

CHAPTER 26 - Pre-palatial Newport

In Chapter 26 of "The Ways of Men," titled "Pre-palatial Newport," the Ocean House, once a prestigious hotel in Newport, is nostalgically recounted following its destruction by fire. The narrative explores the significance of the Ocean House not just as a building, but as a symbol of an era in Newport's history that has since vanished. This bygone period was characterized by its social customs, leisurely activities, and the genteel lifestyle of its inhabitants, marking the pre-palatial phase of Newport from 1845 to 1885.

The chapter vividly describes the changing social scenes of Newport, depicting a time when life was simpler, dinners were earlier, and the newly introduced concept of six o'clock dinners was seen as a modern innovation. The text nostalgically recalls "high-teas," "sally lunns," and the leisurely pace of life punctuated by "rockaways" and picnics that were common social activities of the era.

Sports and cultural interests were modest, with afternoons often spent in sedate activities like driving up Bellevue Avenue. This was contrasted with gatherings at historic sites or clubs where intellectual pursuits were entertained, reflecting the cultured but understated lifestyle of Newport's residents during this time.

The narrative also touches on the influence of foreign-born residents who introduced more lavish and sophisticated standards of living, thus beginning a transformation in American social customs and aspirations. The Ocean House, through its "Saturday evening hops," played a central role in the social fabric of Newport, offering scenes of genteel entertainment and community gatherings.

The decline of the Ocean House and similar establishments is seen not just as a loss of buildings, but as the end of an era marked by simplicity, cultural aspirations, and a sense of community that once defined Newport. The chapter reflects on the evolution of Newport's society, from its pre-palatial days to the more opulent and extravagant lifestyles that would follow, signifying a transition in American social history that hinged significantly on changes in taste, leisure, and social gatherings, as epitomized by the story of the Ocean House.