against opposition and hostility.

Catherine can be quite wistful sometimes. She feels that her wealth is a barrier. She is really a simple person and very successful in campaigns for charity. I have known her to go from door to door in districts where people did not know her and not only collect small sums of money but leave good will and friendliness behind her. None the less, there is no converting common opinion. She is held a snob. She wishes that it were not so. But she does not know what to do about it.

Gerald, on the other hand, fights back.

"I'm not a snob," he insists, "not in the least. They call me that because I'm not a Joiner. That's what has hung the bad name on me. I hate luncheon clubs because they sing songs and because they are so hearty and because they assume that everyone wants roast beef at twelve-fifteen on