

NEWPORT'S MANSIONS



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Henry James, looking back on the Newport, Rhode Island, he knew in the 1860s, compared it to "a little bare, white, open band, with slightly-parted fingers." In those days Newport was both an antiquated fishing port and a summer resort for quiet, intellectual families from Boston - the Longfellows, the Jameses, and the Howes, to name a few - as well as for yachting enthusiasts from New York and Southern aristocrats in search of Northern summer breezes. Although some of these people amassed substantial fortunes, they didn't flaunt it. What they liked about Newport was its simplicity.

"It is the back of the hand, rising to the swell of the wrist, that is exposed," James continued, "which is the way, I think, the true lover takes and admires it. He makes out in it . . . innumerable shy and subtle beauties . . . and he winces at the sight of certain other obtruded ways of dealing with it." But starting in the 1880s, the newly rich intruders began to mistreat this hand, for they apparently had no sense of the delicacy they had encountered. "The pink palm being empty, in other words, to their vision, they had begun, from far back, to put things into it, things of their own, and of all sorts, and of many ugly, and of more and more expensive, sorts; to fill it substantially, that is, with gold, the gold that they have ended by heaping up there to an amount so oddly out of proportion to the scale of nature and of space." James, a gentleman before he was a journalist, did not identify these persons who did not care for empty hands; had he done so, Vanderbilt certainly would have topped his list, although he might have had trouble deciding *which* Vanderbilt - whether Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius II, whose "cottage," The Breakers, had four stories and seventy rooms, or Mr. and Mrs. William K., who, although their Marble House was only about the size of the Petit Trianon, had spent \$9 million on its furnishings. They had given a coming-out ball there for their daughter, Consuelo; in the view of *The New York Times* of August 31, 1895, it "outdid any private social function ever given in this country."

Heydays are often brief, but the heyday of Marble House and The Breakers lasted, in comparison to other palaces, about as long as a sneeze. Marble House was built first, completed in 1892; the following spring the Cornelius Vanderbilts began The Breakers, finishing it in 1895. For one glorious Newport season,

both houses were open and their owners hard at work entertaining. (Said Alva, wife of William K: "I know of no profession, art, or trade that women are working in today as taxing on mental resource as being a leader of society.") But by the following summer, Cornelius Vanderbilt II was ill and did little entertaining, while Alva and William K. were divorced, and Alva was engaged to be married to another millionaire, Oliver H. P. Belmont, who lived just down the street in a Louis XIII hunting lodge called Belcourt. William K. went abroad in his yacht. On becoming Mrs. Belmont, Alva closed Marble House - though she continued to have her washing and ironing done there, with Belcourt lacking housekeeping facilities. Cornelius Vanderbilt II died in 1899, and after that, the Vanderbilt palaces were closed more frequently than they were open.

By this time, there was a considerable herd of these white elephants in Newport. To quote James once more: "They look queer and conscious and lumpish - some of them with an air of the brandished proboscis, really grotesque - while their averted owners, roused from a witless dream, wonder what in the world is to be done with them. The answer to which, I think, can only be that there is absolutely nothing to be done; nothing but to let them stand there always, vast and blank, for reminder of the prohibited degrees of witlessness."

James would be shocked if he could see them now - vast still, but far from blank. All summer long they swarm with guided tours, and on some evenings, they are lighted again for a musicale or a ball to which anyone can come who wants to support a worthy cause. As reminders of "the prohibited degrees of witlessness," they are probably not very useful, for witlessness today takes other forms, and Marble House and The Breakers are too far removed from our world to be anything but curiosities.

Newport's metamorphosis was due chiefly to the fact the prime status symbol for a nineteenth-century millionaire was a yacht, and the breezes of Narragansett Bay showed a yacht off uncommonly well. Beginning in the 1870s, steam yachts so stately that they could cross the Atlantic joined the fishing boats and obsolete whaling vessels of Newport Harbor. Aboard one yacht, French writer Paul Bourget encountered old-rose damask draperies, a piano, an aviary of exotic birds, a dining

table teeming with crystal, silver, and orchids, and "Negroes stationed banjo in hand." The skippers of such vessels naturally needed an appropriate place to rest while on land, and thus the simple dwellings of the Rhode Island shore began to succumb to mansions. The new houses were called "cottages" and resembled cottages except in size, being made of shingles or rough-hewn granite. But very soon these seemed inadequate for the wealthy people who lived in them.

"Up to this time," wrote Ward McAllister, the social arbiter of New York and Newport, in 1890, "for one to be worth a million of dollars was to be rated as a man of fortune, but now, by-gones must be by-gones." Fifty or 100 million was more like it, and "fashion demanded that you be received in the hall of the house in which you were to dine by from five to six servants, who, with the butler, were to serve the repast."

Only a handful of families were rich enough to meet Ward McAllister's requirements, and even fewer who desired it; one was the Vanderbilt family. Old Commodore Vanderbilt, born in a shack on Staten Island in the last years of the eighteenth century, had amassed \$105 million, but he had not cared for society - nor it for him. At his death in 1877, he left the bulk of his fortune to his second son, William Henry, who promptly increased it to \$200 million. When he died in 1885, he was the richest man in the world (a contemporary observer noted his fortune, converted into gold, would have weighed 500 tons). He left the equivalent of 250 tons apiece to his sons, Cornelius and William Kissam. Social prestige depended on the wife: William Henry had improved his social status by marrying the daughter of a Brooklyn minister of good family. His sons chose wives who were belles of High Society: Alice Gwynne became the bride of Cornelius, and Alva Smith, of Mobile, the bride of William. Each wife took her position seriously, but their personalities were opposite, and they disliked one another. Alice was a Queen Mary, sure of her rank, tolerating no breaches of etiquette or tradition. Alva burned with ambition: "I always do everything first," she said. "I blaze the trail for the rest to walk in. I was the first girl of my set to marry a Vanderbilt."

She was also the first of her set to marry her daughter to a duke, as well as the first to sue her husband for divorce, marry again, and still retain her social position. Later in life, as Mrs. O.

H. P. Belmont, she became an ardent supporter of women's rights. She gave a follower the famous advice: "Call on God and She will help you." When, in 1926, her daughter, Consuelo, Duchess of Marlborough, asked the Sacred Rota for an annulment on the grounds her mother had forced her into the marriage, Alva became probably the first mother publicly and in writing to admit such a transgression. "I forced my daughter to marry the duke," she testified. "I have always had absolute power over my daughter, my children having been entrusted to me entirely after my divorce. When I issued an order, nobody discussed it. I therefore did not beg, but ordered her to marry the Duke."

In 1932, Alva sold Marble House to Frederick Prince, died (at age eighty), and was laid to rest in Woodlawn in a tomb she had designed. A suffragette banner flown at her funeral spread the message, "Failure Is Impossible." In addition to the tomb, Alva had designed a number of houses - all palaces, of course, and all for herself - and she was the first woman (and one of a few non-professionals) to be named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. The architect whose work she most liked to oversee was Richard Morris Hunt. One of his jobs for the Vanderbilts had been the family mausoleum on Staten Island, which, as requested by William H. Vanderbilt, was "roomy and solid and rich." For Alva and William K., the architect had designed a palatial town house at 660 Fifth Avenue, comprising elements of late French Gothic, early French Renaissance, and Loire Valley romantic classicism. It pleased its owners greatly. Thus, in 1888, when William K. decided to give his wife a new summer place as a birthday present, Hunt suggested something similar to the Petit Trianon. They put him to work at once.

Hunt, brother of American romantic painter William Morris Hunt, came from a prosperous Vermont family and had spent more than a decade of his youth studying in France. A Francophile, he believed passionately that the only good architecture for America was based on French models. Like Alva, he was a tireless worker, and, fortunately, he did not object to suppressing his ideas for those of his employers. "If they want you to build a house upside down, standing on its chimney, it's up to you to do it and still get the best possible result," he once said.