

Staccato Notes of a Vanished Summer (from Literature and Life) eBook

Staccato Notes of a Vanished Summer (from Literature and Life) by William Dean Howells

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by William Dean Howells

STACCATO NOTES OF A VANISHED SUMMER

Monday afternoon the storm which had been beating up against the southeasterly wind nearly all day thickened, fold upon fold, in the northwest. The gale increased, and blackened the harbor and whitened the open sea beyond, where sail after sail appeared round the reef of Whaleback Light, and ran in a wild scamper for the safe anchorages within.

Since noon cautious coasters of all sorts had been dropping in with a casual air; the coal schooners and barges had rocked and nodded knowingly to one another, with their taper and truncated masts, on the breast of the invisible swell; and the flock of little yachts and pleasure-boats which always fleck the bay huddled together in the safe waters. The craft that came scurrying in just before nightfall were mackerel seiners from Gloucester. They were all of one graceful shape and one size; they came with all sail set, taking the waning light like sunshine on their flying-jibs, and trailing each two dories behind them, with their seines piled in black heaps between the thwarts. As soon as they came inside their jibs weakened and fell, and the anchor-chains rattled from their bows. Before the dark hid them we could have counted sixty or seventy ships in the harbor, and as the night fell they improvised a little Venice under the hill with their lights, which twinkled rhythmically, like the lamps in the basin of St. Mark, between the Maine and New Hampshire coasts.

There was a dash of rain, and we thought the storm had begun; but that ended it, as so many times this summer a dash of rain has ended a storm. The morning came veiled in a fog that kept the shipping at anchor through the day; but the next night the weather cleared. We woke to the clucking of tackle, and saw the whole fleet standing dreamily out to sea. When they were fairly gone, the summer, which had held aloof in dismay of the sudden cold, seemed to return and possess the land again; and the succession of silver days and crystal nights resumed the tranquil round which we thought had ceased.

I.

One says of every summer, when it is drawing near its end, "There never was such a summer"; but if the summer is one of those which slip from the feeble hold of elderly hands, when the days of the years may be reckoned with the scientific logic of the insurance tables and the sad conviction of the psalmist, one sees it go with a passionate prescience of never seeing its like again such as the younger witness cannot know. Each new summer of the few left must be shorter and swifter than the last: its Junes will be thirty days long, and its Julys and Augusts thirty-one, in

compliance with the almanac; but the days will be of so small a compass that fourteen of them will rattle round in a week of the old size like shrivelled peas in a pod.

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To be sure they swell somewhat in the retrospect, like the same peas put to soak; and I am aware now of some June days of those which we first spent at Kittery Point this year, which were nearly twenty-four hours long. Even the days of declining years linger a little here, where there is nothing to hurry them, and where it is pleasant to loiter, and muse beside the sea and shore, which are so netted together at Kittery Point that they hardly know themselves apart. The days, whatever their length, are divided, not into hours, but into mails. They begin, without regard to the sun, at eight o'clock, when the first mail comes with a few letters and papers which had forgotten themselves the night before. At half-past eleven the great mid-day mail arrives; at four o'clock there is another indifferent and scattering post, much like that at eight in the morning; and at seven the last mail arrives with the Boston evening papers and the New York morning papers, to make you forget any letters you were looking for. The opening of the mid-day mail is that which most throngs with summer folks the little postoffice under the elms, opposite the weather-beaten mansion of Sir William Pepperrell; but the evening mail attracts a large and mainly disinterested circle of natives. The day's work on land and sea is then over, and the village leisure, perched upon fences and stayed against house walls, is of a picturesqueness which we should prize if we saw it abroad, and which I am not willing to slight on our own ground.

II.

The type is mostly of a seafaring brown, a complexion which seems to be inherited rather than personally acquired; for the commerce of Kittery Point perished long ago, and the fishing fleets that used to fit out from her wharves have almost as long ago passed to Gloucester. All that is left of the fishing interest is the weir outside which supplies, fitfully and uncertainly, the fish shipped fresh to the nearest markets. But in spite of this the tint taken from the suns and winds of the sea lingers on the local complexion; and the local manner is that freer and easier manner of people who have known other coasts, and are in some sort citizens of the world. It is very different from the inland New England manner; as different as the gentle, slow speech of the shore from the clipped nasals of the hill-country. The lounging native walk is not the heavy plod taught by the furrow, but has the lurch and the sway of the deck in it.

Nothing could be better suited to progress through the long village, which rises and sinks beside the shore like a landscape with its sea-legs on; and nothing could be more charming and friendly than this village. It is quite untainted as yet by the summer cottages which have covered so much of the coast, and made it look as if the aesthetic suburbs of New York and Boston had gone ashore upon it. There are two or three old-fashioned summer hotels; but the summer

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life distinctly fails to characterize the place. The people live where their forefathers have lived for two hundred and fifty years; and for the century since the baronial domain of Sir William was broken up and his possessions confiscated by the young Republic, they have dwelt in small red or white houses on their small holdings along the slopes and levels of the low hills beside the water, where a man may pass with the least inconvenience and delay from his threshold to his gunwale. Not all the houses are small; some are spacious and ambitious to be of ugly modern patterns; but most are simple and homelike. Their gardens, following the example of Sir William's vanished pleasaunce, drop southward to the shore, where the lobster-traps and the hen-coops meet in unembarrassed promiscuity. But the fish-flakes which once gave these inclines the effect of terraced vineyards have passed as utterly as the proud parterres of the old baronet; and Kittery Point no longer "makes" a cod or a haddock for the market.

Three groceries, a butcher shop, and a small variety store study the few native wants; and with a little money one may live in as great real comfort here as for much in a larger place. The street takes care of itself; the seafaring housekeeping of New England is not of the insatiable Dutch type which will not spare the stones of the highway; but within the houses are of almost terrifying cleanliness. The other day I found myself in a kitchen where the stove shone like oxidized silver; the pump and sink were clad in oilcloth as with blue tiles; the walls were papered; the stainless floor was strewn with home-made hooked and braided rugs; and I felt the place so altogether too good for me that I pleaded to stay there for the transaction of my business, lest a sharper sense of my unfitness should await me in the parlor.

The village, with scarcely an interval of farm-lands, stretches four miles along the water-side to Portsmouth; but it seems to me that just at the point where our lines have fallen there is the greatest concentration of its character. This has apparently not been weakened, it has been accented, by the trolley-line which passes through its whole length, with gayly freighted cars coming and going every half-hour. I suppose they are not longer than other trolley-cars, but they each affect me like a procession. They are cheerful presences by day, and by night they light up the dim, winding street with the flare of their electric bulbs, and bring to the country a vision of city splendor upon terms that do not humiliate or disquiet. During July and August they are mostly filled with summer folks from a great summer resort beyond us, and their lights reveal the pretty fashions of hats and gowns in all the charm of the latest lines and tints. But there is an increasing democracy in these splendors, and one might easily mistake a passing excursionist from some neighboring inland town, or even a local native with the instinct of clothes, for a social leader from York Harbor.

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With the falling leaf, the barge-like open cars close up into well-warmed saloons, and falter to hourly intervals in their course. But we are still far from the falling leaf; we are hardly come to the blushing or fading leaf. Here and there an impassioned maple confesses the autumn; the ancient Pepperrell elms fling down showers of the baronet's fairy gold in the September gusts; the sumacs and the blackberry vines are ablaze along the tumbling black stone walls; but it is still summer, it is still summer: I cannot allow otherwise!

III.

The other day I visited for the first time (in the opulent indifference of one who could see it any time) the stately tomb of the first Pepperrell, who came from Cornwall to these coasts, and settled finally at Kittery Point. He laid there the foundations of the greatest fortune in colonial New England, which revolutionary New England seized and dispersed, as I cannot but feel, a little ruthlessly. In my personal quality I am of course averse to all great fortunes; and in my civic capacity I am a patriot. But still I feel a sort of grace in wealth a century old, and if I could now have my way, I would not have had their possessions reft from those kindly Pepperrells, who could hardly help being loyal to the fountain of their baronial honors. Sir William, indeed; had helped, more than any other man, to bring the people who despoiled him to a national consciousness. If he did not imagine, he mainly managed the plucky New England expedition against Louisbourg at Cape Breton a half century before the War of Independence; and his splendid success in rending that stronghold from the French taught the colonists that they were Americans, and need be Englishmen no longer than they liked. His soldiers were of the stamp of all succeeding American armies, and his leadership was of the neighborly and fatherly sort natural to an amiable man who knew most of them personally. He was already the richest man in America, and his grateful king made him a baronet; but he came contentedly back to Kittery, and took up his old life in a region where he had the comfortable consideration of an unrivalled magnate. He built himself the dignified mansion which still stands across the way from the post-office on Kittery Point, within an easy stone's cast of the far older house, where his father wedded Margery Bray, when he came, a thrifty young Welsh fisherman, from the Isles of Shoals, and established his family on Kittery. The Bray house had been the finest in the region a hundred years before the Pepperrell mansion was built; it still remembers its consequence in the panelling and wainscoting of the large, square parlor where the young people were married and in the elaborate staircase cramped into the little, square hall; and the Bray fortune helped materially to swell the wealth of the Pepperrells.

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I do not know that I should care now to have a man able to ride thirty miles on his own land; but I do not mind Sir William's having done it here a hundred and fifty years ago; and I wish the confiscations had left his family, say, about a mile of it. They could now, indeed, enjoy it only in the collateral branches, for all Sir William's line is extinct. The splendid mansion which he built his daughter is in alien hands, and the fine old house which Lady Pepperrell built herself after his death belongs to the remotest of kinsmen. A group of these, the descendants of a prolific sister of the baronet, meets every year at Kittery Point as the Pepperrell Association, and, in a tent hard by the little grove of drooping spruces which shade the admirable renaissance cenotaph of Sir William's father, cherishes the family memories with due American "proceedings."

IV.

The meeting of the Pepperrell Association was by no means the chief excitement of our summer. In fact, I do not know that it was an excitement at all; and I am sure it was not comparable to the presence of our naval squadron, when for four days the mighty dragon and kraken shapes of steel, which had crumbled the decrepit pride of Spain in the fight at Santiago, weltered in our peaceful waters, almost under my window.

I try now to dignify them with handsome epithets; but while they were here I had moments of thinking they looked like a lot of whited locomotives, which had broken through from some trestle, in a recent accident, and were waiting the offices of a wrecking-train. The poetry of the man-of-war still clings to the "three-decker out of the foam" of the past; it is too soon yet for it to have cast a mischievous halo about the modern battle-ship; and I looked at the New York and the Texas and the Brooklyn and the rest, and thought, "Ah, but for you, and our need of proving your dire efficiency, perhaps we could have got on with the wickedness of Spanish rule in Cuba, and there had been no war!" Under my reluctant eyes the great, dreadful spectacle of the Santiago fight displayed itself in peaceful Kittery Harbor. I saw the Spanish ships drive upon the reef where a man from Dover, New Hampshire, was camping in a little wooden shanty unconscious; and I heard the dying screams of the Spanish sailors, seethed and scalded within the steel walls of their own wicked war-kettles.

As for the guns, battle or no battle, our ships, like "kind Lieutenant Belay of the 'Hot Cross-Bun'," seemed to be "banging away the whole day long." They set a bad example to the dreamy old fort on the Newcastle shore, which, till they came, only recollected itself to salute the sunrise and sunset with a single gun; but which, under provocation of the squadron, formed a habit of firing twenty or thirty times at noon.

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Other martial shows and noises were not so bad. I rather liked seeing the morning drill of the marines and the bluejackets on the iron decks, with the lively music that went with it. The bugle calls and the bells were charming; the week's wash hung out to dry had its picturesqueness by day, and by night the spectral play of the search-lights along the waves and shores, and against the startled skies, was even more impressive. There was a band which gave us every evening the airs of the latest coon-songs, and the national anthems which we have borrowed from various nations; and yes, I remember the white squadron kindly, though I was so glad to have it go, and let us lapse back into our summer silence and calm. It was (I do not mind saying now) a majestic sight to see those grotesque monsters gather themselves together, and go wallowing, one after another, out of the harbor, and drop behind the ledge of Whaleback Light, as if they had sunk into the sea.

V.

A deep peace fell upon us when they went, and it must have been at this most receptive moment, when all our sympathies were adjusted in a mood of hospitable expectation, that Jim appeared.

Jim was, and still is, and I hope will long be, a cat; but unless one has lived at Kittery Point, and realized, from observation and experience, what a leading part cats may play in society, one cannot feel the full import of this fact. Not only has every house in Kittery its cat, but every house seems to have its half-dozen cats, large, little, old, and young; of divers colors, tending mostly to a dark tortoise-shell. With a whole ocean inviting to the tragic rite, I do not believe there is ever a kitten drowned in Kittery; the illimitable sea rather employs itself in supplying the fish to which "no cat's averse," but which the cats of Kittery demand to have cooked. They do not like raw fish; they say it plainly, and they prefer to have the bones taken out for them, though they do not insist upon that point.

At least, Jim never did so from the time when he first scented the odor of delicate young mackerel in the evening air about our kitchen, and dropped in upon the maids there with a fine casual effect of being merely out for a walk, and feeling it a neighborly thing to call. He had on a silver collar, engraved with his name and surname, which offered itself for introduction like a visiting-card. He was too polite to ask himself to the table at once, but after he had been welcomed to the family circle, he formed the habit of finding himself with us at breakfast and supper, when he sauntered in like one who should say, "Did I smell fish?" but would not go further in the way of hinting.

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He had no need to do so. He was made at home, and freely invited to our best not only in fish, but in chicken, for which he showed a nice taste, and in sweetcorn, for which he revealed a most surprising fondness when it was cut from the cob for him. After he had breakfasted or supped he gracefully suggested that he was thirsty by climbing to the table where the water-pitcher stood and stretching his fine feline head towards it. When he had lapped up his saucer of water; he marched into the parlor, and riveted the chains upon our fondness by taking the best chair and going to sleep in it in attitudes of Egyptian, of Assyrian majesty. His arts were few or none; he rather disdained to practise any; he completed our conquest by maintaining himself simply a fascinating presence; and perhaps we spoiled Jim. It is certain that he came under my window at two o'clock one night, and tried the kitchen door. It resisted his efforts to get in, and then Jim began to use language which I had never heard from the lips of a cat before, and seldom from the lips of a man. I will not repeat it; enough that it carried to the listener the conviction that Jim was not sober. Where he could have got his liquor in the totally abstinent State of Maine I could not positively say, but probably of some sailor who had brought it from the neighboring New Hampshire coast. There could be no doubt, however, that Jim was drunk; and a dash from the water-pitcher seemed the only thing for him. The water did not touch him, but he started back in surprise and grief, and vanished into the night without a word.

His feelings must have been deeply wounded, for it was almost a week before he came near us again; and then I think that nothing but young lobster would have brought him. He forgave us finally, and made us of his party in the quarrel he began gradually to have with the large yellow cat of a next-door neighbor. This culminated one afternoon, after a long exchange of mediaeval defiance and insult, in a battle upon a bed of ragweed, with wild shrieks of rage, and prodigious feats of ground and lofty tumbling. It seemed to our anxious eyes that Jim was getting the worst of it; but when we afterwards visited the battle-field and picked up several tufts of blond fur, we were in a doubt which was afterwards heightened by Jim's invasion of the yellow cat's territory, where he stretched himself defiantly upon the grass and seemed to be challenging the yellow cat to come out and try to put him off the premises.

PG EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Ambitious to be of ugly modern patterns
Here and there an impassioned maple confesses the autumn
Houses are of almost terrifying cleanliness
Leading part cats may play in society
Picturesqueness which we should prize if we saw it abroad
Has the lurch and the sway of the deck in it