"Regardless of her ability to pay, each individual wants to feel that she will be 'comfortable.' If the store is too high-style, the blue-collar worker's wife's sixth sense tells her she will be subtly humiliated by the clerks and other customers because she is out of her depth classwise."—PIERRE MARTINEAU, Director of Research and Marketing, Chicago Tribune.

OUR EXCURSIONS INTO SPECIFIC STORES—AND PARTICULARLY THE excursions women make to fashionable clothing stores—indicate more than we realize about our status and our status aspirations. The clothing we buy says a good deal about our status. And, for that matter, the way we pay our bills for the clothing and other purchases varies to some extent depending upon our status in our community.

The Chicago Tribune's study of shoppers and their habits in three homogeneous communities outside Chicago reveals that many women see the shopping trip to a prestige store (regardless of any purchases made) as a ritual which, if successful, reassures the woman of her own high status. The trip, the Tribune's investigators found, "enables her to test her self-conception status-wise against the conception" others hold of her.¹

Such women dress up for the shopping trip. They strive to look their most chic and poised, and if the trip is a success they feel "pride, pleasure, and prestige" in patronizing the store and in the satisfaction of "looking down on the customers of the lower-status store" (where women typically don't dress up to shop). Some women said it made them "feel good" just to go into a high-status store. The investigators concluded that "shopping at a prestige store enhances the status of the shopper and vice versa."

On the other hand, women who get beyond their status in their ventures into stores feel uncomfortable. There is a widespread feeling among women that store clerks endeavor to maintain what they consider to be the proper tone for their store by snooting customers who seem out of place. The wife of a research physicist in Stamford, Connecticut, told me that one day when she "ran" into a high-prestige store about a block from her home to buy a blouse that she needed she simply "threw" a babushka over her head and wore slacks. The clerks pretended not to see her. When she asked for a specific blouse in the window, the clerk frozen-face said it was sold. Next morning, dressed in her best, she went back to the same store, sought out the same clerk (who did not recognize her in her more elegant apparel), and without difficulty purchased the same blouse. Sweetly she gave the clerk a $100 bill. The clerk couldn't change such a large bill, and apologetically took the $100 bill to a bank a block away to get change. Our vengeful wife said she enjoyed every minute of the wait.
Or consider a somewhat different case. The wife of a very ambitious but hardly prosperous sales manager went into a fashionable Fifth Avenue store and asked to see "theater suits." A crisp saleslady, after appraising her, brought out a dress priced at $39.50. That price was the store's bargain-basement price. The wife saw only the price tag and was offended. After barely glancing at the suit itself, she asked with some haughtiness if the store didn't have something "better." The clerk, not to be out-snooted, said the only other appropriate suits were "quite a bit higher." With that she disappeared and soon came back with another suit. It was priced at $165. The wife showed visible signs of distress but said it was just what she wanted. She spent the next two months finagling the family finances to conceal her folly from her husband.

In the choice of any store for making an important purchase, we unwittingly seek out the store with a status image at or near our own status level. Pierre Martineau of the Tribune has found that many merchants are unaware of this. He asked a major Chicago retailer with a large store in the heart of the city about the socio-economic character of his customers. The man replied proudly that the entire range of economic classes was his oyster. He said he drew people from all social classes. "But an analysis of his sales tickets," Mr. Martineau states, "revealed that nothing could be further from the truth!" Although he was centrally located, the vast majority of his customers were drawn from the lower third of the economic scale, with addresses in the South Side or southern suburbs.

Another market researcher in Chicago states: "You could classify Chicagoans socially by the stores they patronize." He went down a rather long list of major stores of descending social status. At the top of his list was Marshall Field & Co., which is unsurpassed in status among the major stores.

Pierre Martineau contends that the most successful stores are those that deliberately develop a clear-cut image conveying their socio-economic status, whether high or low. One way stores develop an upper-class image is to bear down heavily on antiquity in their decor. Dark woods are said to be more suggestive of an upper-class status than light woods. Mr.

Martineau tells of a leading department store in the South that had old-fashioned lighting and fixtures throughout. The best families from the city's fine old homes seemed to love the store. Then a change came in one section of the store. The merchandiser of women's apparel set out to modernize his department. Mr. Martineau relates: "He introduced new fixtures and lighting, more high fashion styling, and a promotional flavor similar to any aggressive chain store in the field."

The result? "The fortunes of the store declined in definite progression—first women's apparel, then children's, then men's apparel and finally all the hard-line departments." The trouble was traced to the women's-apparel department, which had been modernized, and the decline was checked when the store brought back into that department the ancient lights, fixtures, and other mood-creating paraphernalia.

When big downtown stores open suburban stores in shopping centers, care must be taken, Martineau has concluded, to open in areas with status images comparable to that of the downtown store. A lower-class department store that builds a branch in an upper-
class suburban neighborhood will find itself under a cloud. And the reverse is also true. Many shopping centers, he states, are a hodgepodge of stores with different status appeals and are "pulling against each other."

Now let us examine the status meanings of the clothing we buy in these stores. The economic director of the Wool Bureau happily predicted, some months ago, that clothing was enjoying a resurgence as a symbol of status and would become more so in the coming decade.

Historically, clothing has been one of the most convenient, and visible, vehicles known for drawing class distinctions. In early New England, a woman was permitted to wear a silk scarf only if her husband was worth a thousand dollars. Medieval London had detailed specifications on the amount of affluence that was necessary before a person could wear ermine, cloth of gold, or silk. Rothenburg, Germany, still exhibits the heavy wooden collar that was locked, during the Renaissance, around the neck of any woman who tried to dress beyond her class. And during the French Revolution, the revolutionists, in their desire to abolish class distinctions, struck down the laws defining the dress appropriate to each class.

The elite long viewed clothing as a way to demonstrate both its superior wealth and its habitual abstinence from any productive form of labor. Some examples of the latter: the high hats, patent-leather shoes, and fluffy white collars and cuffs of the males; the high spiked heels, hobble skirts, and bound feet of females.

Developments of recent years, however, weakened the effectiveness of clothing for these two purposes. The mass production and mass marketing of fine fabrics—including nylon stockings—weakened the first function; and the lessening significance of leisure as a symbol of high status, due to the shorter work week, weakened the second one.

It develops, however, that class distinctions persist in more subtle forms. Sociologists Bernard Barber and Lyle S. Lobel made an analysis of clothing preferences of women at different social levels by analyzing fashion material in a number of women's magazines covering a twenty-year period. The classes studied ranged from "old money" upper class down to lower middle class. They found, for example, a significant difference in emphasis as you moved from the "old money" rich, or true elite, to the "new money" rich, or unseasoned elite. The women of "old money" families tend to be relatively indifferent to swings in fashion; and their taste is oriented more to that of the British upper classes than to the French. They like woolens and prefer a tweedy look to a daring look. All this, Barber and Lobel conclude, reveals a "concern for birth distinction and English heredity as against the distinction of occupational achievement." They respond to fashion messages that use such words as "aristocratic" and such phrases as "well-bred looks" or "a trumpet flare at the hip."

In contrast, the "new money" women are fascinated with high fashion, especially as it is dictated by Paris. They strive for a chic, sophisticated look while at the same time, with an eye on the goal of gaining acceptance from the "old money" rich, they strive for an appearance of quiet, assured elegance.
As you move down into the range of the typical American woman, the aim is to follow whatever "smart" style is "sweeping the country" provided that the style permits the women to emphasize their "respectability" and prettiness. These women are more likely to look for guidance in their dress to Mrs. Earl Warren than to the Duchess of Windsor.

A woman of some wealth amplified for me the difference of attitude of "old money" women and "new money" women when she told of an evening she spent attending parties on the North Shore of Chicago. The first was at a club dominated by wealthy "new money" families. The second was a more elite club for "old money" millionaires. She had planned, for convenience, to wear the same outfit to both affairs, a dramatic black gown accentuated by diamond accessories. Her hostess, however, admonished her to change before going on to the "old money" affair. They looked through her wardrobe and the hostess pointed to a dark-brown woolen dress as being ideal. My acquaintance explained, "It was the thing I had been wearing to come down to breakfast."

The objectives women typically have in mind when they dress also vary from class to class. Women who are really secure in their upper-class status may become fond of a really good outfit and wear it for years as a favorite costume. The fabulously well-dressed Mrs. Winston Guest recently took with her to Europe a suit she has been wearing for eight years. She was reported as explaining, "Good suits simply do not wear out if you hang them up." When you drop down to the semi-upper-class level, however, you find a great deal of striving to demonstrate variety of wardrobe. This is particularly true among club women in the Midwest. As they go to their various club activities, they keep running back home to change their outfits so that they will be more in keeping with the setting, time, and mood of the occasion. They tend to think of their dressing in terms of self-expression. My family once had such a lady as a house guest. She changed her costume five times in the course of one day. The wife of a corporate executive is a former Kansan now living in the New York suburbs. She states that when she goes back to her home town in Kansas she has to plan on wearing more outfits per week than she does in New York. The women in the Kansas town, she states, seem to be more dress-conscious.

Social Research, Inc., has found that lower-middle-class women (limited success), on the other hand, dress primarily to make a nice impression on other people, particularly other women. And the lower-status woman, it found, likes to dress up for still a different reason. She wants most the fantasy of the experience. She is eager to get away from the drudgery of housework and children, and wants to become a Cinderella and so escape for a moment from her troubles. She doesn't dress particularly for men because most of the males she sees at parties are her relatives and in-laws.

Men, too, despite their resistance to attempts to change their styles, exhibit certain distinctive modes of dress as you move from class to class. Upper-class males are much more likely to wear vests than males of any other class. And they have strong ideas about shirt collars. My wife, Virginia, recently painted the portrait of a striking-looking young man of seventeen who attends, most of the year, an elite New England boarding school. The portrait revealed him clean-cut in his open-collared white shirt. When Virginia
showed him the portrait for suggestions, he said it was very nice. Something, however, was obviously bothering him, and he finally confessed the cause of his uneasiness. He asked if she would mind putting buttons on his open collar. The button-down collar, it seemed, is mandatory with boys at his boarding school.

Many grown men would feel uncouth if they ever had to appear in public without their Brooks Brothers suit. They’ve been buying them ever since their own boarding-school days. The importance of the upper-class label and "look" to males can be seen in the fact that a Third Avenue merchant in New York has developed a highly successful business selling cast-off "snob label" clothing, for around $35 a suit, to men who have momentarily come upon hard times. The most sought labels include Brooks Brothers, Burberry, Chipp, Stadler & Stadler, and J. Press.

Perhaps the most visible differentiation between males of the upper cluster of classes and those of the lower classes is the elaborate casualness of the upper-class dress for most occasions outside work and the faith in formality of those in the lower groups. A now famous Hollywood actor still reveals his lower white-collar origins every time he sits down. He pulls up his trousers to preserve the crease.

A sixteen-year-old boy from a limited-success family was invited to attend a dance for young folks at a yacht club on the New England coast. His mother was thrilled and bought him a new blue serge suit for the occasion. The boy spent a miserable evening. Every boy at the dance except himself was wearing khakis and an old sports jacket. Among the yacht-club set this casual uniform was de rigueur. This same distinction apparently applies in England. The aristocrats dress down on weekends, wear dirty sneakers and go tieless. Meanwhile, the gardener, when he goes for a walk, dresses up in his Sunday best with stiff collar and hat even when the weather is very warm.

In clothing as in other matters, the really rich prize age, whereas men well below them in status prize newness. The New England aristocrat clings to his cracked shoes through many re-solings and his old hat.

The shape of our clothing varies in another interesting way by class. As you go up the class scale, you find an increasing number of fat men. Among women the opposite is true. You rarely see a really plump woman on the streets of the well-to-do suburbs surrounding New York. The slim figure is more of a preoccupation with women of the two upper classes. As you go down the scale, the married women take plumpness more calmly.

The way we spend our money and pay our bills—for clothes and other items—also is to a considerable degree a reflection of class-induced attitudes. William Foote Whyte found in his interviews with Chick and Doc, the two contrasting young men of the Italian slums, that attitude toward money has a lot to do with the possibility of rising in the social scale. Chick went on to "Ivy University" and law school to become a successful lawyer. Doc, in contrast, made little progress, continued to hang out nightly with the street-corner gang. Whyte, who came to know both men well as to their intelligence and ability, observed: "Clearly difference in intelligence and ability does not explain the difference between Chick and Doc."
There must be some other way of explaining why some Cornerville men rise while others remain stationary." He found that those who later went on to college and became successful began showing signs of thriftiness even in boyhood. Whyte concluded:

"The college boy must save his money in order to finance his education and launch his business and professional career. He therefore cultivates the middle class virtue of thrift." In contrast, Doc, to maintain his prestige as leader of his street-corner gang, had to be a free spender. "It is not possible," Whyte said, "to be thrifty and yet hold a high position in the corner gang."

Aside from the lowest class, the worst credit risks in America appear to be the upward strivers of the semi-upper class. The Chicago Tribune study of "The New Consumer" quotes a dweller of its high-status community, Golf, as explaining: "You must spend just a little more than you can afford to progress high in life." (In late 1958, an insurance company began promoting a policy that, it said, was ideal for highly paid executives. The New York State superintendent of insurance soon felt it necessary to issue a warning stating that many men of moderate incomes [$10,000-$ 15,000] had been buying it—and had no business doing so.)

A builder in suburban Detroit cited one higher-income suburb favored by middle-level automotive executives as having "the worst credit rating of the Detroit area." And he added, from sad personal experiences, "I want no part of the market for the high-priced home in the $25,000-$40,000 bracket. The most dangerous group to do business with are these people who have salaries between $10,000 and $20,000. Specifically I'm talking about junior executives who have higher-class tastes but still don't have the money. They've got to join the country club and buy a second car and probably a boat and have a regular cleaning woman. I call them the Second Louies of Industry. You can have them!"

The people with salaries ranging from $7,000 to $10,000, he said, are far better credit risks. They are more solid and don't "lush up" at the country club. "Above $10,000 you're taking a chance." That income figure of $10,000, he said, "is the breaking point."

As you go up the class scale, you find that people tend to develop, as a status right, a more delaying attitude toward monthly bills. A workingman's wife who neglects to pay a bill by the fifteenth is likely to find her credit cut off at the butcher's and, if delinquent more than a few days, to find a collector on her door step. A semi-upper-class wife, in contrast, is likely to consider it "plebeian" to pay bills promptly and expects tradespeople to maintain a patient, hat-in-hand attitude. The man and wife are much too busy with larger matters to bother with bills. Actually, of course, they often are strapped.

In the real upper class, you are likely to see a monumental casualness about bills. The local tradespeople pretend that money really is a nuisance and often make a point of seeming negligent and offhand about submitting bills. And the customers frequently take three or more months to pay. When you reach the higher levels of the upper class, the casualness about bills becomes a source of wonderment. Gloria Vanderbilt recalls, in her autobiography, which she wrote with her twin sister, her surprise at learning that the family butcher bill had reached $40,000.
CHAPTER 7
4. C. Wright Mills, op. cit., p. 119.

CHAPTER 8
8. C. Wright Mills, White Collar, p. xvii.

CHAPTER 9
1. The New Consumer, p. 25. (See also "Class Is Open for Discussion" by Pierre Martineau in Motivation in Advertising [New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co . . . 1957], pp. 163-72.)
3. Ibid.

CHAPTER 10