

LAUNCHING THE BLINNS

Drawings by Joseph Clement Coll

IN the course of quite an extended experience in the useful art of social promoting, I do not remember to have had, at the onset, a more difficult proposition than that of the launching of the Blinn family in New York Society. They came into my hands through my friend, the former Ambassador, who was in a way responsible for my career. It was indeed an undertaking of much magnitude. As for the Blinns themselves (and I am going to say here that Blinn was not their name or anything like it), they were not in the least impossible. On the contrary, they were, as a family, somewhat quiet and inoffensive people, with not the least suggestion of vulgarity about them and not the first evidence of being *nouveaux riches*.

Blinn had become a conspicuous figure in the financial world of trusts, had been written up in distinguished company, and his picture had been published more than once.

But the suggested furtherance of the social ambitions of the House of Blinn came just at a time when millionaires and multimillionaires began to be a drug in the market. It was practically impossible then to break into Society with money alone—and absolutely impossible to break in without it. Money was getting too common, and you could not buy your way into Society with it. The jaded appetites of the elect could not be tempted by mere dinners, as one was very much like the other and there were plenty of people with fat purses eager to entertain; but it was a hard task to persuade anyone to go to their entertainments. The hour was not propitious.

Blinn was not a Western man. Indeed, the family hailed from a city within a day's journey from New York. The former Ambassador had been a Senator, and I had suspicions which were afterward verified that Blinn and he had been in more than one deal, financial and otherwise.

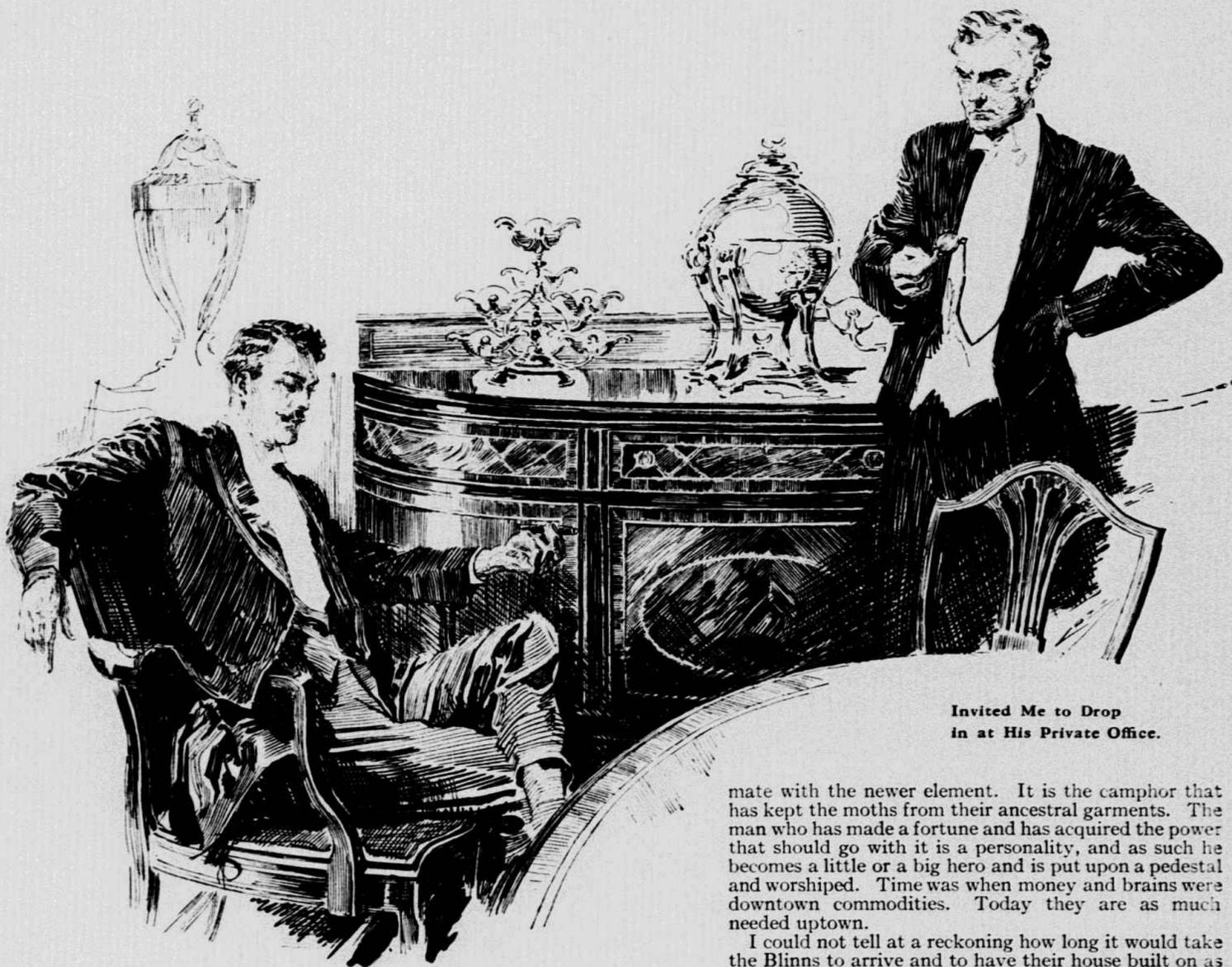
The family was all right. Mrs. Blinn was a quiet, cultivated woman, not in the least pushing, and quite acceptable anywhere. A daughter, Marianna, was not a beauty, but a girl with much charm, clever and accomplished, and all that. She had been educated in a French convent, and had a finishing tour on the Continent, had been in Paris with the Countess, a delightful American woman, an old friend of mine, who, by the way, had unfortunate marital experiences, and had long since divorced the Count at a sacrifice of a large slice of her inheritance. She was suspected of not being averse to launching American heiresses in Paris Society with a view to gathering in a title and a neat commission.

But, in the present-day vernacular, there had been nothing doing for Marianna. Then the girl had two winters at Washington, and she and her mother met a great many people, had gone about a good deal, and had entertained in the free and open way that was the fashion during a previous administration.

Now that Blinn was becoming more or less of a national character, and had the reputation of having a finger in a number of embryo trusts, New York was the logical sequence of the family. And the former Ambassador and the Ambassador and the Countess had concluded that I was the very man to do it. I was further informed that money was no object: Blinn had made up his mind that social position was absolutely necessary to the furtherance of his different schemes, and he was perfectly willing to pay for it.

I FOUND that Blinn himself had an odd presence and physiognomy. There was strength in his face and a certain timid manner that hardly agreed. But I saw that he was a character, and I could easily understand how he could be a power. I think we called them Napoleons of Finance or some such fantastic name in those days. The ladies were a bit colorless; although the girl was bright and amusing when you could draw her out of her shell. She and her mother were perfectly gowned, and if they lacked the strong personality of the father they were not obtrusive.

During the dinner party when we first met we touched on the difference between metropolitan and Washington Society and that abroad, and other kindred topics. The Blinns were attentive listeners; but they took little part in the general conversation. However,



Invited Me to Drop
in at His Private Office.

the entire subject was threshed out from an impersonal point of view, and various anecdotes told by myself illustrating some of the difficulties a few had experienced in getting into Society, and bits of gossip about those who had arrived.

After dinner, over our liqueurs and cigars, the subject was again brought up, and I was surprised to find how well informed the new recruit was on all these matters. He quietly put me through a series of leading questions. I felt as if I had been on the witness stand during a remarkably searching cross examination. At the close of the evening I was a little taken by surprise when Blinn asked me suddenly, "What do you think of Newport?" and followed up this query by an invitation to drop in and see him at his private office in the rooms of one of his corporations downtown. In fact, he named a day and hour. The appointment was made, and when we were taking leave of our host and hostess he turned to me again and said, "I want you to tell me what you know about Newport."

The matter was clear to me. I was to take charge of the Blinns and conduct them via Newport into New York Society.

FOR the newcomer, Newport is a safer investment than New York. If you make a hit there, you can at once follow up your advantage and turn it to excellent account. If you come a cropper, there is no reason why you should not try again another season. You might allow a decent delay of a year or more between trials. At your second venture you may find conditions completely changed. Some will have already forgotten your disaster, and others will never have heard of it. But you must be clever enough to seize your opportunity at the psychological moment. And this cannot be done unless you are guided by someone who knows the ropes.

Newport would be the salvation of the Blinns. Indeed, it was their only hope. To engineer them there seemed to me at first a delicate matter. I did not want anyone to know that I was doing this for revenue. It would hurt my own social position, and I was not so firmly established as to invite risks. On the other hand, I could see that they would be helpless without me. It was more than necessary that I should be with them and that I should direct their every move. But Society with the New York mark, *au fond*, worships money. Twist this round as you may, you cannot get away from it. One of the many writers on Society in this country, a woman well born and of excellent position, has denied the statement that if you are rich you can be a success if you know how, and if you are poor you are never heard of; but it is true, all the same. The so-called Knickerbockers of today, who are socially prominent, have taken good care as a rule to amalga-

mate with the newer element. It is the camphor that has kept the moths from their ancestral garments. The man who has made a fortune and has acquired the power that should go with it is a personality, and as such he becomes a little or a big hero and is put upon a pedestal and worshiped. Time was when money and brains were downtown commodities. Today they are as much needed uptown.

I could not tell at a reckoning how long it would take the Blinns to arrive and to have their house built on as firm a foundation as the socially elect. I might accomplish it in one summer at a single stroke, and again I might have to do it brick by brick, with patient waiting, moving up only a peg or so each year. However, I determined on a *coup d'état*.

Blinn would have to make me, in a way, a species of confidential secretary,—secretaryship being a cloak for so much,—and I could then justify and explain my relations with the family. Indeed, I should be the subject for much congratulation, as having secured a comfortable financial berth, and my friends would rally round me. Then I would allow my individuality to carry the day.

I DECIDED that it was best to come right down to business. Blinn was a plain man, and that was the best way to meet him. I made an appointment with him at the office he maintained near the Stock Exchange, and took him out to luncheon—all the big deals are now pulled through with the aid of food and drink—at my downtown midday club, on the top floor of a Wall Street building.

This was advantageous for both of us. Blinn was gradually becoming a metropolitan character, and, although from his extreme shyness he had made only a few personal friends, he was known by sight quite generally. He was much interested during luncheon in the different other tables and their occupants.

The club is quite catholic, and has among its members all sorts and conditions. However, there was quite a sprinkling of the younger set of uptown clubmen, whom Blinn designated as "swells" and he knew by name. Several of these passed our table and spoke to me, and others again nodded a greeting from the other side of the room. This delighted my guest, and I could see that my stock was leaping up points at a time, and that my having Blinn to luncheon was making its due impression on those who knew me there, many of whom regarded him as a coming power in the Street.

I cut the preliminaries as short as possible. I told him that in view of our previous talks and correspondence I knew that he had some definite proposition to make to me, but that if he would listen for a moment I would make one to him. From what he had heard of me and from what he knew of me, he must be fully aware of my ability in being able to put him where he wanted to be placed in New York Society. I would guarantee to conduct for him a social campaign that would land him. I must have for it absolute management and unstinted funds. From what he had told me, I knew his standard. It was William C. Whitney, who was then in the fullness of his life. He was an ardent admirer of that distinguished politician and financier, whose liberal and princely hospitality has never been rivaled in this country.

Blinn was willing to spend unlimited money. I