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### "Newport In Summer" (Harper's Monthly Magazine Vol. CIII No. DCXIV)

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THE HORSE SHOW AT NEWPORT

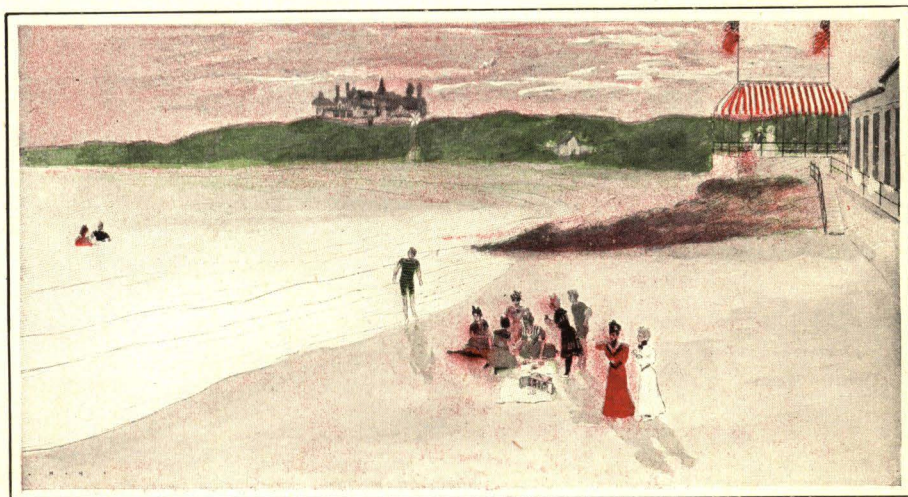


# HARPER'S MONTHLY MAGAZINE

VOL. CIII

JULY, 1901

NO. DCXIV



TEA ON THE BEACH

## Newport in Summer

BY ELIOT GREGORY

CITIES, like human beings, have distinct personalities, are frivolous, progressive, sombre,\* or gay, much after the fashion of the people about us, and produce as vivid impressions on the mind. It is no more possible, for one who has lingered in the highways and byways of Europe, to confuse Ghent and Florence, or St. Petersburg with Arles, than to mistake a friend's face, or characters in a favorite book.

This power to charm or repel is not confined to Old World towns. Here in our young land, so lightly draped as yet in

the scarfs of legend and romance, cities have "atmospheres" of their own impossible to ignore. Certain places attract and soothe us without apparent reason, while others annoy and irritate the nerves. Denver and Chicago are cordial good-fellows who slap one on the back, and call new acquaintances by their Christian names. When Salem or Annapolis is mentioned, a vision is evoked of mittened and kerchiefed old ladies drinking tea from dishes of rare Nan-king. New York is the resplendent wife of a banker, pushing her noisy way in the





VIEWING POLO GAME AND YACHT RACE AT THE SAME TIME



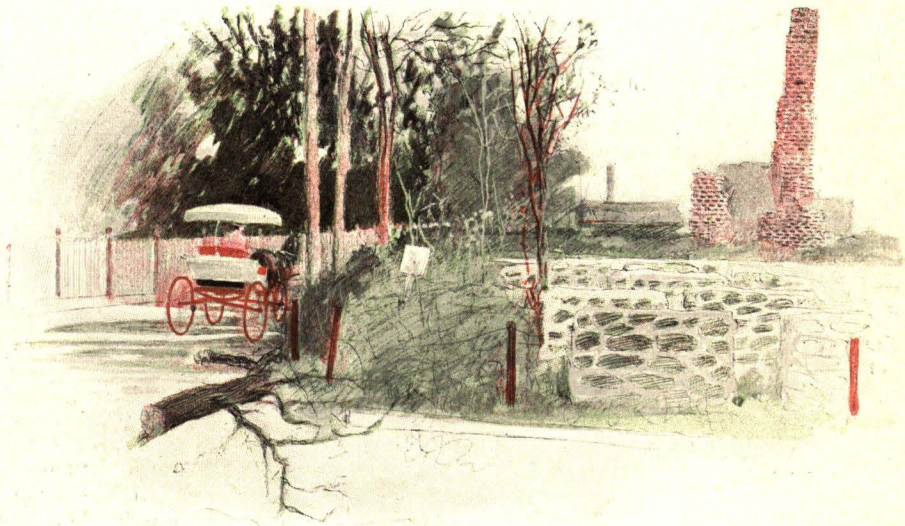
world and dazzling foreign courts with her diamonds, much to the disgust of *passée* Mistress Boston, who draws aside in protest.

Of all our towns, however, that which has of late developed the most amusing individuality is Newport. So much wealth has poured in upon the place that it reminds one to-day of the hero of *Ten Thousand a Year*, who, after a boyhood of toil and privation, awoke one morning to find himself heir to a fortune. Like that lucky youth, the Rhode Island city is experiencing difficulty in adapting itself to new conditions, and has more than once set the world laughing at its pretensions.

During its two hundred years of existence, Newport has seen three distinct phases of life. First, as a provincial seaport, it had a day of prosperity; trade, however, drifted away to rival centres, leaving the town to sink into obscurity and indigence, until some sixty years ago, when a group of unostentatious people selected it for their summer home. Those were happy days! I have an idea that the old city remembers with pleasure the simple ways and entertainments of the epoch. The third phase of its existence began late in the eighties, when, almost in a season, Newport turned from being

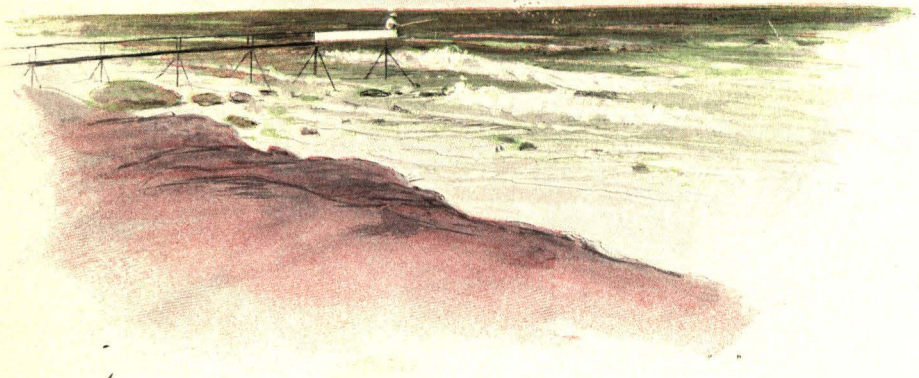
a tranquil and exclusive centre into a focus of folly, extravagance, and newspaper notoriety, the fad of our wealthiest plutocracy, and perhaps the most advertised watering-place on the globe. So quickly did this last transformation take place, so great has been the treasure flung about its ill-kept streets, that the astonished seaport is still rubbing its eyes and wondering if this unexpected prosperity is not an illusion. As to rising to the situation, getting its hair cut, and making a fresh toilet in which to receive guests, such an idea has never crossed its head.

Each year when I set foot anew in the meagre shed that does duty for a railway station, or note the crowd of faultless city carriages huddled together on a pier—at which emigrants would blush to land—waiting of a Saturday afternoon the arrival of their fagged owners; when I saunter through lanelike streets leading incongruously to marble villa and Tudor manor-house; when I find shingle cottages decorated with Versailles furniture, Mignard portraits, Genoa brocades, and Beauvais tapestries; when I see the toilets and jewels that women assume to dine informally with friends—I feel the same sort of amused astonishment as the loungers in Hyde Park must have experi-



A CONTRAST—RUINS IN THE PRINCIPAL PART OF NEWPORT





A LONE FISHERMAN

enced when Tittlebat Titmouse appeared amongst them, his clumsy hands glittering with rings, and a splendid chain strung across a waistcoat homesick for the wash-tub. The strongest impression one receives on visiting Newport to-day is a confused sense of splendor and slouch that would be sad if it were not laughable.

Poets have sung about the palace which in Venice shoulders a prison. It has been reserved for an American city to show the world châteaux and cow-sheds chumming amicably together. Perhaps a bard will some day appear to celebrate these ill-assorted unions, and chant the fact that here green lawns lie down with potato-patches, and stables look in at the windows of granite palaces. One thing, however, is clear: at no other time or place since Cleopatra carried off Anthony for a "season" in Asia Minor has so much money been spent that a group of people might take sea baths.

Newport is not a typical American watering-place. Mr. Page tells us the country is inclined to take it seriously, which is a pity, for it is above all a place of

fads and caprices, of changing moods and inconsistent standards. Oddly enough, many of its manias have coincided with the discarding of those particular fads abroad. The rush to build costly country houses at a moment when the owners of such useless piles of bricks and mortar in Europe are doing their best to get rid of their burdens is an illustration of this.

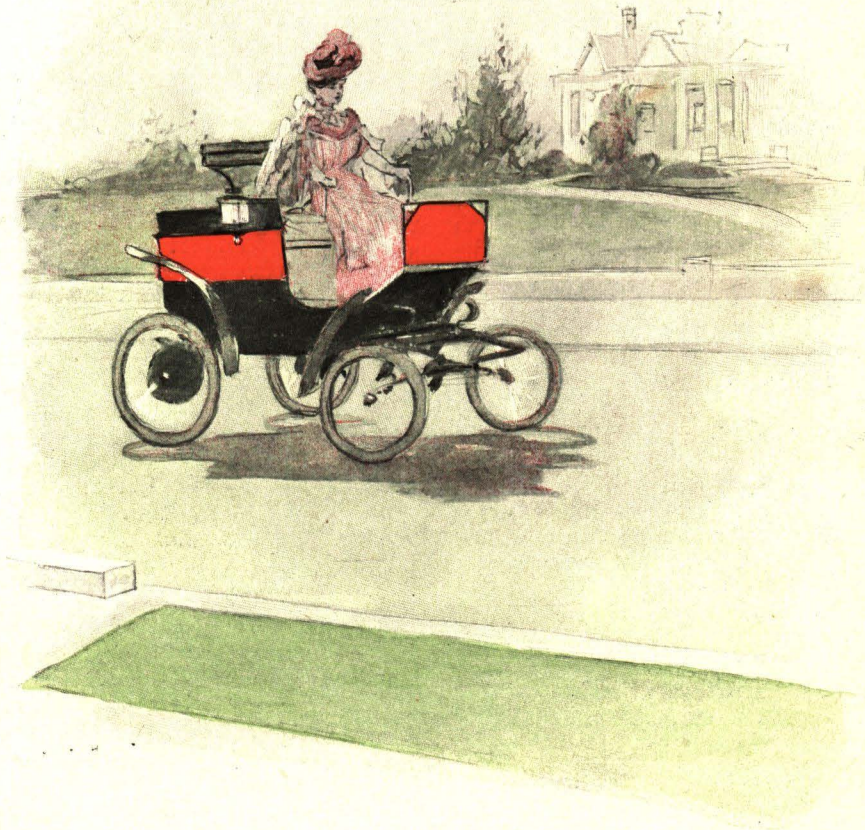
The building craze must be placed first on the list of Newport's idiosyncrasies. Neither in England nor on the Continent have people been thoughtless enough to construct costly residences at a sea-side city where the season lasts but a few weeks—to remain here longer is to "walk alone a banquet-hall deserted." Palaces are as inappropriate to Newport as a court train would be in a row-boat; for it is the one place in America where people don't want to have guests stopping with them. House parties were voted inconvenient long ago, exception being made for young men (with turnouts of their own) sufficiently "in the swim" to be asked out continually, and not interfere with the liberty of their hostess, or make claim upon her stable. One gay



matron, with a Continental reputation for hospitality, openly tells the people who happen to be under her roof that they must shift for themselves the nights she dines out. As she remains at home on an average one evening a week, the pleasure of visiting her may easily be imagined. Yet this very woman was not satisfied until she had nagged her husband into building a granite excrescence on the cliffs roomy enough to shelter a regiment.

Oh! those cliff structures. What monuments to human folly they are! One cannot help wondering what is to become of them in the future, for a fatality seems

to pursue the inappropriate piles. A couple of years ago, when royalty in the person of Count de Turin visited Newport, seven of its largest villas were shut, and have, for the matter of that, remained so since their construction. If the original owners find these habitats inconvenient, what will take place when, in the next generation, fortunes are divided and children find themselves with burdens on their hands compared to which white elephants would be handy bits of *bric-à-brac*. One explanation of this folly is to be found in the fact that the majority of staring habitations have been



DASHING ALONG THE AVENUE



built by "outsiders," or people but recently admitted to the social life of the place, therefore unaware of their blunders until it was too late.

Harpignies used to explain to us, when we were students in Paris, that the city's quais—he was fond of painting—owed their charm to the harmonious adaptation of palace, bridge, and tree-lined embankment to the river's width. "In London," he would add, "the Thames is too wide, and at Rome the Tiber too narrow, for the buildings on the banks. In Paris one feels the sense of artistic satisfaction which comes from harmonious proportions."

Until recently the same might have been said of Newport's famous cliffs. The villas on their crests were in keeping with the place and in harmony with the landscape. Unfortunately, the architects of later structures either failed to see this, or wilfully ignored the subtle laws of proportion, and have marred the fair ocean front with bogus castles and Renaissance pavilions, as out of place on those verdant slopes as a Broad Street office-building would be on the Cours la Reine. Not to mention the æsthetic crime of crowding monumental structures, that require settings of park or stately Italian garden, on foolish little patches of land, until they look like the pasteboard models glued to green boards one occasionally sees in architects' offices.

Now, nothing is more characteristic of a man than the house he builds. An analogy always exists between the aspect of a place and the lives of its inhabitants, because physical and moral peculiarities react upon each other. The pretentious château (on its half-acre of land), so planned that the front door opens into the family sitting-room, and adapted neither for home comfort nor successful entertaining, is singularly characteristic of our "high society."

Modern Newport has made unto itself a god with feet of clay. But as it is that variety of alluvial deposit found at Cripple Creek, the place is suffering from a plethora of gold, which, combined with a paucity of tradition, results in an amusing muddle. The possessors of large new fortunes are anxious to be very fine after the fashion of foreign aristocrats, but, disliking the isolation incumbent on that

pose, decided that it was much jollier to be fine all in a heap. Herding together and living in the public eye are American traits. They fill our large hotels and crowd winter resorts, but are singularly out of keeping with *la vie à grandes guides* that people would fain lead. Our "Deucedly Superior Set" feel that something in their machinery jars, but are not clever enough to see that the fault lies in their foolish ways.

Many years ago, when New York was a small provincial city, a fashion prevailed for ladies to place such flowers as had been sent to them, and even bronze and china ornaments in their parlor windows, outside the curtains, for the benefit, apparently, of the public. It was a simple-minded kind of ostentation, which went with the habits of a people whose idea of summer comfort was a month spent in a hotel. Something like this custom prevails in Newport to-day. Not only are the lawns and façades of the cottages arranged with an eye to effect from the public road, but the entire life of the "cottagers" takes place in their front parlor windows. Hardly a property-owner in the place can give a garden party, nor a lady stroll in her grounds, without furnishing a spectacle to the kodak enthusiast and the "barge" full of dollar trippers. When one sees this, and how publicity is courted in other ways, the naïve inconsistency of our "smart" people in resenting notoriety is amusing.

Next to lack of privacy comes the absence of tranquillity in the list of Newport's shortcomings. One is reminded of the overworked banker whose doctor recommended change and rest. The invalid was unable to find either during his travels, as the waiters, he explained, got his change, and the hotel bills took the rest. Among its many claims to distinction Newport might be mentioned as a place where people (like that suffering financier) find neither variety nor repose, the only difference being that the banker was honestly looking for those blessings, while the patrons of this shore would in all probability refuse them, were they offered.

Morley says that it would be over-praise to call English society half-civilized. One wonders what would he write if he could





A SUNDAY-NIGHT CONCERT AT THE CASINO



see the habits of up-to-date Newporters. In other parts of the land, people fortunate enough to get away from city life break during their holiday with the weary routine of winter existence. Here the grind is carried on through the hot summer days and nights with a persistency worthy of a nobler aim. Less the opera, there is hardly a shade of difference between society's winter and summer ways. The stage setting is different, but the play and the performers, the costumes and the jesters, remain discouragingly the same. *Le calme me tue* would be an excellent title for the comedy that these people perform for the benefit of the public, a play with many fair performers, delightful music, sumptuous ballet, and an occasional bit of tragedy thrown in to keep up the interest, but singularly lacking in plot or antithesis.

It is hardly fair, however, to dwell on the shortcomings of a place which, after all, has much to offer those who know what to take and what to leave. Despite the showy ways of the "Mighty Few"—perhaps on account of them—Modern Newport offers the visitor a brilliancy of summer pageantry unseen in other parts of this country. The air is full of that buoyant sense of living, the subtle *joie de vivre* that one feels in Paris of a May morning when the tide of sparkling traps and laughing children flows through sunny avenues to the Bois. Here of an August afternoon one has the sensation that all poverty and sorrow have been washed off of the face of the world by the morning shower that cooled the air and sprinkled the trim lawns with crystal. Wherever one turns, the same animation and gayety prevails; for a moment the illusion is produced that prosperity and health are normal conditions of humanity, that dainty carriages and fresh toilets spring spontaneously from the soil. There are few prettier sights to be seen, even in this cheerful place, than the Yacht Club when the "world" is embarking for a day on the water; or a more picturesque scene than the Casino of a Sunday evening, its galleries gay with lanterns and its moonlit lawn filled with a throng silent under the spell of music. One might journey far and find no circle more brilliant than the ring of flag-decked boxes that girdles

the open-air Horse Show, that supreme function which with the Coach Parade marks the culmination of the season. Perhaps nowhere else in the world can one sit of an afternoon, sipping tea, and watch polo and a yacht race at the same moment—a combining of pleasures which has a real value for our compatriots who delight in doing two things at once. It doubtless gives them a vague sense of saving time.

But before all social functions, all artificial allurements, must be placed the natural beauties of a place where Nature has been more than prodigal of her good gifts. Before yacht-filled harbor or sheltered beach ranks the rocky stretch of heather and wild rose, which<sup>a</sup> lies at the city feet like a bit of Scotland transplanted into the lap of a tropical sea. The ten miles of roadway that winds through this enchanted region rivals in beauty such famous drives as the "Cornice," the road between Aix and the Grande Chartreuse, and even that bit of paradise lying between Sorrento and Castel-a-Mare. It is of this that Robert Louis Stevenson writes in the letters full of pleasant souvenirs of visits in tranquil Washington Street. It is this and not the palace-lined Avenue that inspired Alexander Harrison, whose brush has more than once expressed the charm of a certain ineffable hour, a fleeting moment of midsummer twilight, after the sun has disappeared and a young moon hangs low in an opalescent sky, an hour when one feels in touch with the hidden mysteries of the ocean.

Let not a simple-minded reader, innocent of the ways of the place, imagine that this is the hour chosen by the "cottagers" to linger by the ocean's edge. You may drive from one end of the winding roadway to the other without meeting a human being. Sea damp takes the curl out of feathers and injures Parisian toilets; besides, what sensible mortals would linger out in the twilight when they might be at home enjoying the intricacies of "bridge," or getting ready for a dinner party?

The same indifference to pleasures that interest other parts of the country is noticeable throughout this place. No set of people is more indifferent to yachting than the owners of the hundred trim





A VIEW OF THE LINKS



craft that crowd its harbor. They will take a languid interest in the greater races, and make up parties for the day. It is not safe, however, to question returning guests as to the result of the contest. Last week a party on one of the big yachts (out to see a contest that was thrilling the whole country) retired to the cabin as soon as they got on board, and remained there the entire day playing cards. As they were being landed at twilight, some one on the wharf called out: "Who won?"

"Mrs. Blank," answered an ingenuous maiden; "she held all the trumps."

A mild pretence is also made by our *beau monde* of encouraging fox-hunting and field sports, but there is little real interest taken in these pastimes. The first "meet" of the season will be well attended, but finding the roads dusty and the hills steep, people soon turn back and go solemnly pounding up and down the Avenue, bowing to each other.

Occasionally a "cottager," wishing to be original and rural, will give a picnic, but the half-hearted affair turns out to be only a burlesque of the real thing, differing in no essential from the winter luncheon served by the same weary waiters who have already offered three hundred and sixty-five identical repasts to the same three hundred odd guests during the past twelve months.

Nothing outside of its narrow circle interests Newport, which has the proud distinction of being the only place on the coast where no notice is taken socially of our navy officers when the fleet visits the harbor.

There are, however, signs of a change in the air. Without knowing it, Newport is on the threshold of a fourth phase of development. The great "palace-building era" has seen its day. It is safe to predict that no additional mastodons will be constructed here. The dull old staggers who still cling to heavy dressing and perfunctory card-leaving are dying out. Aristocrats of the next decade will lead more reasonable lives than their parents. The matron of the future will be simply clothed (in public), leaving elaborate toilet, like her diamonds, for winter wear. (It should be said in passing, to the credit of our men, that they long ago saw the error of their ways, and discarded city

trappings for cool flannels and shady panamas.) Without arriving at the dishevelled condition of the hatless summer girl, our wives and sisters will become open-air women, and forget that such things as visiting-cards exist.

Already one sees the more independent *débutantes*—those who are sure enough of their position to do as they like—cutting the heavy functions given in their honor by fond relations, and escaping from the boredom of reception and "tea" to pass their afternoons in freedom. It will take years to accomplish these reforms, and the pioneers will, in the mean time, be regarded with suspicion. Many old tabbies are at this moment shuddering because a group of young people have chosen the twilight hour for a dip in the ocean, in defiance of fashion, which decrees that a sea bath should be taken at high noon, with the thermometer in the nineties and dressing-cabins turned into ovens. When it got whispered about that the innovators actually had the audacity to carry a tea-basket with them to the beach, and after a hurried toilet lingered in the summer twilight watching the sunset and chatting over the cups—at an hour when all self-respecting philistines are housed in nice hot parlors keeping company with kerosene-lamps—the elderly matrons asked each other, "What is society coming to?"

London society, under an appearance of frivolity, follows a definite aim and exercises great political influence. The prizes it has to offer to the successful are worth a struggle. In France the aristocracy is fighting for its very existence in arms against a rising sea of democracy. With us the shell only of those organizations exists, without their *raison d'être*.

Until many reforms are worked, Newport will continue to give a continual performance of *Hamlet* with the Danish Prince left out; sumptuous dinners served and imperial jewels donned to entertain callow youths from college; carriages that would not be out of place in a coronation procession ordered out for a drive in country lanes, or to take people to the Fall River boat—efforts continually out of proportion to the results obtained—enormous fatigue incurred, great fortunes spent, and serious sacrifices endured to keep the costly ball turning toward no visible goal.