

Confessions of a Summer Colonist (from Literature and Life) eBook

Confessions of a Summer Colonist (from Literature and Life) by William Dean Howells

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Page 1

by William Dean Howells

CONFESSIONS OF A SUMMER COLONIST

The season is ending in the little summer settlement on the Down East coast where I have been passing the last three months, and with each loath day the sense of its peculiar charm grows more poignant. A prescience of the homesickness I shall feel for it when I go already begins to torment me, and I find myself wishing to imagine some form of words which shall keep a likeness of it at least through the winter; some shadowy semblance which I may turn to hereafter if any chance or change should destroy or transform it, or, what is more likely, if I should never come back to it. Perhaps others in the distant future may turn to it for a glimpse of our actual life in one of its most characteristic phases; I am sure that in the distant present there are many millions of our own inlanders to whom it would be altogether strange.

I.

In a certain sort fragile is written all over our colony; as far as the visible body of it is concerned it is inexpressibly perishable; a fire and a high wind could sweep it all away; and one of the most American of all American things is the least fitted among them to survive from the present to the future, and impart to it the significance of what may soon be a "portion and parcel" of our extremely forgetful past.

It is also in a supremely transitional moment: one might say that last year it was not quite what it is now, and next year it may be altogether different. In fact, our summer colony is in that happy hour when the rudeness of the first summer conditions has been left far behind, and vulgar luxury has not yet cumbrously succeeded to a sort of sylvan distinction.

The type of its simple and sufficing hospitalities is the seven-o'clock supper. Every one, in hotel or in cottage, dines between one and two, and no less scrupulously sups at seven, unless it is a few extremists who sup at half-past seven. At this function, which is our chief social event, it is 'de rigueur' for the men not to dress, and they come in any sort of sack or jacket or cutaway, letting the ladies make up the pomps which they forego. From this fact may be inferred the informality of the men's day-time attire; and the same note is sounded in the whole range of the cottage life, so that once a visitor from the world outside, who had been exasperated beyond endurance by the absence of form among us (if such an effect could be from a cause so negative), burst out with the reproach, "Oh, you make a fetish of your informality!"

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“Fetish” is, perhaps, rather too strong a word, but I should not mind saying that informality was the tutelary genius of the place. American men are everywhere impatient of form. It burdens and bothers them, and they like to throw it off whenever they can. We may not be so very democratic at heart as we seem, but we are impatient of ceremonies that separate us when it is our business or our pleasure to get at one another; and it is part of our splendor to ignore the ceremonies, as we do the expenses. We have all the decent grades of riches and poverty in our colony, but our informality is not more the treasure of the humble than of the great. In the nature of things it cannot last, however, and the only question is how long it will last. I think, myself, until some one imagines giving an eight-o’clock dinner; then all the informalities will go, and the whole train of evils which such a dinner connotes will rush in.

II.

The cottages themselves are of several sorts, and some still exist in the earlier stages of mutation from the fishermen’s and farmers’ houses which formed their germ. But these are now mostly let as lodgings to bachelors and other single or semi-detached folks who go for their meals to the neighboring hotels or boarding-houses. The hotels are each the centre of this sort of centripetal life, as well as the homes of their own scores or hundreds of inmates. A single boarding-house gathers about it half a dozen dependent cottages which it cares for, and feeds at its table; and even where the cottages have kitchens and all the housekeeping facilities, their inmates sometimes prefer to dine at the hotels. By far the greater number of cottagers, however, keep house, bringing their service with them from the cities, and settling in their summer homes for three or four or five months.

The houses conform more or less to one type: a picturesque structure of colonial pattern, shingled to the ground, and stained or left to take a weather-stain of grayish brown, with cavernous verandas, and dormer-windowed roofs covering ten or twelve rooms. Within they are, if not elaborately finished, elaborately fitted up, with a constant regard to health in the plumbing and drainage. The water is brought in a system of pipes from a lake five miles away, and as it is only for summer use the pipes are not buried from the frost, but wander along the surface, through the ferns and brambles of the tough little sea-side knolls on which the cottages are perched, and climb the old tumbling stone walls of the original pastures before diving into the cemented basements.

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Most of the cottages are owned by their occupants, and furnished by them; the rest, not less attractive and hardly less tastefully furnished, belong to natives, who have caught on to the architectural and domestic preferences of the summer people, and have built them to let. The rugosities of the stony pasture land end in a wooded point seaward, and curve east and north in a succession of beaches. It is on the point, and mainly short of its wooded extremity, that the cottages of our settlement are dropped, as near the ocean as may be, and with as little order as birds' nests in the grass, among the sweet-fern, laurel, bay, wild raspberries, and dog-roses, which it is the ideal to leave as untouched as possible. Wheel-worn lanes that twist about among the hollows find the cottages from the highway, but foot-paths approach one cottage from another, and people walk rather than drive to each other's doors. From the deep-bosomed, well-sheltered little harbor the tides swim inland, half a score of winding miles, up the channel of a river which without them would be a trickling rivulet. An irregular line of cottages follows the shore a little way, and then leaves the river to the schooners and barges which navigate it as far as the oldest pile-built wooden bridge in New England, and these in their turn abandon it to the fleets of row-boats and canoes in which summer youth of both sexes explore it to its source over depths as clear as glass, past wooded headlands and low, rush-bordered meadows, through reaches and openings of pastoral fields, and under the shadow of dreaming groves.

If there is anything lovelier than the scenery of this gentle river I do not know it; and I doubt if the sky is purer and bluer in paradise. This seems to be the consensus, tacit or explicit, of the youth who visit it, and employ the landscape for their picnics and their water parties from the beginning to the end of summer.

The river is very much used for sunsets by the cottagers who live on it, and who claim a superiority through them to the cottagers on the point. An impartial mind obliges me to say that the sunsets are all good in our colony; there is no place from which they are bad; and yet for a certain tragical sunset, where the dying day bleeds slowly into the channel till it is filled from shore to shore with red as far as the eye can reach, the river is unmatched.

For my own purposes, it is not less acceptable, however, when the fog has come in from the sea like a visible reverie, and blurred the whole valley with its whiteness. I find that particularly good to look at from the trolley-car which visits and revisits the river before finally leaving it, with a sort of desperation, and hiding its passion with a sudden plunge into the woods.

III.

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The old fishing and seafaring village, which has now almost lost the recollection of its first estate in its absorption with the care of the summer colony, was sparsely dropped along the highway bordering the harbor, and the shores of the river, where the piles of the time-worn wharves are still rotting. A few houses of the past remain, but the type of the summer cottage has impressed itself upon all the later building, and the native is passing architecturally, if not personally, into abeyance. He takes the situation philosophically, and in the season he caters to the summer colony not only as the landlord of the rented cottages, and the keeper of the hotels and boarding-houses, but as livery-stableman, grocer, butcher, marketman, apothecary, and doctor; there is not one foreign accent in any of these callings. If the native is a farmer, he devotes himself to vegetables, poultry, eggs, and fruit for the summer folks, and brings these supplies to their doors; his children appear with flowers; and there are many proofs that he has accurately sized the cottagers up in their tastes and fancies as well as their needs. I doubt if we have sized him up so well, or if our somewhat conventionalized ideal of him is perfectly representative. He is, perhaps, more complex than he seems; he is certainly much more self-sufficing than might have been expected. The summer folks are the material from which his prosperity is wrought, but he is not dependent, and is very far from submissive. As in all right conditions, it is here the employer who asks for work, not the employee; and the work must be respectfully asked for. There are many fables to this effect, as, for instance, that of the lady who said to a summer visitor, critical of the week's wash she had brought home, "I'll wash you and I'll iron you, but I won't take none of your jaw." A primitive independence is the keynote of the native character, and it suffers no infringement, but rather boasts itself. "We're independent here, I tell you," said the friendly person who consented to take off the wire door. "I was down Bangor way doin' a piece of work, and a fellow come along, and says he, 'I want you should hurry up on that job.' 'Hello!' says I, 'I guess I'll pull out.' Well, we calculate to do our work," he added, with an accent which sufficiently implied that their consciences needed no bossing in the performance.

The native compliance with any summer-visiting request is commonly in some such form as, "Well, I don't know but what I can," or, "I guess there ain't anything to hinder me." This compliance is so rarely, if ever, carried to the point of domestic service that it may fairly be said that all the domestic service, at least of the cottagers, is imported. The natives will wait at the hotel tables; they will come in "to accommodate"; but they will not "live out." I was one day witness of the extreme failure of a friend whose city cook had suddenly abandoned him, and who

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applied to a friendly farmer's wife in the vain hope that she might help him to some one who would help his family out in their strait. "Why, there ain't a girl in the Hollow that lives out! Why, if you was sick abed, I don't know as I know anybody 't you could git to set up with you." The natives will not live out because they cannot keep their self-respect in the conditions of domestic service. Some people laugh at this self-respect, but most summer folks like it, as I own I do.

In our partly mythical estimate of the native and his relation to us, he is imagined as holding a kind of carnival when we leave him at the end of the season, and it is believed that he likes us to go early. We have had his good offices at a fair price all summer, but as it draws to a close they are rendered more and more fitfully. From some, perhaps flattered, reports of the happiness of the natives at the departure of the sojourners, I have pictured them dancing a sort of farandole, and stretching with linked hands from the farthest summer cottage up the river to the last on the wooded point. It is certain that they get tired, and I could not blame them if they were glad to be rid of their guests, and to go back to their own social life. This includes church festivals of divers kinds, lectures and shows, sleigh-rides, theatricals, and reading-clubs, and a plentiful use of books from the excellently chosen free village library. They say frankly that the summer folks have no idea how pleasant it is when they are gone, and I am sure that the gayeties to which we leave them must be more tolerable than those which we go back to in the city. It may be, however, that I am too confident, and that their gayeties are only different. I should really like to know just what the entertainments are which are given in a building devoted to them in a country neighborhood three or four miles from the village. It was once a church, but is now used solely for social amusements.

IV

The amusements of the summer colony I have already hinted at. Besides suppers, there are also teas, of larger scope, both afternoon and evening. There are hops every week at the two largest hotels, which are practically free to all; and the bathing-beach is, of course, a supreme attraction. The bath-houses, which are very clean and well equipped, are not very cheap, either for the season or for a single bath, and there is a pretty pavilion at the edge of the sands. This is always full of gossiping spectators of the hardy adventurers who brave tides too remote from the Gulf Stream to be ever much warmer than sixty or sixty-five degrees. The bathers are mostly young people, who have the courage of their pretty bathing-costumes or the inextinguishable ardor of their years. If it is not rather serious business with them all, still I admire the fortitude with which some of them remain in fifteen minutes. Beyond our colony, which calls itself the Port, there is a

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far more populous watering-place, east of the Point, known as the Beach, which is the resort of people several grades of gentility lower than ours: so many, in fact, that we never can speak of the Beach without averting our faces, or, at the best, with a tolerant smile. It is really a succession of beaches, all much longer and, I am bound to say, more beautiful than ours, lined with rows of the humbler sort of summer cottages known as shells, and with many hotels of corresponding degree. The cottages may be hired by the week or month at about two dollars a day, and they are supposed to be taken by inland people of little social importance. Very likely this is true; but they seemed to be very nice, quiet people, and I commonly saw the ladies reading, on their verandas, books and magazines, while the gentlemen sprayed the dusty road before them with the garden hose. The place had also for me an agreeable alien suggestion, and in passing the long row of cottages I was slightly reminded of Scheveningen. Beyond the cottage settlements is a struggling little park, dedicated to the only Indian saint I ever heard of, though there may be others. His statue, colossal in sheet-lead, and painted the copper color of his race, offers any heathen comer the choice between a Bible in one of his hands and a tomahawk in the other, at the entrance of the park; and there are other sheet-lead groups and figures in the white of allegory at different points. It promises to be a pretty enough little place in future years, but as yet it is not much resorted to by the excursions which largely form the prosperity of the Beach. The concerts and the "high-class vaudeville" promised have not flourished in the pavilion provided for them, and one of two monkeys in the zoological department has perished of the public inattention. This has not fatally affected the captive bear, who rises to his hind legs, and eats peanuts and doughnuts in that position like a fellow-citizen. With the cockatoos and parrots, and the dozen deer in an inclosure of wire netting, he is no mean attraction; but he does not charm the excursionists away from the summer village at the shore, where they spend long afternoons splashing among the waves, or in lolling groups of men, women, and children on the sand. In the more active gayeties, I have seen nothing so decided during the whole season as the behavior of three young girls who once came up out of the sea, and obliged me by dancing a measure on the smooth, hard beach in their bathing-dresses.

I thought it very pretty, but I do not believe such a thing could have been seen on *our* beach, which is safe from all excursionists, and sacred to the cottage and hotel life of the Port.

Besides our beach and its bathing, we have a reading-club for the men, evolved from one of the old native houses, and verandaed round for summer use; and we have golf-links and a golf club-house within easy trolley reach. The links are as energetically, if not as generally, frequented as the sands, and the sport finds the favor which attends it everywhere in the decay of tennis. The tennis-courts which I saw thronged about by eager girl-crowds, here, seven years ago, are now almost wholly abandoned to the lovers of the game, who are nearly always men.

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Perhaps the only thing (besides, of course, our common mortality) which we have in common with the excursionists is our love of the trolley-line. This, by its admirable equipment, and by the terror it inspires in horses, has well-nigh abolished driving; and following the old country roads, as it does, with an occasional short-cut through the deep, green-lighted woods or across the prismatic salt meadows, it is of a picturesque variety entirely satisfying. After a year of fervent opposition and protest, the whole community—whether of summer or of winter folks—now gladly accepts the trolley, and the grandest cottager and the lowliest hotel dweller meet in a grateful appreciation of its beauty and comfort.

Some pass a great part of every afternoon on the trolley, and one lady has achieved celebrity by spending four dollars a week in trolley-rides. The exhilaration of these is varied with an occasional apprehension when the car pitches down a sharp incline, and twists almost at right angles on a sudden curve at the bottom without slacking its speed. A lady who ventured an appeal to the conductor at one such crisis was reassured, and at the same time taught her place, by his reply: "That motorman's life, ma'am, is just as precious to him as what yours is to you."

She had, perhaps, really ventured too far, for ordinarily the employees of the trolley do not find occasion to use so much severity with their passengers. They look after their comfort as far as possible, and seek even to anticipate their wants in unexpected cases, if I may believe a story which was told by a witness. She had long expected to see some one thrown out of the open car at one of the sharp curves, and one day she actually saw a woman hurled from the seat into the road. Luckily the woman slighted on her feet, and stood looking round in a daze.

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed another woman in the seat behind, "she's left her umbrella!"

The conductor promptly threw it out to her.

"Why," demanded the witness, "did that lady wish to get out here?"

The conductor hesitated before he jerked the bellpull to go on: Then he said, "Well, she'll want her umbrella, anyway."

The conductors are, in fact, very civil as well as kind. If they see a horse in anxiety at the approach of the car, they considerately stop, and let him get by with his driver in safety. By such means, with their frequent trips and low fares, and with the ease and comfort of their cars, they have conciliated public favor, and the trolley has drawn travel away from the steam railroad in such measure that it ran no trains last winter.

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The trolley, in fact, is a fad of the summer folks this year; but what it will be another no one knows; it may be their hissing and by-word. In the mean time, as I have already suggested, they have other amusements. These are not always of a nature so general as the trolley, or so particular as the tea. But each of the larger hotels has been fully supplied with entertainments for the benefit of their projectors, though nearly everything of the sort had some sort of charitable slant. I assisted at a stereopticon lecture on Alaska for the aid of some youthful Alaskans of both sexes, who were shown first in their savage state, and then as they appeared after a merely rudimental education, in the costumes and profiles of our own civilization. I never would have supposed that education could do so much in so short a time; and I gladly gave my mite for their further development in classic beauty and a final elegance. My mite was taken up in a hat, which, passed round among the audience, is a common means of collecting the spectators' expressions of appreciation. Other entertainments, of a prouder frame, exact an admission fee, but I am not sure that these are better than some of the hat-shows, as they are called.

The tale of our summer amusements would be sadly incomplete without some record of the bull-fights given by the Spanish prisoners of war on the neighboring island, where they were confined the year of the war. Admission to these could be had only by favor of the officers in charge, and even among the Elite of the colony those who went were a more elect few. Still, the day I went, there were some fifty or seventy-five spectators, who arrived by trolley near the island, and walked to the stockade which confined the captives. A real bull-fight, I believe, is always given on Sunday, and Puritan prejudice yielded to usage even in the case of a burlesque bull-fight; at any rate, it was on a Sunday that we crouched in an irregular semicircle on a rising ground within the prison pale, and faced the captive audience in another semicircle, across a little alley for the entrances and exits of the performers. The president of the bull-fight was first brought to the place of honor in a hand-cart, and then came the banderilleros, the picadores, and the espada, wonderfully effective and correct in white muslin and colored tissue-paper. Much may be done in personal decoration with advertising placards; and the lofty mural crown of the president urged the public on both sides to Use Plug Cut. The picador's pasteboard horse was attached to his middle, fore and aft, and looked quite the sort of hapless jade which is ordinarily sacrificed to the bulls. The toro himself was composed of two prisoners, whose horizontal backs were covered with a brown blanket; and his feet, sometimes bare and sometimes shod with india-rubber boots, were of the human pattern. Practicable horns, of a somewhat too yielding substance, branched from a front of pasteboard, and a cloth tail, apt to come off in

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the charge, swung from his rear. I have never seen a genuine corrida, but a lady present, who had, told me that this was conducted with all the right circumstance; and it is certain that the performers entered into their parts with the artistic gust of their race. The picador sustained some terrific falls, and in his quality of horse had to be taken out repeatedly and sewed up; the banderilleros tormented and eluded the toro with table-covers, one red and two drab, till the espada took him from them, and with due ceremony, after a speech to the president, drove his blade home to the bull's heart. I stayed to see three bulls killed; the last was uncommonly fierce, and when his hindquarters came off or out, his forequarters charged joyously among the aficionados on the prisoners' side, and made havoc in their thickly packed ranks. The espada who killed this bull was showered with cigars and cigarettes from our side.

I do not know what the Sabbath-keeping shades of the old Puritans made of our presence at such a fete on Sunday; but possibly they had got on so far in a better life as to be less shocked at the decay of piety among us than pleased at the rise of such Christianity as had brought us, like friends and comrades, together with our public enemies in this harmless fun. I wish to say that the tobacco lavished upon the espada was collected for the behoof of all the prisoners.

Our fiction has made so much of our summer places as the mise en scene of its love stories that I suppose I ought to say something of this side of our colonial life. But after sixty I suspect that one's eyes are poor for that sort of thing, and I can only say that in its earliest and simplest epoch the Port was particularly famous for the good times that the young people had. They still have good times, though whether on just the old terms I do not know. I know that the river is still here with its canoes and rowboats, its meadowy reaches apt for dual solitude, and its groves for picnics. There is not much bicycling—the roads are rough and hilly—but there is something of it, and it is mighty pretty to see the youth of both sexes bicycling with their heads bare. They go about bareheaded on foot and in buggies, too, and the young girls seek the tan which their mothers used so anxiously to shun.

The sail-boats, manned by weather-worn and weatherwise skippers, are rather for the pleasure of such older summer folks as have a taste for cod-fishing, which is here very good. But at every age, and in whatever sort our colonists amuse themselves, it is with the least possible ceremony. It is as if, Nature having taken them so hospitably to her heart, they felt convention an affront to her. Around their cottages, as I have said, they prefer to leave her primitive beauty untouched, and she rewards their forbearance with such a profusion of wild flowers as I have seen nowhere else. The low, pink laurel flushed all the stony fields to the edges of their

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verandas when we first came; the meadows were milk-white with daisies; in the swampy places delicate orchids grew, in the pools the flags and flowering rushes; all the paths and way-sides were set with dog-roses; the hollows and stony tops were broadly matted with ground juniper. Since then the goldenrod has passed from glory to glory, first mixing its yellow-powdered plumes with the red-purple tufts of the iron-weed, and then with the wild asters everywhere. There has come later a dwarf sort, six or ten inches high, wonderfully rich and fine, which, with a low, white aster, seems to hold the field against everything else, though the taller golden-rod and the masses of the high, blue asters nod less thickly above it. But these smaller blooms deck the ground in incredible profusion, and have an innocent air of being stuck in, as if they had been fancifully used for ornament by children or Indians.

In a little while now, as it is almost the end of September, all the feathery gold will have faded to the soft, pale ghosts of that loveliness. The summer birds have long been silent; the crows, as if they were so many exultant natives, are shouting in the blue sky above the windrows of the rowan, in jubilant prescience of the depopulation of our colony, which fled the hotels a fortnight ago. The days are growing shorter, and the red evenings falling earlier; so that the cottagers' husbands who come up every Saturday from town might well be impatient for a Monday of final return. Those who came from remoter distances have gone back already; and the lady cottagers, lingering hardily on till October, must find the sight of the empty hotels and the windows of the neighboring houses, which no longer brighten after the chilly nightfall, rather depressing. Every one says that this is the loveliest time of year, and that it will be divine here all through October. But there are sudden and unexpected defections; there is a steady pull of the heart cityward, which it is hard to resist. The first great exodus was on the first of the month, when the hotels were deserted by four-fifths of their guests. The rest followed, half of them within the week, and within a fortnight none but an all but inaudible and invisible remnant were left, who made no impression of summer sojourn in the deserted trolleys.

The days now go by in moods of rapid succession. There have been days when the sea has lain smiling in placid derision of the recreants who have fled the lingering summer; there have been nights when the winds have roared round the cottages in wild menace of the faithful few who have remained.

We have had a magnificent storm, which came, as an equinoctial storm should, exactly at the equinox, and for a day and a night heaped the sea upon the shore in thundering surges twenty and thirty feet high. I watched these at their awfulest, from the wide windows of a cottage that crouched in the very edge of the surf, with the effect of clutching the rocks with one hand and holding its roof on with the other. The sea was such a sight as I have not seen on shipboard, and while I luxuriously shuddered at it, I

had the advantage of a mellow log-fire at my back, purring and softly crackling in a quiet indifference to the storm.

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Twenty-four hours more made all serene again. Bloodcurdling tales of lobster-pots carried to sea filled the air; but the air was as blandly unconscious of ever having been a fury as a lady who has found her lost temper. Swift alternations of weather are so characteristic of our colonial climate that the other afternoon I went out with my umbrella against the raw, cold rain of the morning, and had to raise it against the broiling sun. Three days ago I could say that the green of the woods had no touch of hectic in it; but already the low trees of the swamp-land have flamed into crimson. Every morning, when I look out, this crimson is of a fierier intensity, and the trees on the distant uplands are beginning slowly to kindle, with a sort of inner glow which has not yet burst into a blaze. Here and there the golden-rod is rusting; but there seems only to be more and more asters sorts; and I have seen ladies coming home with sheaves of blue gentians; I have heard that the orchids are beginning again to light their tender lamps from the burning blackberry vines that stray from the pastures to the edge of the swamps.

After an apparently total evanescence there has been a like resuscitation of the spirit of summer society. In the very last week of September we have gone to a supper, which lingered far out of its season like one of these late flowers, and there has been an afternoon tea which assembled an astonishing number of cottagers, all secretly surprised to find one another still here, and professing openly a pity tinged with contempt for those who are here no longer.

I blamed those who had gone home, but I myself sniff the asphalt afar; the roar of the street calls to me with the magic that the voice of the sea is losing. Just now it shines entreatingly, it shines winningly, in the sun which is mellowing to an October tenderness, and it shines under a moon of perfect orb, which seems to have the whole heavens to itself in "the first watch of the night," except for "the red planet Mars." This begins to burn in the west before the flush of sunset has passed from it; and then, later, a few moon-washed stars pierce the vast vault with their keen points. The stars which so powdered the summer sky seem mostly to have gone back to town, where no doubt people take them for electric lights.

PG EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Ladies make up the pomps which they (the men) forego
Summer folks have no idea how pleasant it is when they are gone
Their consciences needed no bossing in the performance