

THE SOCIAL SECRETARY

A Romantic Comedy set in Gilded Age Newport

By Ellen Price

Cast of Characters

<u>CLARA RUTHERFORD</u>	(F, 30-40) The levelheaded social secretary.
<u>ELIJAH (ELI) BOYD</u>	(M, 35-45) A boisterous self-made shipping tycoon.
<u>IONA BOYD</u>	(F, 50-80) Eli's blunt Scottish mother.
<u>SIMPSON</u>	(M, 40-65) The butler. Has a hidden sly streak.
<u>MRS. PETERS</u>	(F, 40-65) The exasperated housekeeper.
<u>BETH</u>	(F, teens-30) A kitchen maid. Intrudes whenever possible.
<u>KATE</u>	(F, teens-30) Another kitchen maid. Naive, eager.
<u>NIKOLAY KOTOV</u>	(M, 25-50) The dance master. Imperious, unrelenting.
<u>VALENTIN</u>	(M, 30- 50) The disappointed chef. Volatile, unpredictable.
<u>FAYE</u>	(F, 40-any age) Clara's feisty landlord.
<u>LILY</u>	(F, 6-9) Eli's niece. Imaginative, exuberant.
<u>THEO</u>	(M, 8-10) Eli's nephew. Bookish, pesky.
<u>VERA</u>	(F, 12-14) Eli's other niece. Reserved, with an inner strength.
<u>MARTHA</u>	(F, late teens-any age) The hapless governess.
<u>FRED</u>	(M, teens-30) A footman.
<u>LULU MONROE</u>	(F, late 20s-45) A wealthy Newport socialite.
<u>HAZEL LONGSTREET</u>	(F, 30-40) Also a socialite.
<u>RUTH SLOANE</u>	(F, 35-55) Lulu's older sister, of the Old Guard.
<u>DORIS</u>	(F, 40- 65) Also of the Old Guard.
<u>WESLEY SLOANE</u>	(M, 40-55) Old Guard Society man, Ruth's husband.
<u>CHARLES MONROE</u>	(M, 35-50) Pompous society man. Lulu's husband.
<u>PHILIP LONGSTREET</u>	(M, 30-50) Dispirited society man, Hazel's longsuffering husband.
<u>MRS. ASTOR</u>	(F, 60-any age) The ultimate Old Guard society matron.
<u>MR. DALE</u>	(M, late teens-any age) The tailor.

(OPTIONAL ensemble: SOCIETY WOMEN, FOOTMEN, NAVAL OFFICERS, FLIRTATIOUS COUPLE, PRINCE HAAKON and SERVANTS)

Note: Suggested doubling (if desired)

MRS. PETERS/RUTH/FAYE

NIKOLAY/FRED/CHARLES/FOOTMAN/HAAKON

VALENTIN/MR. DALE/PHILIP/FOOTMAN

SIMPSON/WESLEY

BETH/LULU/MARTHA

KATE/HAZEL/VERA

IONA/MRS. ASTOR/DORIS

Time: 1894

Place: Newport, RI

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ACT I

Scene 1

Lights up in Faye's Flowers, SR. FAYE attends to flowers on a counter. CLARA sits at a small table across from LULU, an ostentatiously dressed society woman. On CSL and SL, SOCIETY WOMEN mull about on Bellevue Avenue, in wordless activity.

LULU: I said to myself, "Lulu, if Mrs. Webb's social secretary is available, you simply must hire her." Ah, the pressures we women of Old New York face. The dinner parties, balls, social calls, the opera, traveling to Paris to have our gowns made. Then the season here in Newport.

CLARA: And your children, of course.

LULU: Oh yes, and my two darling children. Without the nurse, the nanny and the governess, I'd have no idea what I'd do. Clara, I heard Mrs. Webb was beside herself when she discovered her husband's...indiscretions.

CLARA: Oh, I couldn't say, Mrs. Monroe. I never discuss my patroness's personal affairs.

LULU: Oh, of course you don't, very good. And Clara, I wish to say, and should've said years ago, it was such a shame about your late father and his...financial woes. How troubling it must be to work for your former peers.

CLARA: (*diplomatically*) You're so gracious to say so.

LULU: Oh, it's nothing, dear girl. I always make an effort to pity the less fortunate. I'll be in touch, ta ta. (*Lulu leaves the shop and joins the women on SL*).

CLARA: Please, Faye, tell me I don't have to work for Lulu Monroe.

FAYE: She's a piece of work.

CLARA: (*going through the papers on her desk*) Mrs. Reynolds will only pay peanuts. Mrs. Payne insists I live in. I'm fond of Mrs. Otis, but with her husband, not a chance.

FAYE: He has a wandering eye?

CLARA: It's not his eyes I'm worried about. One last appointment. Mrs. Elijah Boyd.

FAYE: Never heard of her.

CLARA: Must be new money. It's not promising.

FAYE: You'd think more ladies would need a social secretary with the season coming up.

CLARA: We're in a recession. Maybe even the millionaires are cutting back. Thanks for letting me rent your office for the day. At least I can meet these women on my own terms.

FAYE: I would've let you borrow it. I look after my tenants.

CLARA: I like to look after myself.

FAYE: People should look out for each other.

CLARA: They should I suppose, but they usually don't.

FAYE: Such a cynic.

CLARA: No, Faye, just a realist.

ELI BOYD, wearing a plaid vest but otherwise dressed for town, enters from SL. The Society women barely acknowledge him and make exits as he walks by. He enters the flower shop.

FAYE: Good afternoon sir, these Opal Snowflake Roses just arrived. Or perhaps some Orange Spice Lilies?

ELI: I'm not here for flowers. Are you Miss Rutherford?

CLARA: (*She stands.*) I'm Miss Rutherford.

ELI: Eli. Eli Boyd. (*He reaches out a hand eagerly. She doesn't take it.*)

CLARA: If your wife isn't available now, we can reschedule for later today.

ELI: Oh, right, sorry for the deception. I didn't know if you'd meet with me if you knew I was a bachelor.

CLARA: But I received a calling card for Mrs. Elijah Boyd.

ELI: I had them printed last week.

CLARA: You had cards printed on the finest vellum money can buy for a woman who doesn't exist?

ELI: Only the best for my wife.

CLARA: You're not married.

ELI: Minor detail.

CLARA: I manage a *woman's* social affairs and I don't have time for games.

ELI: Please let me explain. I'll pay you handsomely if you help me.

Clara takes a moment, then offers Eli a chair. Clara sits.

FAYE: I'll be in the back if you need anything. (*Clara nods at Faye, Faye exits SR.*)

ELI: (*Eli sits*) So, I've built a wildly successful international shipping business from scratch. But I haven't been received by any society family. Not a single one.

CLARA: Money alone is not your entrance into good society, sir.

ELI: That I know. (*He pulls out a newspaper clipping.*) But I found this list. How do I get on it?

CLARA: The Four Hundred are the top tier of high society. If you wish to raise your social position, the easiest way to begin is to marry well.

ELI: Hmph. All the debutantes are marrying penniless dukes. It's in the papers every day.

CLARA: The best option would be a woman of quality with... reduced circumstances.

ELI: I see. (*He stands.*) I just need to find me some nice knickerbocker girl who's hard up for cash?

CLARA: I wouldn't put it that way—

ELI: If I need that sort of woman, that's basically you, Miss Rutherford.

CLARA: Mr. Boyd I—

ELI: We could be married this afternoon.

CLARA: I didn't mean—

ELI: Quite bold of you really, but if you insist. (*He gets down on one knee, makes a dramatic gesture*) Will you do me the honor of becoming my—

CLARA: Please stand up, sir.

ELI: It's a no, then? (*Eli stands back up, sits back in his chair.*)

CLARA: If you'll restrain from wild outbursts, I may be willing to arrange a few introductions.

ELI: How would I know if she liked me in the least?

CLARA: Men in high society rarely marry for love.

ELI: Hmph. I won't either. Love is for poets, not men like me. If I ever marry, it'd be a respectful arrangement between equals.

CLARA: Then I can't help you.

ELI: I've made my fortune, but I live in exile. It isn't right.

CLARA: Some believe wealth must be passed down three generations before one can be a true gentleman.

ELI: Is it so obvious I'm not one of them?

CLARA: I knew the moment you walked in.

ELI: How?

CLARA: It's a thousand little things.

ELI: But you could show me. Teach me.

CLARA: It's more complicated than that.

ELI: But you understand these society types.

CLARA: Yes, but—

ELI: You can tell me what to do.

CLARA: It'd be quite unorthodox.

ELI: So?

CLARA: Sir, I don't think—

ELI: Look, I know you've been meeting with fancy ladies all day, and I'm sure they'd be far easier and more pleasant to work for than me, but I need you and I'm willing to pay a hefty sum.

CLARA: (*She looks down at her papers for a moment.*) If I were even to consider it, you'd have to do everything I say without question. One wrong move could send you packing before the season begins. You'll have to dress the way they dress, eat the way they eat, dance the way they dance—

ELI: Wait a minute, I'll have to dance?

CLARA: Speak the way they speak. It won't be easy. If you're not willing to put in the work, it's not worth it for either of us.

ELI: I'll do whatever it takes.

CLARA: First, I keep my own lodgings here in town. I rent a room upstairs.

ELI: But the rest of my staff lives at Stonecliff.

CLARA: It's absolutely non-negotiable.

ELI: In that case, fine. I'll hire you until the end of the Newport Season.

CLARA: I have other offers for permanent employment. Plus, one season isn't enough time.

ELI: I'm a quick study.

CLARA: While I appreciate your... confidence—

ELI: Some people call it arrogance.

CLARA: I was being polite. It can take years under the best circumstances to break in.

ELI: Since you have other offers pending, I'll make you bold one. Five thousand dollars.

CLARA: (*This is an enormous sum.*) Five thousand dollars. For the season. (*A beat.*) Ten and I'll do it.

ELI: As long as you never speak of it. I'd have a household revolt if it got out.

CLARA: Discretion is of the upmost importance in my field.

ELI: Then it's a deal. (*He reaches out his hand.*) Welcome aboard.

CLARA: A gentleman doesn't reach out his hand to a lady in that fashion.

ELI: Huh. Good to know. But this a business deal. We can shake on it, right?

CLARA: I'll send you a contract and you can sign it.

ELI: Not the same. You're a bold negotiator, I like that. But just so you know, I would've paid more.

CLARA: That seems fair, Mr. Boyd. (*A cunning grin.*) I would've taken far less.

Clara exits SR. Eli takes a moment, at first a bit miffed, but then lets it go. He exits SL.

Scene 2

The kitchens at Stonecliff. A prep table with cooking implements, a few stools. BETH reads a newspaper next to KATE. VALENTIN prepars for a meal. SERVANTS loiter or do other tasks.

BETH: "Town Topics has learned Mrs. Astor won't arrive in Newport until later this season, but she wishes all the debutantes well." Oh, how gracious of her.

VALENTIN: What kind of newspaper is that?

BETH: It's Colonel Mann's paper. Town Topics is a must read. Has all the news of the society set.

VALENTIN: That's not news. Although I'd read from cover to cover if it'd tell me when Mr. Boyd will be entertaining. So far, here and in New York, I've only cooked for this family. Bean stew. Liver and onions. Egh!

KATE: (*to Beth*) Do you think Mr. Boyd will marry one of those debutantes?

BETH: He's new money, who'd want to marry him?

KATE: I would. (*Kate and Beth laugh.*)

BETH: And look at this juicy tidbit. "Mrs. W. may put up a brave front, but Mr. W. was caught in a compromising—"

MRS. PETERS: (*entering SR*) Good Morning.

The staff stop activity, say a "Good Morning." Beth hides the newspaper.

MRS. PETERS: The social secretary starts today. She'll be working from the office on the first floor.

BETH: Her own office, upstairs? Isn't *she* fancy.

MRS. PETERS: Also, Mr. Boyd informed me he'll be in Newport now through the end of the season.

The staff grumbles.

BETH: Every day, Mrs. Peters? But the men only stay for the weekend.

MRS. PETERS: Mr. Boyd will be doing things differently. Surprise, surprise. We all must be on our best behavior.

BETH: Even if he isn't?

MRS. PETERS: Now you hush. You never know when he might—

ELI: (*entering SR*) So nice to see you all this fine morning!

The staff all stand up, abruptly. They are embarrassed, irritated or amused at Eli's presence.

MRS. PETERS: What can I do for you, sir?

ELI: Good Morning, Mrs. Peters. Valentin, already cooking I see. Looking forward to some fine grub this morning.

VALENTIN: (*condescendingly*) Scrambled eggs on toast. Such fine grub.

ELI: My favorite. Can we have haggis again for dinner this week? My mother is so fond of it.

VALENTIN: Mr. Boyd, I beg of you—

MRS. PETERS: (*Glares at Valentin, then, to Eli*). Of course, haggis can be put on the menu.

ELI: If it's a problem, just say so, I don't want to put you to any trouble.

MRS. PETERS: (*Irritated*) It isn't any trouble, Mr. Boyd.

ELI: Mrs. Peters, you and your staff are doing a marvelous job.

MRS. PETERS: Thank you. (*A long pause.*) Is that all, sir?

ELI: Yes, yes, Mrs. Peters. Just— Anchors away!

Eli exits awkwardly SR. Kate and Beth laugh.

MRS. PETERS: That's enough. Back to work. It's not even six, yet. I'm not sure the man sleeps.

The staff moves the kitchen offstage, everyone exits SL.

Scene 3

Stonecliff. An impressive 'cottage' on a rocky shoreline. A backdrop or permanent set, suggesting the ocean behind it. (Several FOOTMEN, optional, stand at the ready). Westminster chimes ring the quarter hour. FRED and SIMPSON enter SR.

SIMPSON: Every clock *must* be synchronized. The grandfather in the billiard room is five seconds fast.

FRED: Sorry, sir. (*Fred motions to a footman, optional, he and several footmen exit SL*)

Eli enters from USL carrying LILY. VERA and THEO follow behind. The children are wearing pajamas.

LILY: Are we really going to live here all summer, Uncle Eli?

ELI: (*He puts Lily down*) All summer.

LILY: I can't believe the ocean is our backyard. Do you think we have any mermaids?

THEO: Lily, there's no such thing as mermaids.

ELI: We'll have to look for some, won't we, Theo?

LILY: I really hope we have mermaids. And alligators.

THEO: Alligators live in freshwater.

LILY: And penguins.

THEO: (*muttering to himself*) Penguins live in the southern hemisphere.

Eli rubs Theo's head. An exhausted MARTHA enters with IONA.

IONA: (*To the children*) You need to get dressed, then Martha will take you to the park.

LILY: Can't we wear our pajamas there too, Grandma Boyd?

MARTHA: You shouldn't have worn your nightclothes outside at all.

ELI: It was a special treat for this morning. (*to Vera*) You have some fun today, Vera.

VERA: (*as if it's hard to get the words out*) I-I will, Uncle Eli.

ELI: Good girl.

Vera smiles shyly. Martha gathers the children and they exit SL.

IONA: When do I go back to New York?

ELI: Maw, we just arrived.

IONA: You expect me to fritter my summer away in Newport? Pah! What about my work at the orphanage and the literacy program?

ELI: Let's discuss it later.

IONA: Is that what these fancy people do? Discuss? Hmph. I'll just jump into the sea and swim back if I must.

ELI: You're not a prisoner here, maw. But stay, the season is just six weeks long.

IONA: Why did we even come? These society types turn their noses up at you. You came from nothing and look at all you've done.

ELI: The social secretary is going to change that. She'll be here any minute. I'll introduce you.

IONA: Why would I want to meet her? (*Iona exits SL. Eli approaches Simpson*)

SIMPSON: If you'd like to wait in the parlor, sir, I'll alert you when Miss Rutherford arrives.

ELI: No, I'll wait here. (*A beat.*) Simpson, I was, uh, down in the kitchens earlier. Does Mrs. Peters dislike me?

SIMPSON: Your housekeeper? Of course not, sir.

ELI: I feel like I annoy her.

SIMPSON: I'll speak with her today, sir.

ELI: Oh Lord, no, don't do that. Never mind, I'll figure it out.

Clara enters, perhaps from the back of the theatre. Simpson moves toward the door, but Eli is quicker.

Oh, look, she's early. I like that. (*Calling out to her.*) Miss Rutherford, come in, come in.

SIMPSON: Welcome to Stonecliff, Miss Rutherford. (*to Eli*) Will that be all, sir?

ELI: Yes, thank you, Simpson. (*Simpson motions to the remaining opt. footmen, he and they exit.*)

CLARA: Lesson number one. Opening your door is a job for your butler, or a footman. Not you.

ELI: Oh, but I was so excited you were starting today.

CLARA: Lesson number two- Society men don't get 'excited' about anything, except maybe horses and yachts.

ELI: Believe me, Miss Rutherford, men have a longer list than that.

CLARA: Perhaps, Mr. Boyd. But not in mixed company.

ELI: Good point. Your office is this way.

They head towards the office. A desk and chair, a love seat.

CLARA: The first thing we must do is decide who will be your hostess for the season.

ELI: That's what I'm paying you for.

CLARA: I can run everything behind the scenes, but you need a woman of proper station to be your hostess.

Your mother is the most obvious choice.

ELI: How did you know I have a mother? I mean that she's living and in town.

CLARA: It's my business to know. Just as I know you're the guardian to three wards – your nieces and nephew, apparently - even though you didn't mention that.

ELI: You didn't ask.

CLARA: Why would I ask a bachelor if he had three children living with him?

ELI: It's not a problem, is it?

CLARA: No, but from now on, I need complete cooperation and honesty.

ELI: Where's the fun in that? (*Clara gives him a look*) All right. Cooperation and honesty. No fun. In any case, my mother *cannot* be the hostess.

CLARA: Why not?

ELI: She'd rather pluck out her eyes and eat them for breakfast. Why can't I just do it?

CLARA: Women run Newport. Surely Mrs. Boyd can step in.

ELI: Do you think I'm outspoken and impolite?

CLARA: Yes.

ELI: Multiply that by ten.

CLARA: Seriously, Mr. Boyd, I do believe you're exaggerating.

ELI: Seriously, Miss Rutherford, you *have not met her*. I'm not sure I can make her stay for the afternoon, forget the summer.

CLARA: There must be some way to convince her.

ELI: (*conspiratorially*) I'll find some rope. You plaster her feet to the floor.

CLARA: I'll talk to her.

ELI: (*a beat, then seriously*) My mother has had a hard life. I won't make her do anything she doesn't want to.

CLARA: (*thoughtfully*) Duly noted, sir.

SIMPSON: (*entering from SR*) The tailor is here for you, Mr. Boyd. (*Mr. Dale enters from SR*)

ELI: I didn't call for a tailor.

CLARA: Thank you, Mr. Dale, for coming on such short notice.

MR. DALE: Happy to help, Miss Rutherford. Please stand Mr. Boyd, so I can take your measurements.

CLARA: Simpson, please ring for Mr. Boyd's valet. I need to speak with him.

SIMPSON: Mr. Boyd does not have a valet.

CLARA: Oh, that explains a lot. If you have any recommendations—

SIMPSON: I could provide you with several names.

CLARA: I'd appreciate it.

ELI: Before you hire someone *to put my clothes on*, could you—

CLARA: (*to Eli*) We'll need your input of course. Simpson, can you dress Mr. Boyd until a valet is found?

SIMPSON: Of course, ma'am. Anything else?

CLARA: That's all. (*Simpson nods and exits*)

ELI: Wait, now you're dismissing my butler. Who's in charge here?

CLARA: I am, Mr. Boyd.

ELI: *You are?*

CLARA: Unless you prefer I leave.

ELI: I don't want a valet, that's why I don't have one. I'm perfectly capable of dressing myself.

CLARA: Your cuff links are crooked, your tie is slightly askew and you're wearing two different socks. I won't even mention the vest you're wearing.

ELI: (*He looks down.*) I have the same socks on.

CLARA: One is black and the other is midnight charcoal.

ELI: How can you even tell?

CLARA: I'll speak to the laundress, but in any case, you need an expert hand.

ELI: (*unsure, slowly*) I can *learn* how to dress myself.

CLARA: If you want to be one of the Four Hundred, you must be properly dressed for every occasion. Do you know what to wear if you're invited to the Reading Room?

ELI: No. But you know.

CLARA: But I can't dress you.

MR. DALE: That's it, ma'am. You'll be in touch?

CLARA: I'll stop by this afternoon, Mr. Dale, thank you. (*Mr. Dale exits.*)

ELI: I have plenty of clothes.

CLARA: You may be able to wear some of what you own.

ELI: What's wrong with my clothes?

CLARA: Nothing's wrong with them.

ELI: There's just nothing right with them?

CLARA: I'll pick out the proper wardrobe for you.

ELI: Just so you know, I really love plaid.

CLARA: I deduced that, sir, but definitely not.

ELI: You don't like plaid?

CLARA: Have you seen any society man wearing plaid?

ELI: Just because no one else wears plaid, doesn't mean I can't.

CLARA: No gentleman in the Four Hundred stands out in such a way.

ELI: But it's my signature.

CLARA: Not anymore.

SIMPSON: (*Entering with NIKOLAY, SR*). The dance master has arrived, Miss Rutherford.

CLARA: Thank you, Simpson. (*Simpson exits*.) Mr. Boyd may I present Mr. Nikolay Kotov.

NIKOLAY: I'm thrilled to introduce you to the elegant and sophisticated world of social dance.

ELI: (*to Clara*) There has to be more important things to do. (*to Nikolay*) No offense.

NIKOLAY: Mr. Boyd, dance is essential to the high society gentleman all across the globe.

CLARA: (*to Eli*) Do you dance? At all?

ELI: I know a jig or two.

CLARA: Then the answer is no. You'll meet with Mr. Kotov every day—

ELI: Every day!?!?

CLARA: Until he is convinced you can handle any dance at a Newport Ball.

ELI: I don't like to dance. Especially with men I don't know.

NIKOLAY: This way, Mr. Boyd.

ELI: (*to Clara*) There's no way out of this one?

CLARA: Absolutely none.

Nikolay leads Eli out SR, Eli looks wary. Clara laughs to herself.

END EXCERPT