

AN OPEN-EYED CONSPIRACY:


AN IDYL OF SARATOGA.

BY WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS,

Author of «Their Wedding Journey,» «The Rise of Silas Lapham,» etc.

WITH PICTURES BY IRVING R. WILES.

V.

“ AM doing it entirely on Mrs. Deering's account,” said my wife that evening after tea, as we walked down the side street that descended from our place to Broadway. “She has that girl on her hands, and I know she must be at her wits' end.”

“And I do it entirely on Deering's account,” I retorted. “He has both of these women on his hands.”

We emerged into the glistening thoroughfare in front the vast hotels, and I was struck, as I never fail to be, with its futile and unmeaning splendor. I think there is nothing in our dun-colored civilization prettier than that habit the ladies have in Saratoga of going out on the street after dark in their bare heads. When I first saw them wandering about so in the glitter of the shop-windows and the fitful glare of the electrics everywhere, I thought they must be some of those Spanish-Americans mistaking the warm, dry air of the Northern night for that of their own latitudes; but when I came up with them I could hear, if I could not see, that they were of our own race. Those flat and shapeless tones could come through the noses of no other. The beauty and the elegance were also ours, and the fearless trust of circumstance. They sauntered up and down before the gaunt, high porticos of the hotels, as much at home as they could have been in their own houses, and in much the same dress as if they had been receiving there. The effect is one of incomparable cheer, and is a promise of social brilliancy which Saratoga no more keeps than she does that of her other characteristic aspects; say the forenoon effect of the same thoroughfare, with the piazzas banked with the hotel guests, and the street full of the light equipages which seem peculiar to the place passing and re-passing, in the joyous sunlight and out of it, on the leaf-flecked street. Even the public

carriages of Saratoga have a fresh, unjaded air; and to issue from the railway station in the midst of those buoyant top-phaëtons and surreys, with their light-limbed horses, is to be thrilled by some such insensate expectation of pleasure as fills the heart of a boy at his first sally into the world. I always expect to find my lost youth waiting for me around the corner of the United States Hotel, and I accuse myself of some fault if it disappoints me, as it always does. I can imagine what gaudy hopes by night and by day the bright staging of the potential drama must awaken in the breast of a young girl when she first sees it, and how blank she must feel when the curtain goes down and there has been no play. It was a real anguish to me when that young girl with the Deerings welcomed my wife and me with a hopeful smile, as if we were *dramatis personæ*, and now the performance must be going to begin. I could see how much our chance acquaintance had brightened the perspective for her, and how eagerly she had repaired all her illusions; and I thought how much better it would have been if she had been left to the dull and spiritless resignation in which I had first seen her. From that there could be no fall, at least, and now she had risen from it only to sink again.

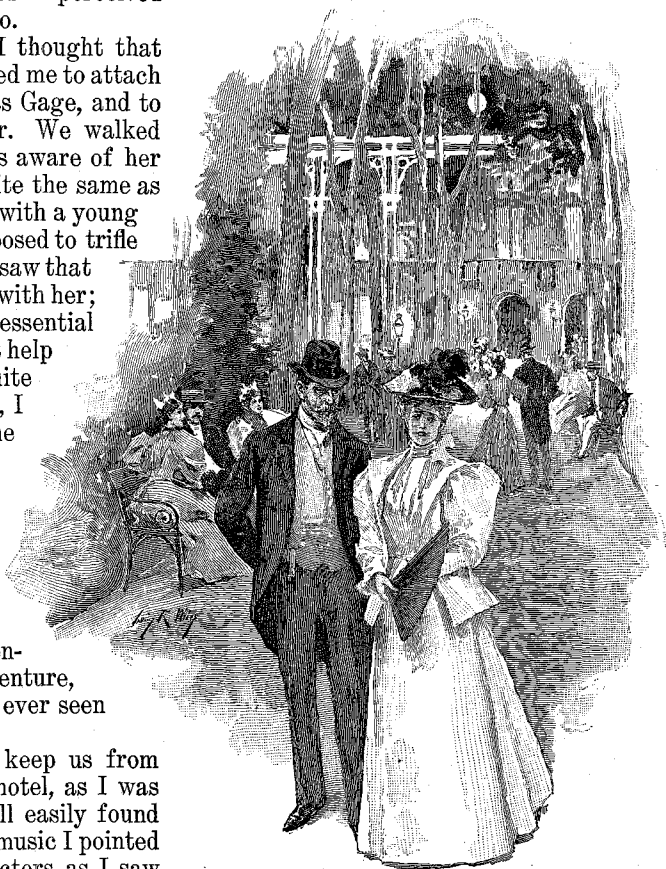
But, in fact, the whole party seemed falsely cheered by the event of the afternoon; and in the few moments that we sat with them on their veranda, before going to the music at the Grand Union, I could hear the ladies laughing together, while Deering joyously unfolded to me his plan of going home the next morning, and leaving his wife and Miss Gage behind him. “They will stay in this hotel,—they might as well,—and I guess they can get along. My wife feels more acquainted since she met Mrs. March, and I sha’n't feel so much like leavin' her among strangers here. I don't know when she's taken such a fancy to any one as she has to your wife, or Miss Gage either. I guess she'll want to ask her about the stores here.”

I said that I believed the fancy was mutual, and that there was nothing my wife liked better than telling people about stores. I added, in generalization, that when a woman had spent all her own money on dress, it did her quite as much good to see other women spending theirs; and Deering said he guessed that was about so. He gave me a push on the shoulder to make me understand how keenly he appreciated the joke, and I perceived that we had won his heart, too.

We joined the ladies, and I thought that my sufferings for her authorized me to attach myself more especially to Miss Gage, and to find out all I could about her. We walked ahead of the others, and I was aware of her making believe that it was quite the same as if she were going to the music with a young man. Not that she seemed disposed to trifle with my gray hairs; I quickly saw that this would not be in character with her; but some sort of illusion was essential to her youth, and she could not help rejuvenating me. This was quite like the goddess she looked, I reflected, but otherwise she was not formidably divine, and, in fact, I suppose the goddesses were, after all, only nice girls at heart. This one, at any rate, I decided, was a very nice girl when she was not sulking; and she was so brightened by her little adventure, which was really no adventure, that I could not believe I had ever seen her sulking.

The hotel people did not keep us from going into the court of the hotel, as I was afraid they might, and we all easily found places. In the pauses of the music I pointed out such notables and characters as I saw about us, and tried to possess her of as much of the Saratoga world as I knew. It was largely there in that bold evidence it loves, and in that social solitude to which the Saratoga of the hotels condemns the denizens of her world. I do not mean that the Saratoga crowd is at all a fast-looking crowd. There are sporting people and gamblers; but the great mass of the frequenters are plain, honest Americans, out upon a holiday from all parts of the country, and of an innocence too inveterate to have grasped the fact that there is no fashion in Saratoga now but the fashion of the ladies' dresses. These, I must say, are of the newest and prettiest; the dressing of the women always strikes me there. My companion was eager to recog-

nize the splendors which she had heard of, and I pointed out an old lady by the door, who sat there displaying upon her vast bosom an assortment of gems and jewels which she seemed as personally indifferent to as if she were a show-window, and I was glad to have the girl shrink from the spectacle in a kind of mute alarm. I tried to make her share my pleasure in a group of Cubans—fat father,



DRAWN BY IRVING R. WILES.

ENGRAVED BY PETER AITKEN.

«I INVITED HER TO WALK ROUND THE COURT
WITH ME.»

fat mother, fat daughter—who came down the walk toward us in the halo of tropical tradition; but she had not the taste for olives, and I saw that I failed to persuade her of the esthetic value of this alien element among us. She apparently could do almost as little with some old figures of bygone beaus spectrally revisiting the hotel haunts of their youth; but she was charmed with the sylvan loveliness of that incomparable court. It is, in fact, a park of the tall, slim Saratoga trees inclosed by the quadrangle of the hotel, exquisitely kept, and with its acres of green-sward now showing their color vividly in the

light of the electrics, which shone from all sides on the fountain flashing and plashing in the midst. I said that here was that union of the sylvan and the urban which was always the dream of art, and which formed the delicate charm of pastoral poetry; and although I do not think she quite grasped the notion, I saw that she had a pleasure in the visible fact, and that was much better. Besides, she listened very respectfully, and with no signs of being bored.

In the wait between the two parts of the concert, I invited her to walk round the court with me, and under the approving eye of Mrs. March we made this expedition. It seemed to me that I could not do a wiser thing, both for the satisfaction of my own curiosity and for the gratification of the autobiographical passion we all feel, than to lead her on to speak of herself. But she had little or nothing to say of herself, and what she said of other things was marked by a straightforward good sense, if not a wide intelligence. I think we make a mistake when we suppose that a beautiful woman must always be vain or conscious. I fancy that a beauty is quite as often a solid and sensible person, with no inordinate wish to be worshiped, and this young lady struck me as wholly unspoiled by flattery. I decided that she was not the type that would take the fancy of De Witt Point, and that she had grown up without local attention for that reason, or possibly because a certain coldness in her overawed the free spirit of rustic love-making. No doubt she knew that she was beautiful, and I began to think that it was not so much disappointment at finding Saratoga as indifferent as De Witt Point which gave her the effect of disgust I had first noted in her the night before. That might rather have come from the sense of feeling herself a helpless burden on her friends, and from that young longing for companionship which is as far as may be from the desire of conquest, of triumph. Finding her now so gratefully content with the poor efforts to amuse her which an old fellow like me could make, I perceived that the society of other girls would suffice to make Saratoga quite another thing for her, and I cast about in my mind to contrive this somehow.

I confess that I liked her better and better, and before the evening was out I had quite transferred my compassion from the Deerings to her. It was forlorn and dreary for her to be attached to this good couple, whose interests were primarily in each other, and who had not the first of those arts which could provide her

with other company. She willingly told about their journey to Saratoga, and her story did not differ materially from the account Deering had already given me; but even the outward form of adventure had fallen from their experience since they had come to Saratoga. They had formed the habit of Congress Park by accident; but they had not been to the lake, or the races, or the House of Pansa, or Mount McGregor, or Hilton Park, or even the outlying springs. It was the first time they had been inside of the Grand Union. «Then you have never seen the parlor?» I asked; and after the concert I boldly led the way into the parlor, and lavished its magnificence upon them as if I had been the host, or one of the hotel guests at the very least. I enjoyed the breathlessness of the Deerings so much, as we walked up and down the vast drawing-rooms accompanied by our images in the mirrors, that I insisted upon sitting down with them all upon some of the richest pieces of furniture; and I was so flown with my success as cicerone that I made them come with me to the United States. I showed them through the parlors there, and then led them through to the inner verandas, which commanded another wooded court like that of the Grand Union. I tried to make them feel the statelier sentiment of the older hotel, and to stir their imaginations with a picture of the old times, when the Southern planters used to throng the place, and all that was gay and brilliant in fashionable society was to be seen there some time during the summer. I think that I failed in this, but apparently I succeeded in giving them an evening of dazzling splendor.

«Well, sir, this has been a great treat,» said Mr. Deering, when he bade us good-by as well as good night; he was going early in the morning.

The ladies murmured their gratitude, Mrs. Deering with an emotion that suited her thanks, and Miss Gage with a touch of something daughtery toward me that I thought pretty.

VI.

«WELL, what *did* you make of her, my dear?» Mrs. March demanded the instant she was beyond their hearing. «I must say, you did n't spare yourself in the cause; you did bravely. What is she like?»

«Really, I don't know,» I answered, after a moment's reflection. «I should say she was almost purely potential. She's not so much this or that kind of girl; she's merely a radiant image of girlhood.»

«Now, you're chicquing it, you're faking

it," said Mrs. March, borrowing the verbs severally from the art editor and the publisher of "Every Other Week." "You have got to tell me just how much and how little there really is of her before I go any further with them. Is she stupid?"

"No—no; I should n't say stupid exactly. She is—what shall I say?—extremely plain-minded. I suppose the goddesses were plain-

tell me how she really impressed you. Does she know anything? Has she read anything? Has she any ideas?"

"Really, I can't say whether they were ideas or not. She knew what 'Every Other Week' was; she had read the stories in it; but I'm not sure she valued it at its true worth. She is very plain-minded."

"Don't keep repeating that! What do you mean by plain-minded?"

"Well, honest, single, common-sense, coherent, arithmetical."

"Horrors! Do you mean that she is *mannish*?"

"No, not mannish. And yet she gave me the notion that, when it came to companionship, she would be just as well satisfied with a lot of girls as young men."

Mrs. March pulled her hand out of my arm, and stopped short under one of those tall Saratogashade-trees to dramatize her inference. "Then she is the slyest of all possible pusses! Did she give you the notion that she would be just as well satisfied with you as with a young man?"

"She could n't deceive me so far as that, my dear."

"Very well; I shall take her in hand myself to-morrow, and find out what she really is."

Mrs. March went shopping the next forenoon with what was left of the Deering party; Deering had taken the early train north, and she seemed to have found the ladies livelier without him. She formed the impression from their more joyous behavior that he kept his wife from spending as much money as she would naturally have done, and that, while he was not perhaps

exactly selfish, he was forgetful of her youth, of the difference in years between them, and of her capacity for pleasures which he could not care for. She said that Mrs. Deering and Miss Gage now acted like two girls together, and, if anything, Miss Gage seemed the elder of the two.

"And what did you decide about her?" I inquired.

"Well, I helped her buy a hat and a jacket at one of these nice shops just below the hotel where they're stopping, and we've started an



DRAWN BY IRVING R. WILES.

ENGRAVED BY F. H. WELLINGTON.

«I HELPED HER BUY A HAT.»

mind. I'm a little puzzled by her attitude toward her own beauty. She does n't live her beauty any more than a poet lives his poetry or a painter his painting; though I've no doubt she knows her gift is hers just as they do."

"I think I understand. You mean she is n't conscious."

"No. Conscious is n't quite the word," I said fastidiously. "Is n't there some word that says less, or more, in the same direction?"

"No, there is n't; and I shall think you don't mean anything at all if you keep on. Now,

evening dress for her. She can't wear that white duck morning, noon, and night.»

«But her character—her nature?»

«Oh! Well, she is rather plain-minded, as you call it. I think she shows out her real feelings too much for a woman.»

«Why do you prefer dissimulation in your sex, my dear?»

«I don't call it dissimulation. But of course a girl ought to hide her feelings. Don't you think it would have been better for her not to have looked so obviously out of humor when you first saw her the other night?»

«She would n't have interested me so much, then, and she probably would n't have had your acquaintance now.»

«Oh, I don't mean to say that even that kind of girl won't get on, if she gives her mind to it; but I think I should prefer a little less plain-mindedness, as you call it, if I were a man.»

I did not know exactly what to say to this, and I let Mrs. March go on.

«It's so in the smallest thing. If you're choosing a thing for her, and she likes another, she lets you feel it at once. I don't mean that she's rude about it, but she seems to set herself so square across the way, and you come up with a kind of bump against her. I don't think that's very feminine. That's what I meant by mannish. You always knew where to find her.»

I don't know why this criticism should have amused me so much, but I began to laugh quite uncontrollably, and I kept on and on. Mrs. March kept her temper with me admirably. When I was quiet again, she said:

«Mrs. Deering is a person that wins your heart at once; she has that *appealing* quality. You can see that she's cowed by her husband, though he means to be kind to her; and yet you may be sure she gets round him, and has her own way all the time. I know it was her idea to have him go home and leave them here, and of course she made him think it was his. She saw that as long as he was here, and anxious to get back to his (stock,) there was no hope of giving Miss Gage the sort of chance she came for, and so she determined to manage it. At the same time, you can see that she is as true as steel, and would abhor anything like deceit worse than the pest.»

«I see; and that is why you dislike Miss Gage?»

«Dislike her? No, I don't dislike her; but she is disappointing. If she were a plain girl her plain-mindedness would be all right; it would be amusing; she would turn it to account and make it seem humorous. But it

does n't seem to go with her beauty; it takes away from that—I don't know how to express it exactly.»

«You mean that she has no charm.»

«No: I don't mean that at all. She has a great deal of charm of a certain kind, but it's a very peculiar kind. After all, the truth is the truth, Basil, is n't it?»

«It is sometimes, my dear,» I assented.

«And the truth has its charm, even when it's too blunt.»

«Ah, I'm not so sure of that.»

«Yes—yes, it has. You must n't say so, Basil, or I shall lose all my faith in you. If I could n't trust you I don't know what I should do.»

«What are you after now, Isabel?»

«I am not after anything. I want you to go round to all the hotels and see if there is not some young man you know at one of them. There surely must be.»

«Would one young man be enough?»

«If he were attentive enough, he would be. One young man is as good as a thousand if the girl is the right kind.»

«But you have just been implying that Miss Gage is cold and selfish and greedy. Shall I go round exploring hotel registers for a victim to such a divinity as that?»

«No; you need n't go till I have had a talk with her. I am not sure she is worth it; I am not sure that I want to do a single thing for her.»

VII.

THE next day, after another forenoon's shopping with her friends, Mrs. March announced: «Well, now, it has all come out, Basil, and I wonder you did n't get the secret at once from your Mr. Deering. Have you been supposing that Miss Gage was a poor girl whom the Deerings had done the favor of bringing with them?»

«Why, what of it?» I asked provisionally.

«She is very well off. Her father is not only the president, as they call it, of the village, but he's the president of the bank.»

«Yes; I told you that Deering told me so—»

«But he is very queer. He has kept her very close from the other young people, and Mrs. Deering is the only girl friend she's ever had, and she's grown up without having been anywhere without him. They had to plead with him to let her come with them,—or Mrs. Deering had,—but when he once consented, he consented handsomely. He gave her a lot of money, and told them he wanted her to have the best time that money could buy; and of course you can understand how such a man would think that money would buy

a good time anywhere. But the Deerings did n't know how to go about it. She confessed as much when we were talking the girl over. I could see that she stood in awe of her somehow from the beginning, and that she felt more than the usual responsibility for her. That was the reason she was so eager to get her husband off home; as long as he was with them she would have to work everything through him, and that would be double labor, because he is so hopelessly *villaginous*, don't you know, that he never could rise to the conception of anything else. He took them to a cheap, second-class hotel, and he was afraid to go with them anywhere because he never was sure that it was the right thing to do; and he was too proud to ask, and they had to keep prodding him all the time.»

«That's delightful!»

«Oh, I dare say you think so; but if you knew how it wounded a woman's self-respect you would feel differently; or you would n't, rather. But now, thank goodness! they've got him off their hands, and they can begin to breathe freely. That is, Mrs. Deering could, if she had n't her heart in her mouth all the time, wondering what she can do for the girl, and bullying herself with the notion that she is to blame if she does n't have a good time. You can understand just how it was with them always. Mrs. Deering is one of those meek little things that a great, splendid, lonely creature like Miss Gage would take to in a small place, and perfectly crush under the weight of her confidence; and she would want to make her husband live up to her ideal of the girl, and would be miserable because he would n't or could n't.»

«I believe the good Deering did n't even think her handsome.»

«That's it. And he thought anything that was good enough for his wife was good enough for Miss Gage, and he'd be stubborn about doing things on her account, even to please his wife.»

«Such conduct is imaginable of the good Deering. I don't think he liked her.»

«Nor she him. Mrs. Deering helplessly hinted as much. She said he did n't like to have her worrying so much about Miss Gage's not having a good time, and she could n't make him feel as she did about it, and she was half glad for his own sake that he had to go home.»

«Did she say that?»

«Not exactly; but you could see that she meant it. Do you think it would do for them to change from their hotel, and go to the Grand Union or the States or Congress Hall?»

«Have you been putting them up to that, Isabel?»

«I knew you would suspect me, and I would n't have asked for your opinion if I had cared anything for it, really. What would be the harm of their doing it?»

«None whatever, if you really want my worthless opinion. But what could they do there?»

«They could see something if they could n't do anything, and as soon as Miss Gage has got her new gowns I'm going to tell them you thought they could do it. It was their own idea, at any rate.»

«Miss Gage's?»

«Mrs. Deering's. She has the courage of a—I don't know what. She sees that it's a desperate case, and she would n't stop at anything.»

«Now that her husband has gone home.»

«Well, which hotel shall they go to?»

«Oh, that requires reflection.»

«Very well, then, when you've reflected I want you to go to the hotel you've chosen, and introduce yourself to the clerk, and tell him your wife has two friends coming, and you want something very pleasant for them. Tell him all about yourself and «Every Other Week.»»

«He'll think I want them deadheaded.»

«No matter, if your conscience is clear; and don't be so shamefully modest as you always are, but speak up boldly. Now, will you? Promise me you will!»

«I will try, as the good little boy says. But, Isabel, we don't know these people except from their own account.»

«And that is quite enough.»

«It will be quite enough for the hotel-keeper if they run their board. I shall have to pay it.»

«Now, Basil dear, don't be disgusting, and go and do as you're bid.»

It was amusing, but it was perfectly safe, and there was no reason why I should not engage rooms for the ladies at another hotel. I had not the least question of them, and I had failed to worry my wife with a pretended doubt. So I decided that I would go up at once and inquire at the Grand Union. I chose this hotel because, though it lacked the fine flower of the more ancient respectability and the legendary charm of the States, it was so spectacular that it would be in itself a perpetual excitement for those ladies, and would form an effect of society which, with some help from us, might very well deceive them. This was what I said to myself, though in my heart I knew better. Whatever Mrs. Deering

might think, that girl was not going to be taken in with any such simple device, and I must count upon the daily chances in the place to afford her the good time she had come for.

As I mounted the steps to the portico of the Grand Union with my head down, and lost in a calculation of these chances, I heard my name gaily called, and I looked up to see young Kendricks, formerly of our staff on "Every Other Week," and still a frequent contributor, and a great favorite of my wife's and my own. My heart gave a great joyful bound at sight of him.

"My dear boy, when in the world did you come?"

"This morning by the steamboat train, and I am never, never going away!"

"You like it, then?"

"Like it! It's the most delightful thing in the universe. Why, I'm simply wild about it, Mr. March. I go round saying to myself, Why have I thrown away my life? Why have I never come to Saratoga before? It's simply supreme, and it's American down to the ground. Yes; that's what makes it so delightful. No other people could have invented it, and it does n't try to be anything but what we made it."

"I'm so glad you look at it in that way. We like it. We discovered it three or four years ago, and we never let a summer slip, if we can help it, without coming here for a week or a month. The place," I enlarged, "has the charm of ruin, though it's in such obvious repair; it has a past; it's so completely gone by in a society sense. The cottage life here has n't killed the hotel life, as it has at Newport and Bar Harbor; but the ideal of cottage life everywhere else has made hotel life at Saratoga ungenteel. The hotels are full, but at the same time they are society solitudes."

"How gay it is!" said the young fellow, as he gazed with a pensive smile into the street, where all those festive vehicles were coming and going, dappled by the leaf-shadows from the tall trees overhead. "What air! what a sky!" The one was indeed sparkling, and the other without a cloud, for it had rained in the night, and it seemed as if the weather could never be hot and close again.

I forgot how I had been sweltering about, and said: "Yes; it is a Saratoga day. It's supposed that the sparkle of the air comes from the healthful gases thrown off by the springs. Some people say the springs are



DRAWN BY IRVING R. WILES.

ENGRAVED BY GEORGE P. BARTLE.

«AS I MOUNTED THE STEPS . . . I LOOKED UP TO SEE
YOUNG KENDRICKS.»

doctored; that's what makes their gases so healthful."

"Why, anything might happen here," Kendricks mused, unheeding of me. "What a scene! what a stage! Why has nobody done a story about Saratoga?" he asked, with the literary turn I knew his thoughts would be taking. All Gerald Kendricks's thoughts were of literature, but sometimes they were not of immediate literary effect, though that was never for long.

"Because," I suggested, "one probably could n't get his young lady characters to come here if they were at all in society. But of course there must be charming presences here accidentally. Some young girl, say, might come here from a country place, expecting to see social gaiety—"

"Ah, but that would be too heart-breaking!"

"Not at all. Not if she met some young fellow accidentally—don't you see?"

"It would be difficult to manage; and has n't it been done?"

"Everything has been done, my dear fellow. Or, you might suppose a young lady who comes

on here with her father, a veteran politician, delegate to the Republican or Democratic convention,—all the conventions meet in Saratoga,—and some ardent young delegate falls in love with her. That would be new ground. There you would have the political novel, which they wonder every now and then some of us don't write.» The smile faded from Kendricks's lips, and I laughed. «Well, then, there's nothing for it but the Social Science Congress. Have a brilliant professor win the heart of a lovely sister-in-law of another member by a paper he reads before the Congress. No? You're difficult. Are you stopping here?»

«Yes; are you?»

«I try to give myself the air of it when I am feeling very proud. But really, we live at a most charming little hotel on a back street, out of the whirl and rush that we should prefer to be in if we could afford it.» I told him about our place, and he said it must be delightful, and he made the proper inquiries about Mrs. March, and asked if he might come to see us. Kendricks never forgot the gentleman in the artist, and he was as true to the *convenances* as if they had been principles. That was what made Mrs. March like his stories so much more than the stories of some people who wrote better. He said he would drop in during the afternoon, and I went indoors on the pretext of wanting to buy a newspaper. Then, without engaging rooms for Mrs. Deering and Miss Gage, I hurried home.

VIII.

«WELL, did you get the rooms?» asked my wife as soon as she saw me. She did not quite call it across the street to me as I came up from where she sat on the piazza.

«No, I did n't,» I said boldly, if somewhat breathlessly.

«Why did n't you? You ought to have gone to the States if they were full at the Grand Union.»

«They were not full, unless Kendricks got their last room.»

«Do you mean that *he* was there? Mr. Kendricks? If you are hoaxing me, Basil!»

«I am not, my dear; indeed I'm not,» said I, beginning to laugh, and this made her doubt me the more.

«Because if you are I shall simply never forgive you. And I'm in earnest this time,» she replied.

«Why should I want to hoax you about such a vital thing as that. Could n't Kendricks come to Saratoga as well as we? He's here

looking up the ground of a story I should think from what he said.»

«No matter what he's here for; he's here, and that's enough. I never knew of anything so perfectly providential. Did you *tell* him, Basil? Did you dare?»

«Tell him what?»

«You know; about Miss Gage.»

«Well, I came very near it. I dangled the fact before his eyes once, but I caught it away again in time. He never saw it. I thought I'd better let you tell him.»

«Is he coming here to see us?»

«He asked if he might.»

«He's always nice. I don't know that I shall ask him to do anything for them, after all; I'm not sure that she's worth it. I wish some commoner person had happened along. Kendricks is too precious. I shall have to think about it; and don't you tease me, Basil, will you?»

«I don't know. If I'm not allowed to have any voice in the matter, I'm afraid I shall take it out in teasing. I don't see why Miss Gage is n't quite as good as Kendricks. I believe she's taller, and though he's pretty good-looking, I prefer her style of beauty. I dare say his family is better, but I fancy she's richer; and his family is n't good beyond New York city, and her money will go anywhere. It's a pretty even thing.»

«Good gracious, Basil! you talk as if it were a question of marriage.»

«And you *think* it is.»

«Now I see that you're *bent* upon teasing, and we won't talk any more, please. What time did he say he would call?»

«If I may n't talk, I can't tell.»

«You may talk that much.»

«Well, then, he did n't say.»

«Basil,» said my wife, after a moment, «if you could be serious, I should like very much to talk with you. I know that you're excited by meeting Mr. Kendricks, and I know what you thought the instant you saw him. But, indeed, it won't do, my dear. It's more than we've any right to ask, and I shall not ask it, and I shall not let you. She is a stiff, awkward village person, and I don't believe she's amiable or intelligent; and to let a graceful, refined, superior man like Mr. Kendricks throw away his time upon her would be wicked, simply wicked. Let those people manage for themselves from this out. Of course you must n't get them rooms at the Grand Union now, for he'd be seeing us there with them, and feel bound to pay her attention. You must try for them at the States, since the matter's been spoken of, or at Congress Hall. But there's

no hurry. We must have time to think whether we shall use Mr. Kendricks with them. I suppose it will do no harm to introduce him. If he stays we can't very well avoid it; and I confess I should like to see how she impresses him. Of course we shall introduce him! But I insist I shall just do it merely as one human being to another; and don't you come in with any of your romantic nonsense, Basil, about her social disappointment. Just how much did you give the situation away?"

I told as well as I could remember.

"Well, that's nothing. He'll never think of it, and you must n't hint anything of the kind again."

I promised devoutly, and she went on:

"It would n't be nice—it would n't be delicate—to let him into the conspiracy. That must be entirely our affair, don't you see? And I don't want you to take a single step without me. I don't want you even to discuss her with him. Will you? Because that will tempt you further."

That afternoon Kendricks came promptly to call, like the little gentleman he was, and he was more satisfactory about Saratoga than he had been in the morning even. Mrs. March catechized him, and she did n't leave an emotion of his unsearched by her vivid sympathy. She ended by saying:

"You must write a story about Saratoga. And I have got just the heroine for you."

I started, but she ignored my start.

Kendricks laughed, delighted, and asked, "Is she pretty?"

"Must a heroine be pretty?"

"She had better be. Otherwise she will have to be tremendously clever and say all sorts of brilliant things, and that puts a great burden on the author. If you proclaim boldly at the start that she's a beauty, the illustrator has got to look after her, and the author has a comparative sinecure."

Mrs. March thought a moment, and then she said: "Well, she is a beauty. I don't want to make it too hard for you."

"When shall I see her?" Kendricks demanded, and he feigned an amusing anxiety.

"Well, that depends upon how you behave, Mr. Kendricks. If you are very, very good, perhaps I may let you see her this evening. We will take you to call upon her."

"Is it possible? Do you mean business? Then she is—in society?"

"Mr. Kendricks!" cried Mrs. March, with burlesque severity. "Do you think that I would offer you a heroine who was *not* in society? You forget that I am from Boston!"

"Of course, of course! I understand that any heroine of your acquaintance must be in society. But I thought—I did n't know but for the moment—Saratoga seems to be so tremendously mixed; and Mr. March says there is no society here. But if she is from Boston—"

"I did n't say she was from Boston, Mr. Kendricks."

"Oh, I beg your pardon!"

"She is from De Witt Point," said Mrs. March, and she apparently enjoyed his confusion, no less than my bewilderment at the course she was taking.

I was not going to be left behind, though, and I said: "I discovered this heroine myself, Kendricks, and if there is to be any giving away—"

"Now, Basil!"

"I am going to do it. Mrs. March would never have cared anything about her if it had n't been for me. I can't let her impose upon you. This heroine is no more in society than she is from Boston. That is the trouble with her. She has come here for society, and she can't find any."

"Oh, that was what you were hinting at this morning," said Kendricks. "I thought it a pure figment of the imagination."

"One does n't imagine such things as that, my dear fellow. One imagines a heroine coming here, and having the most magnificent kind of social career,—lawn-parties, lunches, teas, dinners, picnics, hops,—and going back to De Witt Point with a dozen offers of marriage. That's the kind of work the imagination does. But this simple and appealing situation—this beautiful young girl, with her poor little illusions, her secret hopes half hidden from herself, her ignorant past, her visionary future—"

"Now, I am going to tell you all about her, Mr. Kendricks," Mrs. March broke in upon me, with defiance in her eye; and she flung out the whole fact with a rapidity of utterance that would have left far behind any attempt of mine. But I made no attempt to compete with her; I contented myself with a sarcastic silence which I could see daunted her a little at last.

"And all that we've done, my dear fellow,"—I took in irony the word she left to me,—
"is to load ourselves up with these two impossible people, to go their security to destiny, and answer for their having a good time. We're in luck."

"Why, I don't know," said Kendricks, and I could see that his fancy was beginning to play with the situation; "I don't see why it is n't a charming scheme."



DRAWN BY IRVING R. WILES.

ENGRAVED BY PETER AITKEN.

«(WE WERE JUST TALKING OF YOU,) SAID MRS. MARCH.»

«Of course it is,» cried Mrs. March, taking a little heart from his courage.

«We can't make out yet whether the girl is interesting,» I put in maliciously.

«That is what *you* say,» said my wife. «She is very shy, and of course she would n't show out her real nature to you. I found her *very* interesting.»

«Now, Isabel!» I protested.

«She is fascinating,» the perverse woman persisted. «She has a fascinating dullness.»

Kendricks laughed and I jeered at this complex characterization.

«You make me impatient to judge for myself,» he said.

«Will you go with me to call upon them this evening?» asked Mrs. March.

«I shall be delighted. And you can count

upon me to aid and abet you in your generous conspiracy, Mrs. March, to the best of my ability. There's nothing I should like better than to help you—»

«Throw dust in her beautiful eyes,» I quoted.

«Not at all,» said my wife. «But to spread a beatific haze over everything, so that as long as she stays in Saratoga she shall see life rose-color. Of course you may say that it's a kind of deception—»

«Not at all!» cried the young fellow in his turn. «We will make it reality. Then there will be no harm in it.»

«What a jesuitical casuist! You had better read what Cardinal Newman says in his (Apologia) about lying, young man.»

Neither of them minded me, for just then

there was a stir of drapery round the corner of the piazza from where we were sitting, and the next moment Mrs. Deering and Miss Gage showed themselves.

«We were just talking of you,» said Mrs. March. «May I present our friend Mr. Kendricks, Mrs. Deering? And Miss Gage?»

At sight of the young man, so well dressed and good-looking, who bowed so prettily to her, and then bustled to place chairs for them, a certain cloud seemed to lift from Miss Gage's beautiful face, and to be at least partly broken on Mrs. Deering's visage. I began to talk to the girl, and she answered in good spirits, and with more apparent interest in my conversation than she had yet shown, while Kendricks very properly devoted himself to the other ladies. Both his eyes were on them, but I felt that he had a third somehow upon her, and that the smallest fact of her beauty and grace was not lost upon him. I knew that her rich, tender voice was doing its work, too, through the commonplaces she vouchsafed to me. There was a moment when I saw him lift a questioning eyebrow upon Mrs. March, and saw her answer with a fleeting frown of affirmation. I cannot tell just how it was that, before he left us, his chair was on the other side of Miss Gage's, and I was eliminated from the dialogue. These are the secrets of youth, which we lose as we live on.

He did not stay too long. There was another tableau of him on foot, taking leave of Mrs. March, with a high hand-shake, which had then lately come in, and which I saw the girl note, and then bowing to her and to Mrs. Deering.

«Don't forget,» my wife called after him, with a ready invention not lost on his quick intelligence, «that you're going to the concert with us after tea. Eight o'clock, remember.»

«You may be sure I shall remember *that*,» he returned gaily.

IX.

THE countenances of the two ladies fell instantly when he was gone. «Mrs. March,» said Mrs. Deering, with a nervous tremor, «did Mr. March get us those rooms at the Grand Union?»

«No—no,» my wife began, and she made a little pause, as if to gather plausibility. «The Grand Union was very full, and he thought that at the States—»

«Because,» said Mrs. Deering, «I don't know that we shall trouble him, after all. Mr. Deering is n't very well, and I guess we have got to go home—»

«Go home!» Mrs. March echoed, and her

voice was a tone-scene of a toppling hope and a wide-spread desolation. «Why, you must n't!»

«We must, I guess. It had begun to be very pleasant, and—I guess I have got to go, I can't feel easy about him.»

«Why, of course,» Mrs. March now assented, and she waved her fan thoughtfully before her face. I knew what she was thinking of, and I looked at Miss Gage, who had involuntarily taken the pose and expression of the moment when I first saw her at the kiosk in Congress Park. «And Miss Gage?»

«Oh, yes; I must go, too,» said the girl, wistfully, forlornly. She had tears in her voice, tears of despair and vexation, I should have said.

«That's too bad,» said Mrs. March, and, as she did not offer any solution of the matter, I thought it rather heartless of her to go on and rub it in. «And we were just planning some things we could do together.»

«It can't be helped now,» returned the girl.

«But we shall see you again before you go?» Mrs. March asked of both.

«Well, I don't know,» said the girl, with a look at Mrs. Deering, who now said:

«I guess so. We'll let you know when we're going.» And they got away rather stiffly.

«Why in the world, my dear,» I asked, «if you were n't going to promote their stay, need you prolong the agony of their acquaintance?»

«Did you feel that about it, too? Well, I wanted to ask you first if you thought it would do.»

«What do?»

«You know; get her a room here. Because if we do we shall have her literally on our hands as long as we are here. We shall have to have the whole care and responsibility of her, and I wanted you to feel just what you were going in for. You know very well I can't do things by halves, and that if I undertake to chaperon this girl I shall chaperon her—»

«To the bitter end. Yes; I understand the conditions of your uncompromising conscience. But I don't believe it will be any such killing matter. There are other semi-detached girls in the house; she could go round with them.»

We talked on, and, as sometimes happens, we convinced each other so thoroughly that she came to my ground and I went to hers. Then it was easier for us to come together, and after making me go to the clerk, and find out that he had a vacant room, Mrs. March

agreed with me that it would not do at all to have Miss Gage stay with us; the fact that there was a vacant room seemed to settle the question.

We were still congratulating ourselves on our escape when Mrs. Deering suddenly reappeared round our corner of the veranda. She was alone, and she looked excited.

"Oh, it is n't anything," she said in answer to the alarm that showed itself in Mrs. March's face at sight of her. "I hope you won't think it's too presuming, Mrs. March, and I want you to believe that it's something I have thought of by myself, and that Julia would n't have let me come if she had dreamed of such a thing. I do hate so to take her back with me, now that she's begun to have a good time, and I was wondering—wondering whether it would be asking too much if I tried to get her a room here. I should n't exactly like to leave her in the hotel alone, though I suppose it would be perfectly proper; but Mr. Deering found out when he was trying to get rooms before that there were some young ladies staying by themselves here, and I did n't want to ask the clerk for a room unless you felt just right about it."

"Why, of course, Mrs. Deering. It's a public house, like any other, and you have as much right—"

"But I did n't want you to think that I would do it without asking you, and if it is going to be the least bit of trouble to you—" The poor thing while she talked stood leaning anxiously over toward Mrs. March, who had risen, and pressing the points of her fingers nervously together.

"It won't, Mrs. Deering. It will be nothing but pleasure. Why, certainly. I shall be delighted to have Miss Gage here, and anything that Mr. March and I can do— Why, we had just been talking of it, and Mr. March has this minute got back from seeing the clerk, and she can have a very nice room. We had been intending to speak to you about it as soon as we saw you."

I do not know whether this was quite true or not, but I was glad Mrs. March said it, from the effect it had with Mrs. Deering. Tears of relief came into her eyes, and she said: "Then I can go home in the morning. I was going to stay on a day or two longer, on Julia's account, but I did n't feel just right about Mr. Deering, and now I won't have to."

There followed a flutter of polite offers and refusals, acknowledgments and disavowals, and an understanding that I would arrange it all, and that we would come to Mrs. Deer-

ing's hotel after supper and see Miss Gage about the when and the how of her coming to us.

"Well, Isabel," I said, after it was all over, and Mrs. Deering had vanished in a mist of happy tears, "I suppose this is what you call perfectly providential. Do you really believe that Miss Gage did n't send her back?"

"I know she did n't. But I know that she *had* to do it, just the same as if Miss Gage had driven her at the point of the bayonet."

I laughed at this tragical image. "Can she be such a terror?"

"She is an ideal. And Mrs. Deering is as afraid as death of her. Of course she has to live up to her. It's probably been the struggle of her life, and I can quite imagine her letting her husband die before she would take Miss Gage back unless she went back satisfied."

"I don't believe I can imagine so much as that exactly, but I can imagine her being afraid of Miss Gage's taking it out of her somehow. Now she will take it out of us. I hope you realize that you've done it now, my dear. To be sure, you will have all your life to repent of your rashness."

"I shall never repent," Mrs. March retorted hardily. "It was the right thing, the only thing. We could n't have let that poor creature stay on, when she was so anxious to get back to her husband."

"No."

"And I confess, Basil, that I feel a little pity for that poor girl, too. It would have been cruel, it would have been fairly wicked, to let her go home so soon, and especially now."

"Oh! And I suppose that by *especially now*, you mean Kendricks," I said, and I laughed mockingly, as the novelists say. "How sick I am of this stale old love-business between young people! We ought to know better—we're old enough; at least *you* are."

She seemed not to feel the gibe. "Why, Basil," she asked dreamily, "have n't you any romance left in you?"

"Romance? Bah! It's the most ridiculous unreality in the world. If you had so much sympathy for that stupid girl, in her disappointment, why had n't you a little for that poor woman, in her anxiety about her sick husband? But a husband is nothing—when you have got him."

"I did sympathize with her."

"You did n't say so."

"Well, she is only his second wife, and I don't suppose it's anything serious. Did n't I really say anything to her?"

"Not a word. It is curious," I went on,

«how we let this idiotic love-passion absorb us to the very last. It is wholly unimportant who marries who, or whether anybody marries at all. And yet we no sooner have the making of a love-affair within reach than we revert to the folly of our own youth, and abandon ourselves to it as if it were one of the great interests of life.»

«Who is talking about love? It is n't a question of that. It's a question of making a girl have a pleasant time for a few days; and what is the harm of it? Girls have a dull enough time at the very best. My heart aches for them, and I shall never let a chance slip to help them, I don't care what you say.»

«Now, Isabel,» I returned, «don't you be a humbug. This is a perfectly plain case, and you are going in for a very risky affair with your eyes open. You shall not pretend you're not.»

«Very well, then, if I am going into it with my eyes open, I shall look out that nothing happens.»

«And you think provision will avail! I wish,» I said, «that instead of coming home that night, and telling you about this girl, I had confined my sentimentalizing to that young French-Canadian mother and her dirty little boy, who ate the peanut shells. I've no doubt it was really a more tragical case. They looked dreadfully poor and squalid. Why could n't I have amused my idle fancy with their fortunes—the sort of husband and father they had, their shabby home, the struggle of their life? That is the appeal that a genuine person listens to. Nothing does more to stamp me a *poseur* than the fact that I preferred to bemoan myself for a sulky girl who seemed not to be having a good time.»

There was truth in my joking, but the truth did not save me; it lost me rather. «Yes,» said my wife; «it was your fault. I should never have seen anything in her if it had not been for you. It was your coming back and work-

ing me up about her that began the whole thing, and now if anything goes wrong you will have yourself to thank for it.»

She seized the opportunity of my having jestingly taken up this load to buckle it on me tight and fast, clasp it here, tying it there, and giving a final pull to the knots that left me scarcely the power to draw my breath, much less the breath to protest. I was forced to hear her say again that all her concern from the beginning was for Mrs. Deering, and that now, if she had offered to do something



DRAWN BY IRVING R. WILES.

ENGRAVED BY H. DAVIDSON.

«(WILL IT DO?)»

for Miss Gage, it was not because she cared anything for her, but because she cared everything for Mrs. Deering, who could never lift up her head again at De Witt Point if she went back so completely defeated in all the purposes she had in asking Miss Gage to come with her to Saratoga.

I did not observe that this wave of compassion carried Mrs. March so far as to leave her stranded with Mrs. Deering that evening when we called with Kendricks, and asked her and Miss Gage to go with us to the Congress Park concert. Mrs. Deering said that she had to pack; that she did not feel just exactly like going; and my tender heart ached with a knowledge of her distress. Miss

Gage made a faint, false pretense of refusing to come with us, too; but Mrs. Deering urged her to go, and put on the new dress, which had just come home, so that Mrs. March could see it. The girl came back looking radiant, divine, and—"Will it do?" She palpitated under my wife's critical glance.

"Do? It will *outdo*! I never saw anything like it!" The connoisseur patted it a little this way, and a little that. "It is a dream! Did the hat come, too?"

It appeared that the hat had come, too. Miss Gage rematerialized with it on, after a moment's evanescence, and looked at my wife with the expression of being something impersonal with a hat on.

"Simply, there is nothing to say!" cried Mrs. March. The girl put up her hands to it. "Good gracious! You must n't take it off! Your costume is perfect for the concert."

"Is it really?" asked the girl, joyfully; and she seemed to find this the first fitting moment to say, for sole recognition of our

self-sacrifice, "I'm much obliged to you, Mr. March, for getting me that room."

I begged her not to speak of it, and turned an ironical eye upon my wife; but she was lost in admiration of the hat.

"Yes," she sighed; "it's much better than the one I wanted you to get at first." And she afterward explained that the girl seemed to have a perfect instinct for what went with her style.

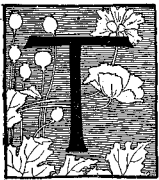
Kendricks kept himself discreetly in the background, and, with his unfailing right feeling, was talking to Mrs. Deering, in spite of her not paying much attention to him. I must own that I too was absorbed in the spectacle of Miss Gage.

She went off with us, and did not say another word to Mrs. Deering about helping her pack. Perhaps this was best, though it seemed heartless; it may not have been so heartless as it seemed. I dare say it would have been more suffering to the woman if the girl had missed this chance.

(To be continued.)

William Dean Howells.

A DAY IN TOPHET.



THE story of the first Doddville—old Doddville, as its ex-residents always spoke of it—was full of pathos, the pathos of the prairie and of great skies, where snows drift and wild winds sweep, and humanity struggles against all the vast forces of earth and air to maintain its free gift of life.

The nucleus of the first town had been a small inland lake in Dakota. About it had been laid out (on paper) a city with wide streets and fine buildings, public and private. These never got beyond the paper period, but John Dodd's colony of old farming neighbors built a few cheap houses to begin with, and went to work, inspired by the optimism of his nature.

"We're tied right into the wheat belt of the great Northwest," said he, "an' all you got to do is to git a crop planted. The railroad 'll be here afore you can cut it; it's got to come. We'll turn over a few crops an' git a ranch goin', an' by the time we do that you 'll see the boom rollin' right over the prairie toward us. We're in the way, an' we're goin' to git hit."

But the first summer was dry and rainless. Crops that had burst from the new soil in rank richness were scorched and blighted by the heat. The lake grew weedy.

"I declare, John," said Miranda, his wife, "I believe that there lake is dryin' up. I bet it ain't got no spring. 'Pears to me I can jes see it shrinking every time the cattle come down to drink. They'll swallow it all afore winter."

Her husband scouted the idea, but nevertheless looked anxiously at the ever-increasing strip of black, sun-baked mud around it, cracked apart by the heat and pockmarked with trampling hoofs. Day by day yesterday's hoof-marks dried out. They were probed by an anxious finger, and proved as dry as the dust of Pharaoh. Cattail flags stood like withered pipes of Pan in a crust that crumbled underfoot.

"The dod-blasted thing ain't even marshy," he said to himself, moodily stalking about it when none was by to note his anxiety. But the lake did not vanish that year.

They made a living from their first crops—a living and no more. The winter was as bitter cold as the summer had been hot, and it was hard to winter their stock. The second