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THE SALON OF MABEL DODGE

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THE SALON OF MABEL DODGE

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Mabel Dodge's salon . . . burst upon New York like a rocket.

Margaret Sanger

It was the only successful salon I have ever seen in America.

Lincoln Steffens

Many famous salons have been established by women of wit or beauty; Mabel's was the only one ever established by pure will power. And it was no second-rate salon; everybody in the ferment of ideas could be found there.

Max Eastman

It is indeed the happy woman who has no history, for by happy we mean the loving and beloved, and by history we designate all those relatable occurrences on earth caused by the human energies seeking other outlets than the biological one. . . . That I have so many pages to write signifies, solely, that I was unlucky in love. Most of the pages are about what I did instead. . . .

Mabel Dodge<sup>1</sup>

Mabel Dodge was rich and attractive and more than a little lucky. For two years -- from 1912 to 1914 -- she played hostess to the most famous and no doubt the most interesting salon in American history. This success was no accident, but the result of a subtle interplay between her individual needs and ambitions and the historical moment. It was a very special period in the cultural life of the United States, one when expatriate Irish painter John Butler Yeats cocked an ear and heard "the fiddles . . . tuning as it were all over America."<sup>2</sup> A historian has used the phrase, "The End of American Innocence" to describe the brief years before the First World War when the U.S. was flooded with ideas that had been developing in Europe for more than a century -- the theories of Marx, Freud, Bergson and Nietschze, the doctrines of Syndicalism, Anarchism, Socialism and Naturalism, the visions of Cubists and Fauves.<sup>3</sup> These blended with native American movements in politics, art and social

life to form a volatile, radical-Bohemian subculture which produced new styles of living, publications, cultural forms and institutions. Much of this activity centered in Greenwich Village, and Mabel Dodge's salon became a primary meeting place for the artists, intellectuals, seekers and radicals who called that region home.

She seems an unlikely hostess for gatherings where public issues, intellectual doctrines or radical actions were debated. Mabel was a private person who, for most of her life held as an ideal something she called "la grande vie intérieure." She was a mystic, always on the trail of the Infinite, which she often managed to confuse either with psychic love, the sexual impulse, or a combination of the two. She was a neurasthenic who loved to languish in bed while doctors or male friends held her hand and made soothing noises. She was a person whose interest in herself and her own problems was so enormous that she underwent psychoanalysis twice and then wrote nine lengthy volumes of Intimate Memories (five of which remain unpublished) as a continuation of the therapeutic process. Finally, she was a rich woman who had never held a job and whose idea of getting close to "the people" was to ride in a chauffeur-driven limousine through the Lower East Side ghetto or to live in a luxurious mansion amidst the impoverished, Indian pueblo-dwellers of Taos, New Mexico.

That Mabel could create such a successful salon tells as much about the era as about her. It was a period when the distinction between inner and outer worlds became fuzzy and blurred. Words like "liberation," "rebellion" and "revolution" were on everyone's lips in

the radical-Bohemian subculture of New York, but their meanings ran in two opposite directions, one personal and the other public. The former meant freeing oneself from the dead hand of the past, from those attitudes usually (and erroneously) labeled Puritanism. This was believed to have stifled both artistic and sexual modes of expression and turned American into a drab, joyless, business civilization whose citizens were stunted and warped by the pursuit of what William James termed "the bitch goddess Success." The latter path meant sympathy for and action on behalf of those other victims, the laboring classes of the industrial order, the men and women whose toil created vast wealth that they could not enjoy but which allowed a small minority to control the political, economic and social destinies of the nation.

The salon got under way just when a revolt against business, industrialism and narrow definitions of human potential was taking middle class people from small towns and provincial cities to major urban centers. In communities like Greenwich Village many people began to live outside the conventions of normal bourgeois society. Both men and women sought to define themselves in new ways -- they refused to take regular jobs, lived together openly without being married, experimented in various art forms, theorized endlessly about life, drank a good deal and felt free to seek new forms of insight through the infant practice of psychoanalysis. This self-indulgence and hedonism was tempered by a social conscience. Smatterings came with them from hometowns, where ghosts of the Populist revolt of the nineties still lingered, village atheists thundered against Christianity,

the radical doctrines of Henry George and Edward Bellamy retained adherents and the growing Socialist Party -- whose candidate, Eugene V. Debs, was to win almost a million Presidential votes in 1912 -- had established reading rooms or run candidates for local office. The glaring contrast between rich and poor in the metropolis gave further fuel to notions of exploitation, and the Village itself was a schoolroom full of radical doctrines -- the anarchism of Emma Goldman; the syndicalism of Big Bill Haywood, leader of the Industrial Workers of the World; the socialism of Morris Hillquit. In the Village it was impossible to ignore the lesson that the traditional American parties and labor unions did not cover the full spectrum of political and economic wisdom.

A later generation may find the two impulses -- the artistic or self-exploratory and the social or radical political one -- to be in conflict. Yet in that era youthful optimism denied all such contradictions. Mabel Dodge was hardly the only person to confuse personal fulfillment, artistic expression and social change. Emma Goldman, for example, devoted herself to lecturing on art and literature as well as anarchism; John Sloan, leader of the Ashcan School of painters, ran for Congress as a Socialist more than once; Max Eastman, editor of the radical Masses, promoted the doctrines of both Marx and Freud, wrote poetry and abstract philosophical works, and underwent a brief psychoanalysis; Floyd Dell, another Masses editor, toyed with Socialism, Pacifism, Feminism, psychoanalysis and experimentation in the theater. Such examples could easily be multiplied. Many other figures -- John Reed, Randolph Bourne,

Margaret Sanger, James Oppenheim, Hutchins Hapgood, Walter Lippmann and Van Wyck Brooks also embraced multiple and often contradictory interests without worrying over the logic of their positions. It was, in truth, a time when the experience of daily life was more important than anything which could be said about it.

Mabel's life may echo themes sounded by many of her contemporaries, but her road to Manhattan in 1912 was unique. She had been born Mabel Ganson in 1879, the only child of a wealthy, banking family in the provincial city of Buffalo, New York. It was not an affectionate household and some of Mabel's earliest memories were of the implacable warfare that can exist between men and women. For the most part it was a cold war, but sometimes anger broke into the open and her father raged with an impotent fury, stamping, flinging his arms about, shouting and swearing. Her mother refused to acknowledge such tirades and hid "her cold, merciless, expressionless contempt behind her book or newspaper."<sup>4</sup> Eventually he would slam out of the room, his angry actions covering what Mabel would interpret as defeat. The lessons from her parents sank deep. All her life Mabel would see relationships as a struggle for power and dominance, and she would adopt her mother's attitudes -- speaking little and asserting her own will through silent manipulation.

She was dimly aware of this behavior pattern which, with regards to men, sometimes rose close to consciousness. Seeing her days as a search for love, Mabel could easily write that "like most

women, all my life I . . . needed and longed for the strong man who would take responsibility for me and my decisions. I wanted to lie back and float on the dominating decisive current of an all-knowing, all-understanding man." Yet much as she might claim the problem to be that she "had never known any such men," there were moments when she recognized the struggle waged in her own psych: "Something in us wants men to be strong, mature and superior to us so that we may admire them, thus consoled in a measure for our enslavement to them. . . . But something else in us wants them to be inferior, and less powerful than ourselves, so that obtaining the ascendancy over them we may gain possession not only of them, but of our own souls, once more."<sup>5</sup> What Mabel never admitted was that her relations with women -- either as friends, rivals for a man's affection or in her few homosexual encounters -- were marked by the same bitter kind of conflict.

From an early age Mabel saw herself as an essentially passive creature, one whose actions were mysteriously guided by the current of the universe flowing through her. Outwardly her childhood was normal for her era and social class -- private schools, flirtations with boys and girls, a summer on the continent, a fashionable debut. But her real life was inner. Morbidly sensitive to her own feelings, she lived in an introspective world where emotion was much more highly valued than intellect. She was pulled to her first husband, Karl Evans, not by passion, but because he was already engaged. Tearing him away from another allowed Mabel to glory in her own powers. When he was killed in a hunting accident shortly after their son was born, she

soon scandalized Buffalo by engaging in a barely concealed affair with a prominent, married doctor. Public pressure forced this liaison to end and Mabel's mother packed her off to Europe. There she became emotionally-involved with a French woman, toyed with the idea of entering the Catholic church and, at the age of twenty-two, collapsed into the willing arms of Edwin Dodge, an independently wealthy Boston architect.

On her part it was hardly a love relationship. Before the marriage ceremony in Paris, Mabel informed Dodge that "I wasn't in love with him and I felt nothing for him except a desire for him to be about, to help me, and to enable me to make something new and beautiful."<sup>6</sup> Soon they were doing just that with the Village Curonia, at Arcetri, perched in the hills overlooking Florence. While Edwin used his professional talents to remodel the villa, his wife took charge of decorating the interiors, devoting days to an endless search for antique furniture, statues, paintings, porcelains and tapestries. The result was a magnificent setting in which Mabel, attired in flowing robes and silk turbans, played hostess to rich American and British expatriates, members of the Italian nobility and figures from the world of art -- actress Eleanor Dusa, theatrical designer Gordon Craig, sculptor Jo Davidson, painter Janet Scudder and the then unknown writer, Gertrude Stein. While in residence, Stein produced "Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia." It began, "The days are wonderful and the nights are wonderful and the life is pleasant," but neglected to mention either the hostess or the villa. Mabel liked it anyway. She had the work printed and

bound in Florentine paper, and for years presented visitors with copies.

The Villa Curonia was the center of Mabel's life for a decade. Her husband had early on ceased to interest her; Edwin was too limited, proper, dull and lacking in sophistication -- in short, too American. Such a judgment showed that Europe had made Mabel contemptuous of her native land. The U.S. was devoted to money-grubbing, sordid politics and brutal sports like football, while to her "a scrap of genuine primitive painting on a worm-eaten board . . . in a dingy, cavernous cellar in Siena or Perugia, meant more . . . than the tallest skyscraper on earth."<sup>7</sup> This was easy to say, but Mabel was too young and vital to live permanently in a museum. Despite the glorious Renaissance surroundings and her efforts to keep things spicy -- including relationships with both men and women -- life at Arcetri grew stale and repetitious as the years passed. Increasingly, Mabel felt out-of-sorts, weak and sickly. Often she remained in bed for days, once she attempted suicide, and eventually she recognized herself to be in desperate need of a change. On the excuse that her 12-year-old son should receive an American education, she decided in the fall of 1912 to move to New York City. Not that it seemed very inviting. Mabel worried that "there was no place for a person like me, who knew so much now about colors and odors and all the shades of things." To leave the continent was to abandon the home of "everything worthwhile" in life, and to return home was to enter a land of "machinery and factories" that could only be described as "ugly! ugly! ugly!"<sup>8</sup>

At first New York City lived up to all her fears. She hated the dirt and grime of the streets and buildings, the nervous crowds of men pursuing "the main chance," the fact that people seemed wholly devoid of an inner life, of spiritual or artistic interests. Her son went off to boarding schools, Edwin opened an office and Mabel remained sullenly at home, in a large apartment occupying the entire second floor of 23 Fifth Avenue, just a few steps from the edge of Greenwich Village. Her only solace was interior decorating. To relieve the darkness both of the city and her mood, she made the rooms bright as possible. Everything was white -- the paper on the walls, paint on the woodwork, linen curtains on the windows, marble mantelpiece, bearskin rug on the floor, silk Chinese shawls draped from the walls of her bedroom and curtains that served as the canopy of her four-poster bed. In this pristine setting she placed delicate, pastel antique chairs and chaise longue from France and Italy, mirrors in gilt Renaissance frames, velvet couches with cushions of damask and brocade, Venetian tables and commodes, and colorful pieces of blown glass, while on the walls she hung colorful Persian miniatures.

This labor served its purpose -- for a time: "It diminished New York, it made New York stay outside in the street."<sup>9</sup> But when the job was complete, Mabel felt dreadfully lonely. Not one to "live by things alone," she needed interesting people to give her energy. Her husband was definitely not such a person. But now Edwin was worse than boring; his presence seemed to suffocate her. Once again Mabel slipped into depression. She took to bed with headaches, severe colds, tonsillitis. Lying in a darkened room day after day,

she began to have mystical experiences of flames, smoke and other worldly creatures. Psychiatrist Bernard Sachs was brought in and somehow Mabel persuaded him that her husband was the cause of all her weaknesses and depression. Evidently Sachs explained to Edwin that his wife could only recover if he stayed away from the apartment for a while. But once he left, Edwin never again came back into Mabel's life.

Her husband's departure helped to release Mabel from sickness and lethargy, but there were other factors as well. Even before Edwin left she had begun to touch the current of Manhattan's cultural life. At a dinner party she had encountered Carl Van Vechten, music critic for the Times, a friendly, whimsical, vital sort who quickly became the first person to animate her "lifeless rooms." Then, fresh from Europe, Jo Davidson appeared, and soon he was bringing friends from the worlds of art, journalism and theater to the white apartment. Here were the first traces of what would eventually become the salon. But before that could happen, Mabel in the winter of 1912-1913 suddenly launched herself wholeheartedly into New York life by taking an active part in one of those epoch-making events by which the new cultural radicalism was to define itself -- this was the Armory Show, which brought to America for the first time the stunning, modernist visions of contemporary European visual arts.

It was an event that confused politics and culture. The artists who organized it, Walter Kuhn and Arthur B. Davies, had chosen the pine-tree flag of Massachusetts during the American Revolution as its symbol, and supporters like Robert Henri,

Alfred Stieglitz and John Sloan were not only proclaiming the exhibition as a battle cry of freedom for artistic expression but speaking of it as a "bomb" under social conventions as well. Mabel was swept into this atmosphere because of her connection to Gertrude Stein, one of the earliest collectors of Picasso, Matisse and Braque. Asked to write a piece on Stein for a magazine to be sold at the exhibition, Mabel connected the verbal experiments of Stein to the visual ones of Picasso and -- in her own mystical way -- claimed that both were charting new roads along which "consciousness is pursuing truth to eternity." Stein was "impelling language to induce new states of consciousness, and in doing so language becomes with her a creative art rather than a mirror of history."<sup>10</sup>

Words were not her only contribution. In her chauffeur-driven automobile Mabel helped to gather works from private collections and deliver them to the Sixty-Ninth Street Armory. Then she sent a check for five hundred dollars to the organizers, and with it a note that read: "Anything that will extend the unawakened consciousness here (or elsewhere) will have my support. . . . The majority are content to browse upon past achievements. What is needed is more, more and always more consciousness, both in art and in life."<sup>11</sup> To these philosophical notions she added personal and political ones. By now Mabel felt that the Exhibition belonged to her: "It became, overnight, my own little Revolution . . . I was going to dynamite New York and nothing would stop me."<sup>12</sup> To Stein she feverishly wrote that the show would be "the most important public event . . . since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and it is of the same

nature. . . . There will be a riot and a revolution and things will never be quite the same afterwards."<sup>13</sup>

Neither Mabel nor the organizers were to be disappointed. From the moment the Armory show opened on February 17, 1913 it was a center of controversy. Never before had Americans flocked in such numbers to an exhibition or so passionately debated the work of artists. The center of the storm was a small number of European moderns -- the Fauves, Cubists and Expressionists. If conservatives could find touches of sensuous immorality in Brancusi's "The Kiss" or some of Matisse's crude studies of nudes, it was Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending the Staircase" that struck some as verging on the lunatic. Humor might dismiss it as "An Explosion in a Shingle Factory" or "Staircase Descending a Nude" but others took such Cubist visions as a sign of impending doom. Now it was the establishment's turn to equate art and politics. No less a reviewer than ex-President Theodore Roosevelt referred to Cubists and Futurists as a "lunatic fringe" of "European extremists."<sup>14</sup> The New York Times pointed to more sinister implications: "This movement is surely part of the general movement, discernible all over the world, to disrupt and degrade, if not destroy, not only art, but literature and society, too. . . . The cubists and futurists are . . . cousins to the anarchists in politics, the poets who defy syntax and decency, and all the would-be destroyers who with the pretense of trying to regenerate the world are really trying to block the wheels of progress in every direction."<sup>15</sup>

No better statement of the differences between the custodians of the old culture and the proponents of a new one could be made. The Armory Show had neatly drawn a line between generations -- if not chronological then cultural ones. Both sides could agree that art, literature, politics and social life were inextricably intertwined, that changes in one went hand in hand with changes in all the others. Yet Mabel's new friends -- her cultural generation -- reversed the underlying values of the Times editorial. Believing it was indeed possible to "regenerate the world," they conceived progress as something that manifested itself in radical change -- even revolution -- in art forms, life styles and economic and political power. Material progress, the glory of the industrial order, meant less than nothing; this, after all, was what seemed to subvert and confine the human spirit.

The underlying paradox of this position was ignored. Mabel lived in splendor thanks to the income from her family's bank. She could write that "our institutions are crystals thrown off by civilization into the waste heap of the world, ready for the cosmic melting pot," but never was she moved to inquire as to how many poor families had suffered mortgage foreclosure to help support her lifestyle, and surely she would have been surprised if her cook, butler, houseboy, maid, nurse or chauffeur had accused her of exploitation.<sup>16</sup> Hers was an extreme case, of course. Mabel's basic impulse was mystical, and selfishly so. A distaste for her own

family had broadened to include the entire middle class and her search for meaning and fulfillment had led to an infatuation with the antique, as represented by the Italian Renaissance. New York City and the Armory Show helped to shift her direction. The manifestation of the infinite, now seemed wedded to revolutionary movements in art and society. In supporting them Mabel saw herself as succumbing to a greater power, the mysterious movement of the universe.

By the time the Armory Show opened and her article on Stein brought some notoriety, Mabel's "Evenings" were under way. Carl Van Vechten and Jo Davidson had taken friends to meet her, and these contacts led to more people until the white apartment seemed always full of poets, music critics, painters, journalists, playwrights, and actors. Meanwhile, she was busy meeting people all over town. Her closest companion and guide was Hutchins Hapgood, a middle-aged journalist whose own mystical streak seemed to make them "soul mates." Hutch, a theoretical anarchist who believed it his "duty to undermine subtly the foundations of the community," had written on radicals, labor unions, ghetto residents, art movements and love.<sup>17</sup> His wide connections opened many worlds for Mabel. It was Hapgood who led her to 291, Alfred Stieglitz's avant garde gallery where she met painters Marsden Hartley and Andrew Dasburg and first saw the works of John Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe. Hutch also brought Mabel for the first time into the presence of genuine, committed radicals,

Emma Goldman and her former lover, Alexander Berkman, who had spent fourteen years in jail for the attempted assassination of steel magnate Henry Frick. This was a thrill, and Mabel was suitably impressed: "They were the kind that counted. They had authority. Their judgment was somehow true."<sup>18</sup>

An infatuation with modern art and political movements would give Mabel's salon its special flavor. Yet oddly enough, the first Evening had nothing to do with either realm, nor did it include any serious conversation. Rather it was devoted to entertainment which, in its failure, says something about the limitations of that era's radicalism. The architect was Van Vechten, one of the first white intellectuals to take an interest in the culture of Black Harlem. When he insisted on bringing two performers to the apartment, Mabel provided an audience. It proved to be an uncomfortable occasion. While a man strummed a banjo and sang off-color songs, a woman in white stockings and black button boots performed a lewd dance. Mabel was shocked: "They both leered and rolled their suggestive eyes and made me feel first hot, and then cold, for I never had been so near this kind of thing before." Only Van Vechten seemed to be enjoying himself, and as the woman pulled her skirt higher and higher, members of the crowd began to mutter and avert their eyes. Appalled as anyone, Mabel at least knew how to find consolation: "One must let life express itself in whatever form it will."<sup>19</sup>

The next idea for Evenings was much more to the taste of Mabel and her friends. Already the apartment was a kind of open house and all it took to get the salon started was a suggestion to

organize the free-wheeling discussions that were often in progress. Mabel gives credit for this to Lincoln Steffens, who had been first brought to her by Hutch. Like Hapgood, Stef was middle-aged and a renowned journalist, but if there was a mystical bone in his body it was directed only towards social reform. A graduate of the University of California who had also studied at Heidelberg, Berlin and Paris, Steffens had become famous a decade before when he had been one of the original muckrakers on McLure's Magazine. He specialized in exposing the corruption of city and state politics but was too sophisticated to think that political bosses were necessarily bad men and reformers good ones. Rather, it was human systems which produced evil. The way to improve the world, Stef currently believed, was a doctrine called "Christian anarchism," the tenets of which nobody but he could accept. No matter. He loved good food, drink, conversation and social life, and Mabel's could be a forum for all of those.

She later remembered Steffens' initial suggestion in a way most flattering to herself. On a chilly afternoon, while they drank tea in front of her glowing fireplace, he explained that she had a "magnetic, social faculty. You attract, stimulate and soothe people, and men like to sit with you and talk to themselves! You make them think more fluently and they feel enhanced. If you had lived in Greece long ago you would have been called a hetaira. Now why don't you see what you can do with this gift of yours? Why not organize all this accidental, unplanned activity around you, this coming and going of visitors, and see these people at certain hours. Have Evenings!"

When Mabel protested that he and Hutch were always warning against the dangers of too much organization, Stef replied: "Oh, I don't mean that you should organize the Evenings. I mean, get people here at certain times and let them feel absolutely free to be themselves, and see what happens. Let everybody come! All these different kinds of people that you know, together here, without being managed or herded in any way! Why, something wonderful might come of it! You might even revive General Conversation!"<sup>20</sup>

Even if this description, written many years later, is not accurate -- and in his Autobiography Steffens claimed the salon had been Mabel's idea -- it does capture her specific, subtle contribution to the Evenings. Mabel did have a rare faculty for attracting people and making them wish to speak from the heart. This was not the result of physical beauty, but manner, spirit or what she might call "soul." Basically she was a rather plain woman, short and tending towards the plump. Yet she had a very definite and unique sense of style, even panache. Mabel did not follow current fashions, but always dressed in long robes and often covered her head with floppy hats, huge turbans or flowing scarves. The total picture was appealing to men and women alike, and members of both sexes seemed to quite regularly fall in love with her.

Oddly enough for the hostess of a salon, Mabel had few verbal gifts. She could be animated when talking with a good friend alone, but in a group situation she was neither witty, wise nor deep.

Knowing this, she rarely opened her mouth during the Evenings. Still even in a crowd of a hundred people her special magic seemed to work. Max Eastman, the Masses editor who had little liking for Mabel and none at all for any salon, was impressed by her powers. On seeing that "she sits like a lump and says nothing," he recalled, one might be tempted to "move on to someone else who at least knew how to make conversation." But soon the guest would be back, because "there is something going on, or going around, in Mabel's head or bosom, something that creates amagnetic field in which people become polarized and pulled in and made to behave very queerly. Their passions become exacerbated; they grow argumentative; they have quarrels, difficulties, entanglements, abrupt and violent detachments. And they like it -- they come back for more."<sup>21</sup>

This was certainly true. Some people -- and Eastman claimed to be one -- attended only once or twice. But it was much more common to return many times, to make the salon a regular part of one's social life. From the winter of 1912-13 and on into the following spring, Evenings were held once, twice or sometimes even three times a week. Usually a discussion topic was announced in advance and often special experts were invited to attend, but sometimes the conversation was confused, anarchic and to some rigorous-minded participants, rather dismaying. Yet complaints were the exception. It was always stimulating to be at Mabel Dodge's because, as one newspaper reporter put it, she "seemed to know everybody worth knowing, not in the society way, but in the real way, and to get the right people together."<sup>22</sup> This did not happen by chance. The energy which had gone into collecting

antiques now went into collecting people. Mabel became a self-described "Species of Head Hunter." She wanted to know the "Heads of Movements, Heads of Newspapers, Heads of all kinds of groups of people." Upon meeting such individuals, she immediately issued invitations to the salon, and each would arrive with a clique of followers. The only person she ever remembered refusing to attend was French philosopher Henri Bergson.

The normal crowd represented an impressive cross section of Manhattan's cultural and political circles. People from uptown -- socialites, successful actors and newspaper editors -- mingled with residents of the Village -- unknown poets, sculptors or radical activists. There were middle-aged Progressives like Hapgood and Steffens, men whose ideas were being shaken by contact with the younger generation. Occasionally they were joined by contemporaries like Federic C. Howe, U.S. Commissioner of Immigration, or Amos Pinchot, the well-known attorney and supporter of liberal causes. Heading a group of young intellectuals recently out of Ivy League schools was the brilliant, prematurely-wise Walter Lippmann, who two years after graduating Harvard was already beginning to apply Freudian theories of the irrational to the realm of political behavior. From the world of young visual artists came Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, Andrew Dasburg, John Marin and Max Weber. Representing feminism was Henrietta Rodman, who had refused to take her husband's name and had successfully fought the Board of Education's rule that a married woman could not hold a teaching post. Also on hand was Margaret Sanger, an early proponent of both the joy of sex and the need for birth control.

Radicals arrived in large numbers -- Goldman and Berkman; anarchist Hippolyte Havel, who loudly denounced everyone -- including Mabel -- as "goddam bourgeois"; and Bill Haywood of the IWW who was currently living with a young schoolteacher in the Village.

Whether planned around a topic or merely free-form, the Evenings had a regular pattern. Gowned in silk or velvet, Mabel would stand near the door, give her hand to arriving guests and murmur impersonal greetings. The front room would fill until all the chairs were taken and people were sitting on the floor or lounging against the wall. It was a colorful crowd -- "ladies in black velvet, wearing diamonds, ladies in batik and Greenwich village sacks, ladies with bobbed hair and mannish-cut garments, men in evening dress, men in workmen's clothes."<sup>23</sup> At some point Mabel would retire to a chair, servants would close the doors and the Evening would begin. Sometimes there was a master of ceremonies, Steff or Hutch or Lippmann, whose job it was to keep order. This was almost impossible. People might jump up, have their say, interrupt one another, grow angry or sarcastic and on occasion storm out of the room. The talk could be brilliant or unintelligible, sober or riotous, but always it was charged with energy. Van Vechten remembered: "Arguments and discussion, floated in the air, were caught and twisted and hauled and tied, until the white salon itself was no longer static. There were undercurrents of emotion and sex."<sup>24</sup> No matter how fascinating the discussion, there was a break at midnight. The doors to the dining room were thrown open and the crowd rushed for a supper of Virginia Ham, turkey, imported cheese and salads and to a bar well stocked with rare scotch, wine

and liquers. Talk would continue as people mingled informally and then the crowd would begin to drift away. Sometimes Mabel showed guests out in the same, impersonal manner, but it was not unknown for her to withdraw from the room long before the Evening ended.

Subjects of discussion covered the full range of fashionable artistic and intellectual interests. There were political Evenings, when Lippmann or Steffens expounded on government, or Socialist leaders explained the doctrines of Marx, or Anarchism and Syndicalism were compared. Sex was a common topic; though to Mabel's dismay there was little talk of love, much was made of the need for healthy "sex expression." Abstract art was another favorite, possibly because it seemed difficult for many people to accept the new notion that painting and sculpture did not have to represent anything beyond themselves, that like music the visual arts did not have to copy or recreate the real world. Other occasions were devoted to eugenics, feminism, birth control, primitive cultures, poverty, newspapers and magazines, or foreign issues like the growing revolutionary war in Mexico.

Neither the topic nor the guest list could ensure an Evening's success. This was a haphazard matter, the result of some strange alchemy, a subtle blend of people, subject and liquor intake that nobody could predict in advance. A much-anticipated poetry reading was ruined by two factors: the most eminent author present, Edward Arlington Robinson "sat like a bump on a log and didn't express a thing," and then, when George Sylvester Vierick began to read his verse, the hefty Amy Lowell rose and sailed out "like a well-freighted

frigate."<sup>25</sup> Several guests also departed hastily on the Psychoanalytic Evening, when A. A. Brill -- one of the first American disciples of Freud -- explained the nature of the unconscious and tried to show how it affected everyday behavior. Yet others judged this one of the most successful of occasions and demanded that more Evenings be devoted to the same subject. Steffens claimed that at the salon that he first heard of the "new Psychology of Freud and Jung," and what was true for this sophisticated writer was no doubt so for many others as well.<sup>26</sup>

Sometimes a guest could be brilliant on one occasion and inarticulate on another. This was the case with Bill Haywood, one of the stars of the salon, a real catch for Mabel the head-hunter. Haywood was considered by many Americans to be a dangerous man, and the IWW -- with its bindle-stiffs, tramp poet organizers and calls for direct action -- was the most feared of all radical organizations. Born in the mining camps of the West, the union had recently invaded the East Coast. Early in 1912 the IWW had taken charge of a bitter strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and had successfully helped a multi-national group of textile workers to win their demands against the combined opposition of mill owners and public officials. Haywood was every inch the radical, labor-leader Hero; he was a massive, slouchy, battered-looking, one-eyed man with a voice that could crackle with revolutionary sentiments. When he entered the salon it was -- Van Vechten wrote -- as if a "tremendous presence . . . filled the room. . . . Debutantes knelt on the floor beside him, while he talked simply, but with an enthralling

intensity . . . reinforcing his points by crushing the heels of his huge boots into the Shirvan rug or digging his great hands into the mauve tapestry with which the divan was upholstered."<sup>27</sup>

Despite his usual eloquence, Haywood was a total failure on an Evening devoted to what Mabel liked to call "Dangerous Characters." Anarchists, Socialists and Wobblies were to give their views on direct action and sabotage. To ensure no interference from the police, Mabel shifted the normal meeting night, issued special invitations and dramatically had the apartment doors bolted. She need not have bothered. Somehow the discussion never took fire. Haywood "talked as though he were wading blindfolded in sand," and when Walter Lippmann attempted to draw him out with leading questions, his "lid drooped over his blind eye and his heavy cheeks sagged lower" but nothing worth hearing issued from his mouth. Emma Goldman then took the floor. Sounding "like a severe schoolteacher in a scolding mood," she too rambled and never made an effective point. Following her, Socialist William English Walling was no better than "smiling and bland."<sup>28</sup> But this was only to be expected. For Mabel and her friends, Socialists were too tame; like good bourgeois, they believed in electoral politics. It was the Wobblies and Anarchists, with their hints of violence, who seemed fully heroic to a middle class mentality.

Haywood was much better on the Evening when he told an audience that include Hartley, Dasburg, Marin and Francis Picabia that artists "thought themselves too special and separate" and spoke of a future when everybody would have enough leisure time to produce works of art. Mabel's old friend Janet Scudder, who had spent many

painful years training in Paris, rose to her feet and scornfully said: "Do you realize that it takes twenty years to make an artist?" That began the battle. Haywood eloquently replied, Dasburg grew "flashing and witty," and soon people were passionately interrupting one another until "the air was vibrant with intellectual excitement, and electrical with the appearance of new ideas and dawning changes." It was one of those times when, Mabel remembered, "We really had General Conversation."<sup>29</sup>

A different group of artists provided another rousing session. The ostensible topic was magazines. Mabel had invited the editors of the slick, popular Metropolitan Magazine to meet with the staff of the radical subculture's favorite journal, The Masses, an irreverent monthly whose contributing editors included John Sloan, George Bellows and Art Young. What was supposed to be a general discussion of ideas and policies degenerated into confrontation as the poor young men of The Masses denounced their commercial counterparts. Young Maurice Becker shook his finger at Metropolitan art editor Will Bradley for avoiding young artists and underpaying them. When Bradley, a rather timid sort, tried to defend himself, others pounced upon him, referring to the Metropolitan as "a prostitute." Becker shouted "How we loathe ourselves for selling drawings to go inside you covers."<sup>30</sup> This was more amusing to the crowd than Bradley, who took to his bed for a week.

Rude confrontation was hardly the rule. Witty and eloquent disagreements were more commonly reported, and one young man expressed a general attitude by writing, "Everyone was sophisticated to a

frightening degree, and the smart repartee was battledored and shuttlecocked across that candle-lit room so rapidly that a youngster like myself could not keep pace with it."<sup>31</sup> Once an attempt was made to capture this repartee on paper. Hapgood had been asked to speak on what Mabel called "Sex Antagonism," that war between man and woman that she so well understood, and a stenographer was hired to record the conversation. But Hutch was a little drunk when he rose to speak and the stenographer was not used to his vocabulary or odd juxtapositions. The resulting transcript was a disjointed jumble of ideas about sex, men, women, Wobblies, revolution, love, art, democracy and anarchism that lurched between sharp insights and total nonsense. On reading it over, Steffens commented that it sounded much like the writing of Gertrude Stein.

However witty, entertaining, difficult, boring or meaningless the conversation, the salon was by the spring of 1913 the most important thing in Mabel's life. Because of it she was asked to contribute to magazines, serve on public boards and political committees, lend her name, money and organizing abilities to worthy causes. No longer did she have time to languish in bed or complain about the lack of culture in America. Yet all the whirl of activity did not make her life complete. Often the Evenings left her feeling sad and painfully aware of the fact that others went home as couples while she always slept alone. It is true that friends like Steffens, Lippmann, Hapgood and Van Vechten were attentive as lovers -- only none of these relationships was ever sealed in the flesh, and Mabel was a woman for whom the spiritual and the sexual went together. Once

that spring she took a lover, but the affair was brief and unsatisfactory because it sprang from the mind and not the heart and soul. This action was a sign that not all was happy in her life. The salon was marvelous, but Mabel was ready for a serious distraction to arise from the transcendent realm of love.

The distraction's name was John Reed. He was twenty-five, a graduate of Harvard in the same 1910 class that produced Lippmann and T. S. Eliot, a contributing editor of The Masses and a writer who had already achieved a considerable reputation among both uptown journalists and the residents of Greenwich Village. His short stories were spare slices of life that dealt with the underside of the big city -- with bums, scrub women, prostitutes, con men and cops -- in a vision that blended both shock and love, much like the realistic paintings of the Ash Can school. One of his poems had won an "honorable mention" in the first year (1912) of Harriet Monroe's new publication, Poetry, which carried works by William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay and William Carlos Williams. His father, a militant Progressive in Oregon politics, was close to Lincoln Steffens, who had been guiding young Reed's career and helping him to enter the world of New York journalism.

What distinguished Reed from so many similar young middle class men was not just an ability with words, but a propensity towards action. He had a wild streak and at prep school and Harvard had frequently been in trouble with authorities. After graduation, while

classmates had sailed in luxury for a grand tour of the continent, Reed had worked across the Atlantic on a cattle boat and tramped alone through England, France and Spain before settling in a hotel room on the Left Bank. His long poem, "A Day in Bohemia," had captured the new lifestyle of the Village -- "We dare to think as uptown wouldn't dare" -- but he was hardly a typical villager. Reed preferred hanging out in working class bars, mingling with immigrants on the Lower East side, talking with the girls of Satan's circus, trading stories with foreign sailors on the docks to attending literary meetings where people "Talk about talking and think about thinking, and swallow each other without even blinking."<sup>32</sup> No doubt it was this attitude which had kept him from ever getting to Mabel's salon.

It almost seems inevitable that Mabel would fall in love with Reed. In a sense he was an incarnation of all the radical impulses of art and social change thrusting through Greenwich Village and being expressed at the salon. Only her account of their meeting is available; and however problematic the details, the emotional tenor rings true. The place was a crowded village apartment; the time, April 1913; the occasion a talk by Bill Haywood on a silk strike that the IWW was supporting in Paterson, New Jersey. It was an old story. City officials and mill owners were working together. Strikers were being clubbed off the streets by police and jailed in large numbers, but the New York press was neglecting to report these events. Mabel claims to be the one who first suggested that to receive proper news coverage the strike should be brought to New York and reenacted on the

stage of Madison Square Garden. At this point Reed popped out of the crowd; "That's a great idea . . . we'll make a Pageant of the strike! The first in the world!" She noticed he was big and full chested, with glowing, olive green eyes, a high forehead set off by light brown curls "and two spots of light shining on his temples . . . his chin was the best of his face, for it had a beautiful swinging curve forward -- the real poet's jawbone, strong and delicate above his round throat." From the first there was no doubt in her mind -- Reed was "lovable."<sup>33</sup>

Soon they were seeing a lot of each other. Reed went off to Paterson, was arrested, spent four days in jail with Wobbly prisoners and emerged bursting with a radical excitement that filled a piece for The Masses entitled "War in Paterson." This was the first step in a road that would run through the Mexican Revolution to Petrograd in 1917, where he would witness the Bolshevik Revolution, come home to write the classic Ten Days That Shook the World, help found the Communist Labor Party, return to Russia to be elected to the Executive Committee of the Communist International and die of typhus in 1920. The drive that would take him so far was already showing, and Mabel was captivated by his energy, passion and ability to get things done. Together they were on the planning committee for the Paterson Pageant that met almost night in the uptown flat of Margaret Sanger. Reed wrote the scenario, persuaded Harvard classmate Bobby Jones to design the setting and John Sloan to paint the scenery. He also led Villagers like Max Eastman, novelist Ernest Poole and poet Harry Kemp to Sunday meetings in Paterson to express solidarity with the Italian,

Lithuanian, Polish and Jewish silk workers, and he took charge of drilling masses of strikers for their onstage roles.

These feverish preparations swept Mabel away from the salon. It continued to meet, but no longer was she always present. As with the Armory show, Mabel looked as the Pageant was hers: "I knew I was enabling Reed to do what he was doing. I knew he couldn't have done it without me. I felt that I was behind him, pouring all the power in the universe through myself into him."<sup>34</sup> The performance took place on June 7 before a packed, raucous mass in the Garden. It was such a success that some newspapers hailed the birth of "a new art form" and many Bohemians had momentary visions of a revolutionary, popular theater with the power engage the emotions of the masses. Yet this kind of elation was temporary. Partly intended to raise money for the Wobblies, the Pageant produced a deficit and whatever publicity it brought proved unavailing -- in August the strike ended in complete defeat for the IWW. Neither of these facts bother Mabel very much. When the financial report was released late in June, she and Reed were in Europe, and temporarily the salon was at an end.

It was a summer devoted to love, and for a short period Mabel was ecstatic. Sex meant total surrender, yet Reed was a worthy lover who led her to say "At last I learned what a honeymoon should be." Night after night at the Villa Curonia he climbed into her bed and the world vanished: "Nothing counted for me but . . . to lie close to him and empty myself over and over, flesh against flesh."<sup>35</sup> Such passion could not prevent problems from arising in the daylight. Mabel wanted to be the absolute center of his existence, but Reed

was also interested in the old towns of Tuscany, the palaces, cathedrals, art works and history that had once captivated Mabel. Now she grew jealous: "I hated to see him interested in things. I . . . didn't like to have him even look at churches, and leave me out of his attention."<sup>36</sup> Late in the summer Reed suffered an attack of diphtheria, and Mabel was pleased to find him helpless and totally dependent upon her. But this meant another problem, for a man lying sick in bed seemed like "no man at all."<sup>37</sup>

The Evenings recommenced when Mabel and Jack returned to New York in the fall of 1913 and he moved into 23 Fifth Avenue. Outwardly everything was the same as before, with similar crowds, topics and a certain amount of press notoriety. But for her the salon would never regain its former importance. She was caught in the grips of the old power struggle, and Reed, who was half-boy and half-man, seemed impossible either to let go of or subdue. For Mabel the Evenings became a kind of battleground. She invited people in the hope that "when my value appeared greater to others, it would appear so to him and would make him want to be with me all the day."<sup>38</sup> But Reed was too committed to the worlds of art, radical movements and journalism -- he did after all have to support himself -- to spend all his time with Mabel. Even worse, the Pageant had made him very well known and Jack was now one of the stars of the salon. Mabel was driven into a frenzy at the sight of women approaching him, but she was equally jealous of the time he spent at The Masses or other Village hangouts. By late fall the relationship had degenerated into arguments, tears, quarrels and recriminations that led to Mabel

taking an overdose of veronal. When she recovered, Jack fled the city for a few days. Then in December he escaped again, this time by taking an assignment to cover the revolution of Pancho Villa in Northern Mexico.

In the four months that Reed was away, Mabel struggled to regain her equilibrium -- this, after all, was the first time that a man had eluded her control. When she had briefly followed Jack to El Paso, Steffens had attempted to keep the salon going by hosting an Evening devoted to British Labor Party visitors. But without Mabel it was not the same and he cancelled further meetings until her return. She started the Evenings again, but neither the salon nor an intense relationship with Andrew Dasburg could keep her mind off Reed. Then, happily, the Wobblies were able to provide a meaningful diversion. Early in 1914 Frank Tannenbaum, who had attended the salon, was arrested for leading groups of unemployed, homeless men and women into churches and synagogues to find shelter on cold winter nights. Mabel attended the trial and hosted meetings of support. These were crashed by the press, leading to headlines like "I.W.W. Throng Are Guests of Society Folk of Fifth Avenue. Women in Evening Gowns Entertain Bill Haywood. Agitators and the Unemployed in Home of Mrs. Mabel Dodge." As if this odd juxtaposition of social types were not newsworthy enough, each story solemnly reported that many of the women were engaged in the shocking practice of "smoking cigarettes."

Reed returned in April a full-fledged Hero. He had braved gunfire while riding with the troops of Pancho Villa and his active, colorful articles in the Metropolitan had made him famous -- even the

cautious, sober Lippmann called them "the finest reporting that's ever been done." None of this was good news for Mabel. At "Reed in Mexico" Evening she regarded him critically "and wondered why he looked so puffed up, as though he had been inflated by a pump. His chest swelled up under his chin and he had to compress it to get the air into his lungs."<sup>39</sup> Two weeks later he was off again, this time to investigate a massacre of coal strikers by militia at Ludlow, Colorado. Now Mabel had to understand she was losing him. They would spend a few weeks in Provincetown in June, then some time together in Italy, France and England the next autumn, where Reed would be covering stories on the Western Front. But all this was denouement. She, who was so attuned to the inner life of the psyche was losing her lover to the external world of men and events, to armies, strikes, war, and revolution.

Not only was the affair with Reed drawing to an end -- so was the salon. The World War would eventually shatter the fragile bond connecting art and politics, and in the postwar era social and artistic experimentation would dwell in two separate realms. But even before the guns of August began to sound, Mabel was retreating from the daily issues of the world. Reed had come to symbolize them all, and the loss of his love entailed the death of feelings and interests which had occupied her for two years. Sometime in the late spring of 1914 the last Evening was held. The spirit of the universe was moving in a new direction. Mabel was saying goodbye "To the gay, bombastic, and lovable boy with his shining brow; to the Labor Movement, the Revolution, and to anarchy. To the hope of

subtly undermining the community with Hutch; and to all the illusions of being a power in the environment. My young lover was gone, and, it seemed, gone with him were the younger hopes of change. . . . Instinctively I turned once more to Nature and Art and tried to live in them."<sup>40</sup>

Short-lived as it was, Mabel Dodge's salon cast a long shadow in American cultural history. Memoires of the period refer to the Evenings in the most laudatory and ecstatic terms, yet it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to measure their impact upon the lives of active and creative men and women. For Mabel the salon was a kind of unique spiritual and cultural oasis in the materialistic desert of American life. There is both truth and exaggeration in such a judgment. Enough other such centers did exist to show that the salon was an outlet for the widespread social and cultural ferment of the pre-war years.

Clearly, to attend the Evenings was a splendid experience. Often they reflected the excitement of a subculture suddenly making connections between disparate schools of thought, social doctrines, movements in the arts. It was a youthful moment when people seemed in control of their destinies, when change seemed imminent and there was no conflict between reshaping the social order or oneself. At least this was the middle class view, that of people who later had the time and inclination to write about themselves. Obviously part of the fascination was what has more recently been labelled "radical

chic," the chance for those with sheltered lives to confront what seemed the brute reality and potential violence of class struggle and industrial warfare symbolized by anarchists and Wobblies. What it meant to those radicals who are silent witnesses of history is less apparent. Perhaps it was a rare chance to meet the oppressors face to face, to indulge in flirtations with class enemies or merely to enjoy a warm evening of expensive food and drink.

If there is no way of tracing the influence of the Evenings upon those who participated, the doctrines discussed have a more open history. The struggles over birth control, the importance of Freud, the need for healthy sexual expression and the nature of modern art have been won; those over Feminism, or the nature of male-female relationships are clearly still at issue. The doctrines of Marxism and Anarchism have in the U.S. led a more shaky existence, becoming widespread in the thirties and sixties but more usually being espoused by elite groups of artists and intellectuals. How they affected those who attended the salon is problematic. For some older people, the Evenings rekindled idealistic notions while for youngsters they were part of an education that would continue in the school of life.

Out of the salon and the Greenwich Village subculture that was destroyed by American entry into the war in 1917, men and women carried a variety of beliefs into action. Lippmann went on to a lengthy career as one of America's premier political analysts; Sanger mothered the modern movement of birth control; Steffens resurfaced in the thirties as the guru of the Left with the publication of his Autobiography; artists like Hartley, Dasburg and Marin and poets like

Lowell have secure places in the cultural history of the U.S. These children of the middle class ultimately stayed within the bounds of respectability, but others could not. Reed was enshrined as a permanent radical hero by dying for the Russian Revolution. Many other radicals suffered from wartime hysteria. Haywood stood trial with 200 leading Wobblies who were unjustly convicted of sedition, then jumped bail and fled to the Soviet Union, where he died in obscurity in 1926. Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman were deported after the Red Scare raids of 1920 and remained exiles for the rest of their lives.

Except for Lippmann, Van Vechten, and Dasburg, Mabel Dodge would outlive most of her regular guests; she did not die until 1961. In 1915 she withdrew from Manhattan to a country estate in Croton, on the Hudson River. Then a few years later she moved to New Mexico. She married twice more, first to artist Maurice Sterne, then to an Indian, Tony Luhan. Neither proved to be capable of dominating and controlling her in the manner which she claimed to desire. In Taos she helped to create an art colony where for a time she captured Dasburg, Georgia O'Keefe and D. H. Lawrence. She traveled, was psychoanalyzed, wrote her voluminous memoirs and continued hoping to see God. But never again was she at the center of an active world where great changes seemed possible. Only for two years had the spirit of the universe led Mabel Dodge to dwell amidst what she later called the "Movers and Shakers" of history.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Margaret Sanger, An Autobiography (New York: Norton, 1938), 72-73; The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931), 655; Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Living (New York: Harper, 1948), 523; Mabel Dodge, Intimate Memories -- Movers and Shakers (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936).
2. Quoted in Allen Churchill, The Improper Bohemians (New York: Ace Books, 1959), 13.
3. Henry F. May, The End of American Innocence (New York: Knopf, 1959).
4. Dodge, Intimate Memories -- Background (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1933), 25-26. Dodge's four volumes of memoirs are the best introduction to her life. The only biography, Emily Hahn, Mabel: A Biography of Mabel Dodge Luhan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977) is chatty, uncritical, full of factual mistakes and based on outdated scholarship.
5. Dodge, Movers and Shakers, 228.
6. Dodge, Intimate Memories -- European Experiences (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935), 77.
7. Ibid., 447-448

8. Ibid., 453.
9. Dodge, Movers and Shakers, 6.
10. Quoted in ibid., 27.
11. Quoted in ibid., 37.
12. Ibid., 36.
13. Letter to Stein in Donald Gallup, ed., The Flowers of Friendship: Letters Written to Gertrude Stein (New York: Knopf, 1953), 70-71.
14. "A Layman's View of the Art Exhibition," The Outlook, 103 (March 29, 1913), 719.
15. New York Times (March 16, 1913), 4, p. 6.
16. Dodge, Movers and Shakers, 94.
17. Quoted in ibid., 47.
18. Ibid., 58.
19. Ibid., 80.

20. Ibid., 80-81.
21. Eastman, Enjoyment of Living, 523.
22. Quoted in Dodge, Movers and Shakers, 82.
23. Carl Van Vechten, Peter Whiffle (New York: Knopf, 1922), 134.
24. Ibid., 124.
25. Dodge, Movers and Shakers, 91.
26. Autobiography, 655.
27. Van Vechten, Peter Whiffle, 125-126.
28. Dodge, Movers and Shakers, 89.
29. Ibid., 91.
30. Ibid., 87.
31. Charles H. Towne, This New York of Mine (New York: Cosmopolitan, 1931), 177-78.

32. John Reed, The Day in Bohemia, or Life Among the Artists (New York: printed for the author, 1913). For a full account of Reed's background see Robert A. Rosenstone, Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed (New York: Knopf, 1975).
33. Dodge, Movers and Shakers, 189.
34. Ibid., 205.
35. Ibid., 215-16.
36. Ibid., 217-18.
37. Ibid., 229.
38. Ibid., 234.
39. Ibid., 257
40. Ibid., 303.