

CONEY ISLAND NO PLACE FOR THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

By James Huneker.

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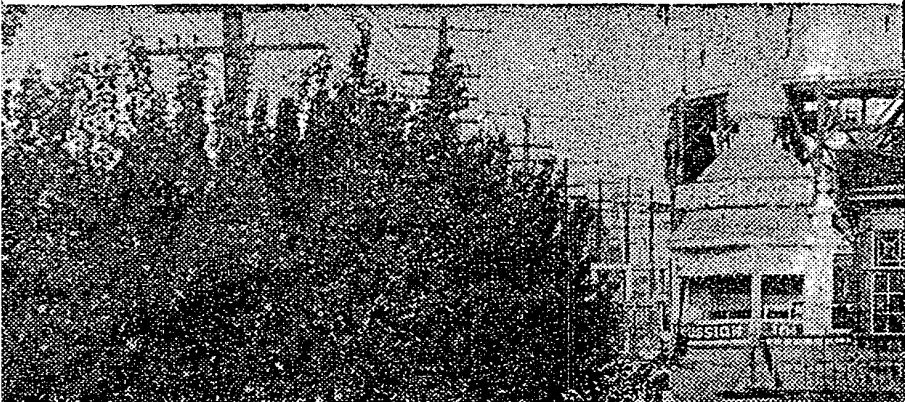
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Awaiting their turn outside the Bath House

James Huneker, the Critic, Lured There by a Poster, Is Stirred to Caustic Criticism of the "Playground of the People"



In the Surf

By James Huneker.

IT was a poster that sent me to Coney Island again, although I had sworn never to tread that Avenue of Hideous Sights and Sounds, had taken a solemn oath at least five years ago. But that poster! Ah! if these advertising men only knew how their signs and symbols arouse human passions they would be more prudent in giving artists full swing with their suggestion-breeding brushes.

This is what I saw on the poster: A tall, energetic band conductor waving his baton over a succulent symphony of crabs, lobsters, fruit and fish, corn, cantaloupes, clams, and watermelons—truly a pretty combination, for the overtones are Afro-American, the undertones Asiatic cholera. Nevertheless, an appealing orchestra to palates jaded by city restaurant fare and the hot, humid streets. I was in haste to be off. I mentally saw that gustatory symphony. I heard its colicky music. I tasted its clammy instrumentation. I must take the boat at once. I did so.

As the tall architectural chimneys at the lower end of the island slowly receded I noted the wafflelike effect of the myriad windows set in their staring walls. Waffles! Yes, that is the new note in American architecture; it is the very soul of the art. Waffles! This discovery comforted me somewhat, and I began to enjoy life and sought for a fresh thrill by gazing steadily at the Brooklyn shorescape.

Perhaps the first definite impression made amid the thousands of confusing, beckoning, and mutually destructive sights as one comes up the harbor is Brooklyn Bridge, seen across the green of Governors Island. The woven wires of the structure seem to float; no water, except that in the immediate foreground of the spectator, suggests the notion that this is a bridge; rather is it a fantastic apparition strung across an emerald prairie, a huge harp ready for the fingers of some monstrous musician, whose melodies would be hurricane-like, not aeolian. The illusion vanishes the further down or up one sails. It is trapped at its best near Staten Island.

The coast line of Brooklyn does not lead itself to optical enchantment. But it is not more depressing than, say, the docks of London after you leave Blackfriars Bridge to go down Greenwich way. Brooklyn is in reality more cheerful because of the greater spaces of the waterway, because of the diversity in the sky line. In London the heavens seem closer to earth; the sky is not as far away as ours. High buildings are rare along the Thames, while Brooklyn boasts many, with more and more going up. The time is not long passed when the Hotel Margaret was the proud monarch of all it surveyed across the harbor. Now it has numerous rivals. They are beginning to string down the shore and run a race with the church spires that gave to the town of Beaches and Talmage its nickname. With the picturesque villas and the old fort, the interest merges into the strand, into the superior beauties of Bath Beach and Norton Point.

Same Old Boats.

The same old iron steamboats, with the same old band of itinerant musicians, arouse memories. They still play "Non é Ver," as they did a quarter of a century ago. And more memories when the Grand Republic passes off-ward, its flags and pennants flying, the venerable steamer as attractive looking as ever; dwarfed, to be sure, since the advent of ocean leviathans, the Grand Republic still makes a gallant showing.

Is our river excursion service commensurate with the volume of its business? It far outshines in efficiency and in the size of its craft the Thames or the tiny boats on the Seine. Nevertheless, our steamers are not equal to the strain put upon them; they are old-fashioned, cramped, and with only mediocre accommodations. They are crowded, too, beyond the danger line. A fire, a panic, a collision, and the inherent unworthiness of most of the excursion boats in our harbor would be revealed in a moment. The great god Chance is the patron saint of pilots and owners. Votive candles in abundance should be burned before his image by grateful worshippers, for it is due to his graces that we somehow or other muddle through season after season without serious accidents. But when one arrives it is usually in the category of the catastrophic.

As I first recall Coney Island, one could walk on a wide, clean, shining

space of sand from the Point to the Oriental Hotel. No vile barracks and booths snouted their noisome features to the water's edge. There was no Sea Gate in those days, and the top of the island was practically barren and given over to fishermen. Today the villas and hotels at Sea Gate have improved matters; but go up the beach a bit, and what disillusionment follows!

From where the Brighton bathing pavilion stands, down as far as Ravenhall's, is the craziest collection of tumble-down hovels—you can't dignify them with any other term—that ever disgraced a beautiful sea view. There are exceptions: the Brighton Beach Hotel, the several large casinos and restaurants clustering about the end of the ocean boulevard, and also the municipal bath house, a building worthy of its purpose. I may have omitted a few others, and I'm duly sorry in advance; yet do I cling to my belief that if the whole horrible aggregation of shanties, low resorts, shacks masquerading as hotels, and the rest were swept off the earth by some beneficent visitation of Providence, the prayers of the community would be in order.

Disgrace to Civilization.

This sounds selfish, but it's not a question of personal feeling; it is the pestilential fact that the municipal authorities tolerate such a plague—for it is a centre of moral and physical infection—on the very heels of the city. This rings of Comstock and humbug "uplift," but it is the naked truth. Privileges usurped from the public are granted to a lot of greedy money-muckers who bamboozle the people. The poor rob the poor more than the rich.

But the people, the poor people! Must they be deprived of their day's outing, of the innocent, idiotic joys of dear, dear old Coney? You know the sentimental cant of the east side sociologist and the friend of the "peepul," (for revenue only!) No, this is no attempt to depreciate the enjoyment of the masses and classes, (the latter are much given to visiting the Island as a sort of vicious open-air slumming spot;) there is more than one centre of amusement—unlike Sodom, Coney Island can boast at least ten good inhabitants—but they only serve to set off the repulsive qualities of their neighbors.

I know that you can't make the public enjoy the more refined pleasures of a beach free from vulgarity and rapacious beach-combers, male and female, unless it so wishes. Even mules will not drink if not thirsty. The Montessori method applied to an army of

excursionists would be ludicrous; it's a sufficient affliction on children. In a word, it is not a question of restriction but of regulation; decency, good taste, and semi-barbarism should not be allowed to go unchecked. Coney Island today, despite the efficiency of the police, is a disgrace to our civilization. It should be abolished and something else substituted.

And now, having abolished the eyesore by a mere waving of my wishwand, let me tell you of the joys I

experienced after I had landed at the Steeplechase Park pier in company with some hundreds of fellow-lunatics of all ages and conditions, for when you are at Coney you cast aside your hampering reason and become a plain lunatic. It was a great French writer who advised his readers to make of themselves beasts from time to time, to kick over the slow and painful steepladder of moral restraint and revert to the normal animal from which we evolved. It is never a dif-

ficult precept to follow, although the writer didn't mean his text to be exactly interpreted as I am now doing.

After the species of straitjacket that we wear in every-day life is removed at such a Saturnalia as Coney Island, the human animal emerges in a not precisely winning guise. He and she and the brats are a mixture that sets you thinking over the idle boast that our century is the flowering of culture. As Gustave Flaubert says in

his "Sentimental Education," "the patriot doesn't always smell nice!"

Again you think—cleanliness is greater than godliness, and that if mankind were friendlier to soap this old globe of ours would be a sweeter place to live on. But where can they keep cleaner than at the seaside, and what seaside is so cheap, so near by as Coney? Sound and unanswerable arguments. The man with the brooding mouth who salutes you from the signs as you enter the portal of Steeplechase would smile still wider if you attempted to answer them. So let us throw logic to the dogs and simply be happy because we are alive, because the wind is not only in the heather, brother, but because the smell of the frankfurter "dog" as it sizzles over the fire ascends to eager nostrils on the dock.

Bedlam of Amusements.

The fisherman sits line in hand as we pass; a sign informs that there are 25,000 bathing suits to hire, and we listlessly gaze at the hulk of the only American vessel captured in the war with Spain. The barkers arouse us. We buy a string of parti-colored tickets. They are so many keys that unlock to us the magic chambers of this paradise of secular joys and terrors. You may swim or guzzle; on the hard backs of iron steeds, to the accompaniment of bedlam music, you may caracole or go plunging down perilous declivities, swinging into the gloom of sinister tunnels or, perched aloft, be the envy of small boys.

There is an Italian garden where basket parties are forbidden—the only spot in the establishment—and a vast hall where, as if practicing the attitudes and steps of some strange religious cult, youths and maidens indulge in simian gestures and in native buffoonery. Food, mountains of it, is cooking. The odor ascends to the stars; but you forget as in a monster wheel human beings are swung in a giant circle. Coasting parties clatter by or else are shot down a chute into irritated water. Every device imaginable by which man may be separated from his dime without adequate return is in operation. You weigh yourself or get it guessed; you go into funny houses—oh! the mockery of the title—and later are tumbled into the open, insulted, mortified, disgusted, angry, and—laughing. What sights you have seen in that prison house, what gentlemen—with shrill voices—desperately holding on to their skirts and their chewing gum.

What I can't understand is the lure of the Island for the people who come. Why, after the hot, narrow, noisy, dirty streets of the city, do these same

people crowd into the narrower, hotter, noisier, dirtier, wooden alleys of Coney? Is the wretched, Cheap John fair, with the ghastly rubbish for a sale, the magnet? Or is it just the gregariousness of the human animal? They leave dirt and disorder to go to greater disorder and dirt. The sky is bluer, but they don't look at the sky; clam chowder is a more agreeable spectacle; and the smacking of a thousand lips as throats gurgle with the suspicious compound is welcome to the ears of them that pocket the cash.

How's that for a rhythmic cadence after the manner of Flaubert?

The late Jacob Rills once told me that many times he despaired at the apparent hopelessness of his efforts to instill the love of cleanliness among his poor. To their ancient habits these people revert, like the beast-folk in H. G. Wells's "The Island of Doctor Moreau." And at Coney Island where the mob is thickest, where your eardrums are shattered by steam organs, sheet-iron bands, and the yelling of barkers, the "people" hurry. I looked, as others before me have looked, for Walt Whitman's "powerful uneducated persons," but in vain. By way of compensation every one seemed content—which is better than being "poetic."

But the joylessness of it all! The miserable children, sick from their tenebrous, sit on dirty newspapers spread on the dirty sand and in the poisonous blaze of the sun—for some reason this sun is supposed to kill in town but will work wonders at the beach.

What kind of food is swallowed I leave to your imagination. The place should be called Ptomaines Beach. Family parties with baskets, (ever welcome) are better off; they know what they swallow.

I looked up my orchestra of sea food and found it. I confess I enjoyed its crabbed music. Once indoors, away from the glare and roar, your nerves begin to simmer and your throat craves the cool of an element not washing the front door of the hotel. You try to think. Impossible! It is a world of screams and howls.

Further up at Brighton matters improve, though wooden sheds disgrace the beach and bar people from its use. I sighed over—I always do—the thought of 1888 and the pavilion at Brighton Beach where Anton Seidl gave us ambrosial music. Coney Island was as bad as it is today, but the Seidl music furnished an oasis in a dreary desert of vulgarity. There were some New Yorkers alive in those dear but distant days. New York was not yet an open noisy trench; nor was it then the dumping ground of the Cosmos. However, I am not a pessimist and if I fall at the plague spot, Coney Island, it is with the hope that some day it will vanish and be succeeded by pleasant parks, trees, seawalls, and stone walks. This madland of lunatics, who must go up in the air, down in the earth, who must have clatter and dirt, might be relegated elsewhere. Certainly people don't go to Coney for the sea or the air or the view.

New Work for Women.

If the worthy ladies and "uplifters" of indeterminate sex (chiefly old women in trousers) would turn their attention to making the seaside beautiful, or if not beautiful then decent, they would justify their civic existence. Here is where the busy female, with or without a ballot, can come in. A new and attractive Coney Island should be their slogan. But the public likes to be fooled, swindled—alas!

Where stood the old Manhattan Hotel is now a comely terrace which, when the trees have grown, will be a garden by the sea. The bathing pavilion is still there—too small for its clientele, yet cleaner than Brighton and less populated. As I no longer bathe at the beach, I hold no brief for any particular location. I am stating the bald, unflattering facts.

There is Brighton, England, as an example to emulate. What a beautiful boulevard by the water it has built, so satisfying in its solidity and spaciousness. The hotels are massive, the view unobstructed. Ostende and Scheveningen, two other European resorts, are also examples for the heedless and conceited public administrators who let our beaches go to rack and ruin or evade the issue by erecting temporary structures. That's why so many Americans go to Europe in the Summer. They get something for their money.

But if you want to take a "bath of multitude"—either Poe or Baudelaire made this phrase—and experience the "emotion of multitude," there is no spot on earth for the purpose like Coney Island.

The lure of the Island for the people who come