GLITZ, GLAM *and a* DAMN GOOD TIME

HOW MAMIE FISH, QUEEN *of the* GILDED AGE, PARTIED HER WAY TO POWER

JENNIFER WRIGHT

AUTHOR *of* MADAME RESTELL *and* GET WELL SOON

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GRAND CENTRAL

New York Boston

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the moment we met

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INTRODUCTION

*I*T WAS OFFICIAL: THE PRINCE DEL DRAGO WAS *COMING TO NEWPORT*.

In the summer of 1902, it seemed like all of Rhode Island was buzzing with anticipation after hearing rumors that an exotic nobleman was headed for their fair city. Could a prince *really* be on his way to visit them? Then again, it *must* be true. After all, Mamie Fish, the supreme arbiter of society, had sent out party invitations to anyone who was *anyone* in Newport, corralling the toniest of the ton, the very highest of high society—together to welcome him.

For the wealthiest families in Newport, the prince's impending arrival signified more than just fun and festivities. It was the dawn of a new century. One hundred and twenty-five years after the country's founding, perhaps Americans were now finally sophisticated enough to be considered equal to Europeans. Princes would mingle with their daughters. Never mind that their American grandfathers had fought against princes and kings—let bygones be bygones. Though some American families had amassed riches beyond riches at this point, there was still one thing money couldn't buy: a title. And for that, these eligible American bachelorettes were paired up with European noblemen, who found that US dollars went a long way in restoring their dilapidated estates. Songs about these "dollar princesses" rang out through music halls declaring,

The almighty dollar will buy, you bet,
A superior class of coronet;
That's why I've come from over the way,

From New York City of USA.[1]

Everything European *had* to be absolutely wonderful. The satirical magazine *Puck* found this kind of striving faintly ridiculous. They featured one cartoon of an absurd, unwieldy carriage justified by a man proudly exclaiming, "It's English, you know!" The highest goal of many wealthy American families was to marry their daughters not merely into nobility but into *royalty*.

And who could possibly be a better matrimonial target than an actual prince, said to be en route to Newport from Corsica? This was no dour English duke. Ladies did not want to end up in a humorless, perpetually damp castle, like Consuelo Vanderbilt, who'd married the Duke of Marlborough and claimed that she spent her days staring longingly at a frigid lake on her estate where a butler had committed suicide. This man might even have a castle in a *sunny* climate, with a *fun*, *suicide-free* lake. The possibilities!

A word of caution, though. According to Henry "Harry" Lehr, a close friend of the hostess, the prince could be "inclined to be wild."[2] Furthermore, he could not have too much to drink because "anything goes to his head, and then he is apt to behave rather badly." However, amid this corseted, constrained, and utterly prim and polite society, that *too* might have seemed alluring. When Newport inhabitants wondered if it might be one of the Del Dragos they knew from Rome, Harry Lehr informed them, "They all belong to the same family, only the Prince's is a distant branch."[3]

Perhaps an older, *even more distinguished* branch.

And so, the lucky few invited to Mrs. Fish's dinner were positively aflutter. The beautiful women now clustered within the Ocean Drive mansion were understandably concerned whether their own manners would be up to the task of meeting such an established fellow. They discussed their curtsies. Unmarried women primped desperately, patting their faces with powder and pinching their (subtly!) rouged cheeks. They were ready to fall in

love with whoever arrived. They only hoped he would love them back. There was a palpable sense of excitement in the air, ladies already bobbing into curtsies, eyelashes fluttering down appealingly as the wealthy Chicagoan Joseph Leiter walked into the room with the prince in hand.

No, literally, *in hand*.

For the illustrious "Prince Del Drago" was actually a monkey… dressed in a tuxedo.

WHEN ATTENDEES RECOVERED ENOUGH FROM THEIR COMPLETE SHOCK TO look over at the hosts, they saw that Mamie Fish and Harry Lehr were doubled over in hysterics.

This joke had been devised beforehand on Fish's yacht, while they were traveling into Newport with the little "prince"—Mamie's newest pet, affectionately named Jocko. No sooner had they docked than Mamie breezed into the finest tailor in Newport, demanding a suit of custom dinner clothes be made for Jocko. Naturally, the establishment refused. Never one to take no for an answer, Mamie promptly fixed the tailor with a frosty glaze and declared, "Name your price, but start sewing—*quickly*."[4] *The New York Times* would later report that the tailor "was given a large sum of money for abandoning all other work in his shop to make and fit a full-dress suit for the monkey guest."[5]

Back at the party, Jocko's presence prompted "a vast assemblage of bejeweled dowagers to gasp and wildly paw the air."[6] Admittedly, this kind of response feels a bit unfair to Jocko, who—it must be said—was behaving *very well* (although he could not have been very comfortable in that restricting suit). Fortunately, things quickly took a turn for the better. Reportedly, "after the first shock, the diners accepted Jocko with good grace, and he, in turn, handled his fork and knife like a gentleman of the old school."[7] As Lehr's wife later noted, "his manners compared favorably with

some princes I have met."[8]

Alas, the slightest semblance of decorum only lasted for a while—largely because the many warnings that the prince was not to be given alcohol were mostly ignored. And so, like many party animals who would follow in his tiny footsteps, the increasingly inebriated monkey jumped up on the table and then began swinging from the chandelier, flinging lightbulb after lightbulb at the assembled guests.

Far from running away in fear, the partygoers loved it. After the event, many of the guests professed that it was one of the most entertaining nights of their lives. It did not matter that the joke was on them. They could surely say that *they* only came to the party because they found Mamie so amusing, not because they were really in awe of nobility. *They* wouldn't preen for a monkey if it had a title in front of its name—but they had some neighbors who would.

Few outside the spectacle found it quite as entertaining. Newspaper reports, for example, could see nothing funny at *all* about the evening, and certainly didn't see it as a jab on Mamie's part about Newport society kowtowing to aristocracy. They only saw a woman who let a monkey run amok for reasons they could not begin to fathom. Journalists "grasped their pearls," horrified by the impropriety of it all.

Why, the monkey had probably destroyed an expensive chandelier!

And what would Europeans think?

Americans through this period seemed to regard all Europeans as wealthy and particularly intimidating neighbors whose approval they desperately craved. Reporters cried out that "it is dreadful to think of distinguished foreigners coming over here and judging us by Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish's entertainments," since, after all, "New York Society represents America in the eyes of the foreign world and we should behave with a becoming sense of dignity."[9] Stories of this affair even made their way as far as France, where denizens of Chartres wrongly attributed the prank to a local French church leader named Henry Lehr, who had to issue a

statement to the *Los Angeles Evening Post-Record* saying that "he had never dined with a monkey and was not that kind of man."[10]

Those kind of men were, seemingly, some of the richest and most important men in America.

If anything, these reports only added to Mrs. Fish's delight. Ever a proud American, she did not really care what the Europeans thought in the slightest. She was known for endlessly lamenting the fuss made over their arrival and complaining to anyone who would listen that "this country is making itself ridiculous in regard to titles."[11] No, as far as Mrs. Fish was concerned, wealth and status should be earned through hard work and enterprise—or, at least, through wit.

And she didn't curtail or sugarcoat this opinion, no matter who was in her company. When she met a Saxon prince on a trip to Nice, he expressed shock that her husband worked. With dismay, he declared that he'd thought her husband "came from a fine family."

"Oh, yes, he does," she'd replied. "But, you see, in America, it is not a disgrace to work. How much better it would be if those conditions prevailed in Europe! We in America would be spared so many titled nonentities."[12]

Clearly not everyone felt the same, especially in tony Rhode Island, and *that* was much more embarrassing than someone who'd worked for their fortune.

"Newport," she sniffed, "is paying too much attention to foreign lords. By marrying European noblemen, American girls are laying themselves liable to the ridicule of the world."[13]

The whole exchange reeked of desperation and delusion, as far as Mrs. Fish was concerned. Her thoughts on the topic were mirrored by a poem in *Life* magazine, which ran:

Such folly is its own rebuke
so let them pay who can.
But if 2 million buys a Duke

How much would buy a man? [14]

If the guests at the party were being ridiculed, that is what they had come to expect from a woman who often greeted them by saying, “Make yourself at home. No one wishes you were there more than I do.”

By the time Jocko arrived in Newport, it was almost a privilege to be heckled by Mamie—or given any flicker of her attention at all. Mamie was a novelty in high society. For generations, famous families like the Astors had kept the rest of the elite in line, prizing respectability, propriety, and dignity above all else. But many had started to tire of this predictable snoozefest—and Mamie instinctively understood that.

“Society wants novel entertainment,” Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish explained. “It is like a child… I try to give it fillips.”[15] And when it came to the wealthy, that meant that “you have to liven these people up.”[16]

Mamie did not want to be a pale, homegrown imitation of a European aristocrat. Before her, American socialites were primarily distinguished by their refinement and ladylike qualities. They could be glamorous, certainly, and positively gasping for breath under the weight of the jewels and finery, but they were not normally funny.

Mamie, on the other hand, was always the first to crack a joke, even when she knew she shouldn’t. By her own admission, she could barely read or write. She had none of the musical skills that characterized upper-crust ladies. But she’d jump into a car and try to drive it, even if it meant a spectacular crash. She was never afraid to have a party, and when she partied, she wanted to have a laugh. She was bold, she was brash, she was sometimes thoughtless and overconfident, but she was *fun*. She didn’t want to stay cooped up politely in a tower like a princess; she wanted to ride in streetcars, pamper her dogs, and host the best parties ever thrown.

Essentially, every twenty-first-century influencer owes Mamie a debt. Because she taught American women that even in an era when they might never wield the same power as their male counterparts, they could have as

much fun as the men in their lives, and it would not be held against them.

And if you did not agree, if you were stodgy, boring, and rooted in the past, well—Mamie would make a monkey out of you.

CHAPTER 1

*W*HAT MAMIE WAS DOING WAS SO MEMORABLE LARGELY BECAUSE America was never supposed to be a nation that partied too hard. In fact, the Puritans who founded the country intended it to be quite the opposite.

Certainly, they meant for there to be socialization. Humans need to mingle, they're biologically conditioned to do so. Gathering together protects against anxiety, depression, and all manner of mental health issues. But the Puritans wanted a Godly, virtuous, sensible nation, which meant not replicating the parties they'd seen in Europe.

Up to and throughout the seventeenth century, Europe had been awash in fabulous festivities. In France, for example, King Louis XIV had discovered that if he kept the nobles partying, they would be perpetually too delighted—or at least too hungover—to foment a revolution. And this was a serious concern. In the forty years prior to his reign, nobles had incited a whopping total of *eleven* civil uprisings, all in attempt to seize power. Louis XIV understood that if he wanted to maintain some semblance of peace, he had to find a way to keep the upper class in his thrall.

Offering a sumptuous life at court proved itself to be the answer—at least temporarily. There was gambling. There were sumptuous meals, perfectly prepared. There were intellectual salons, scientific demonstrations, and musical performances. Nobles were assigned apartments according to rank. The higher you rose at court, the better your lodgings. It was like college, with none of the things that might have displeased you about college (unless

the thing that displeased you was “intense, cliquey social competition,” in which case, you would have had a very bad time).

Court was such fun that exile—or, as it was known, disgrace—was a constant terror. When one duke who displeased the king was exiled to his country home, he responded with such grief that, when he went to tell his wife, she initially assumed from his expression that one of their children must have died. “Living at their beautiful houses in the beautiful French countryside… these exiled nobles were considered, and considered themselves, dead.”[1]

Never again could they attend the parties that were the cherry atop the sundae of court life.

Meanwhile, by hosting decadent and over-the-top parties like 1664’s “Delights of Enchanted Island,” the king could provide the nobles with the glitz, glam, and grandiosity they craved. At that particular six-day-long fete, the Palace of Versailles was lit up by thousands of candles, with ballet dancers prancing amidst elephants and masked servants carrying fruits, candied nuts, and pastries around to the guests. There were endless parades, horse races, and lotteries. It was also during this party that the playwright Molière staged *Tartuffe* for the first time at court, after which fireworks exploded overhead, casting an ethereal glow over the drunken spectators.

Four years later, the king was at it again with the “Great Royal Entertainment” of 1668, which began with a lavish garden tea. Afterward, guests were carried in sedan chairs to view a new play by Molière (the farce *George Dandin*), performed in a new outdoor theater that was illuminated by thirty-two crystal lamps. Later that evening, the guests danced at a ball surrounded by walls of flowers erected for the occasion. They could then wander to a secret cave hewn out of marble to carry on secret assignations, canoodling with anyone but their spouses.

This all ended up being an absolutely fabulous time, provided you were invited—which the many, many commoners were not. Eventually, they got understandably upset about money being spent on such celebrations when

much of the country was starving. Consequently, as they were not being offered even a slice of this cake to eat, they staged an entirely different and shockingly bloody gathering now referred to as the French Revolution.

France was hardly the only setting for such indulgent celebration. The Italian city of Venice, which came to be known as "the Republic of Masks" by its English visitors, was defined by its festivals. Every year, from December 26 until Lent, Venetians—and plenty of foreigners—let loose and partook in a season full of Carnival festivities, most of which would make a nun blush. Firework shows were abundant, special dances commemorated Venetian power, strongmen formed "Hercules-strength human pyramids,"[2] and tightrope walkers gamboled overhead as people made their way to feasts and balls galore. Revelers cavorted under the cover of beautiful masks, which meant that anyone could be whomever they wished—at least for an evening or two. This disguise inherently afforded the costumed—particularly women—a certain degree of sexual freedom. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the eighteenth-century author, recalled these celebrations fondly, saying that "it is so much the established fashion for everybody to live their own way, that nothing is more ridiculous than censuring the actions of another."[3]

However, not everyone heard about parties where people were having unrestrained, anonymous sex and thought, "Delightful!"

Take America, "Land of the Free," where the Puritans went so far as to ban Christmas.

To be fair, England had enacted this decree first. No sooner did the intensely religious, conservative sect come to power in England in 1649 upon the execution of King Charles I than it immediately forbade Christmas celebrations, declaring that December 25 must instead be a day of "fasting and penance."[4] After all, there was no mention of Christmas in the Bible, and certainly nothing about revelry. This was generally unappreciated by the English populace, who had previously spent the twelve days of Christmas feasting, drinking, and caroling in order to demand entry to rich people's homes, who would then ply them with more food and drink. They would get

truly, outrageously drunk. For many Englishmen and women, this period was a bright spot within an isolated, wintry season, but in the Puritans' view, the tradition was nothing short of "wanton bacchanalian" behavior.[5] Philip Stubbes, the Puritan writer, wrote in 1583 that surely everyone realized that at Christmas "more mischief is committed than in all the year besides? What masking and mumming? Whereby robberies, whoredom, murder, and whatnot, is committed? What dicing and carding, what banqueting and feasting, is then used more than in all the year besides!"[6] Meanwhile, in 1632, politician William Prynne declared that if anyone were to learn about Christianity from Christmas, would they not think "our Saviour to be a glutton, an epicure, a wine-bibber, a devil, a friend of publicans and sinners?"[7]

Anyone who has trudged through the vomit-coated streets following a rowdy weekend of SantaCon can probably relate, at least a bit, to these Puritan frustrations.

Puritanic rule in England did not last long, ending in 1660. But thirty years prior, Puritans had begun migrating to Massachusetts, where they established the city of Boston and could wage war on Christmas—and all other forms of excessive merriment—to their hearts' content. Christmas was finally banned in Boston in 1659, and it was decreed that "whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or any other way" would be fined. Christmas would not become a public holiday in Boston until 1856. And, while other early colonies, especially Southern ones, were more apt to celebrate Christmas with caroling and feasting, Christmas wouldn't even be accepted as a national holiday in America until 1870.

There was not much more in the way of merriment for Puritan society throughout the rest of the year. Dancing where men and women might touch was prohibited because, in the words of the clergyman (and subsequent president of Harvard University) Increase Mather, it was a temptation akin to seeing "naked necks and arms, or, which is more abominable, naked