

# McCLURE'S MAGAZINE.

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## REAL CONVERSATIONS.—I.

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS AND  
HJALMAR HJORTH BOYESEN.

RECORDED BY MR. BOYESEN.

WHEN I was requested to furnish a dramatic biography of Mr. Howells, I was confronted with what seemed an insuperable difficulty. The more I thought of William Dean Howells, the less dramatic did he seem to me. The only way that occurred to me of introducing a dramatic element into our proposed interview was for me to assault him with tongue or pen, in the hope that he might take energetic measures to resent my intrusion; but as, notwithstanding his unvarying kindness to me, and many unforgotten benefits, I cherished only the friendliest feelings for him, I could not persuade myself to procure dramatic interest at such a price.

My second objection, I am bound to confess, arose from my own sense of dignity which rebelled against the *rôle* of an interviewer, and it was not until my conscience was made easy on this point that I agreed to undertake the present article. I was reminded that it was an ancient and highly dignified form of literature I was about to revive; and that my precedent was to be sought not in the modern newspaper interview, but in the Platonic dialogue. By the friction of two kindred minds, sparks of thought may flash forth which owe their origin solely to the friendly collision. We

have a far more vivid portrait of Socrates in the beautiful conversational turns of "The Symposium" and the first book of "The Republic," than in the purely objective account of Xenophon in his "Memorabilia." And Howells, though he may not know it, has this trait in common with Socrates, that he can portray himself, unconsciously, better than I or anybody else could do it for him.

If I needed any further encouragement, I found it in the assurance that what I was expected to furnish was to be in the nature of "an exchange of confidences between two friends with a view to publication." It was understood, of course, that Mr. Howells was to be more confiding than myself, and that his reminiscences were to predominate; for an author, however unheroic he may appear to his own modesty, is bound to be the hero of his biography. What made the subject so alluring to me, apart from the personal charm which inheres in the man and all that appertains to him, was the consciousness that our friendship was of twenty-two years' standing, and that during all that time not a single jarring note had been introduced to mar the harmony of our relation.

Equipped, accordingly, with a good

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conscience and a lead pencil (which remained undisturbed in my breast-pocket), I set out to "exchange confidences" with the author of "Silas Lapham" and "A Modern Instance." I reached the enormous human hive on Fifty-ninth Street where my subject, for the present, occupies a dozen most comfortable and ornamental cells, and was promptly hoisted up to the fourth floor and deposited in front of his door. It is a house full of electric wires and tubes—literally honeycombed with modern conveniences. But in spite of all these, I made my way triumphantly to Mr. Howells's den, and after a proper prelude began the novel task assigned to me.

"I am afraid," I remarked quite *en passant*, "that I shall be embarrassed not by my ignorance, but by my knowledge concerning your life. For it is difficult to ask with good grace about

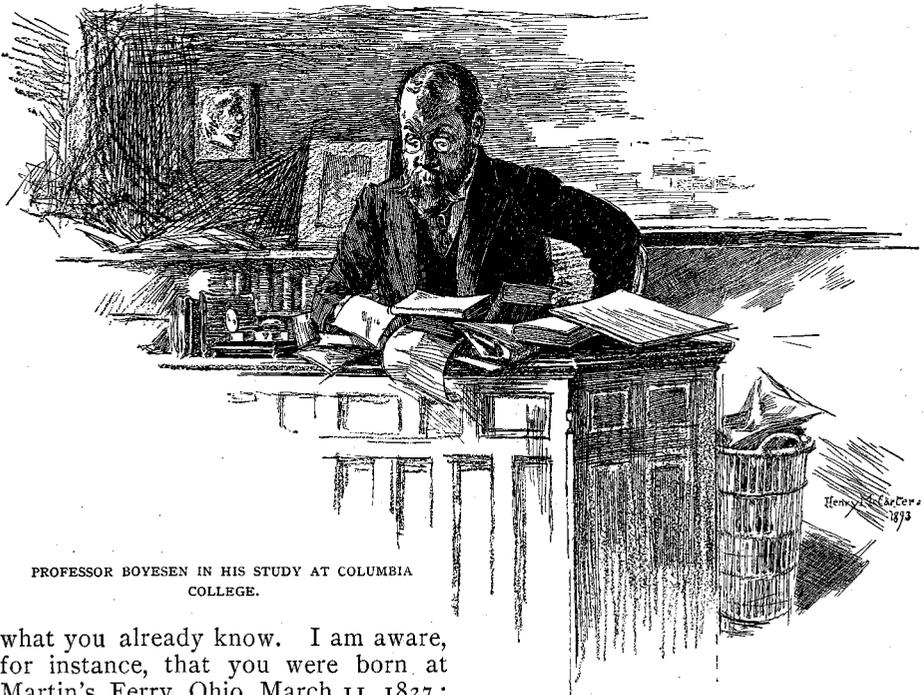
Nevertheless, I have some difficulty in realizing the environment of your boyhood."

*Howells.* If you have read my "Boy's Town," which is in all essentials autobiographical, you know as much as I could tell you. The environment of my early life was exactly as there described.

*Boyesen.* Your father, I should judge, then, was not a strict disciplinarian?

*Howells.* No. He was the gentlest of men—a friend and companion to his sons. He guided us in an unobtrusive way without our suspecting it. He was continually putting books into my hands, and they were always good books; many of them became events in my life. I had no end of such literary passions during my boyhood. Among the first was Goldsmith, then came Cervantes and Irving.

*Boyesen.* Then there was a good deal



PROFESSOR BOYESEN IN HIS STUDY AT COLUMBIA COLLEGE.

what you already know. I am aware, for instance, that you were born at Martin's Ferry, Ohio, March 11, 1837; that you removed thence to Dayton, and a few years later to Jefferson, Ashtabula County; that your father edited, published, and printed a country newspaper of Republican complexion, and that you spent a good part of your early years in the printing office.

of literary atmosphere about your childhood?

*Howells.* Yes. I can scarcely remember the time when books did not play a great part in my life. Father was by his culture and his interests rather

isolated from the community in which we lived, and this made him and all of us rejoice the more in a new author, in whose world we would live for weeks and months, and who colored our thoughts and conversation.

*Boyesen.* It has always been a matter of wonder to me that, with so little regular schooling, you stepped full-fledged into literature with such an exquisite and wholly individual style.

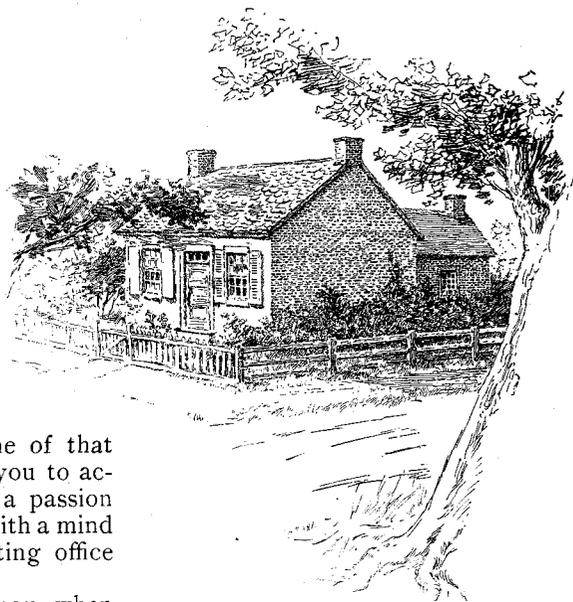
*Howells.* If you accuse me of that kind of thing, I must leave you to account for it. I had always a passion for literature, and to a boy with a mind and a desire to learn, a printing office is not a bad school.

*Boyesen.* How old were you when you left Jefferson, and went to Columbus?

*Howells.* I was nineteen years old when I went to the capital and wrote legislative reports for Cincinnati and Cleveland papers; afterwards I became one of the editors of the "Ohio State Journal." My duties gradually took a wide range, and I edited the literary column and wrote many of the leading articles. I was then in the midst of my enthusiasm for Heine, and was so impregnated with his spirit, that a poem which I sent to the "Atlantic Monthly" was mistaken by Mr. Lowell for a translation from the German poet. When he had satisfied himself, however, that it was not a translation, he accepted and printed it.

*Boyesen.* Tell me how you happened to publish your first volume, "Poems by Two Friends," in partnership with John J. Piatt.

*Howells.* I had known Piatt as a young printer; afterwards when he began to write poems, I read them and was delighted with them. When he came to Columbus I made his acquaintance, and we became friends. By this time we were both contributors to the "Atlantic Monthly." I may as well tell you that his contributions to our joint volume were far superior to mine.



THE BIRTHPLACE OF W. D. HOWELLS AT MARTINS FERRY, OHIO.

*Boyesen.* Did Lowell share that opinion?

*Howells.* That I don't know. He wrote me a very charming letter, in which he said many encouraging things, and he briefly reviewed the book in the "Atlantic."

*Boyesen.* What was the condition of society in Columbus during those days?

*Howells.* There were many delightful and cultivated people there, and society was charming; the North and South were both represented, and their characteristics united in a kind of informal Western hospitality, warm and cordial in its tone, which gave of its very best without stint. Salmon P. Chase, later Secretary of the Treasury, and Chief Justice of the United States, was then Governor of Ohio. He had a charming family, and made us young editors welcome at his house. All winter long there was a round of parties at the different houses; the houses were large and we always danced. These parties were brilliant affairs, socially, but besides, we young people had many informal gayeties. The old Starling Medical College, which was defunct as an educational institution, except for some vivisection and experiments

on hapless cats and dogs that went on in some out-of-the-way corners, was used as a boarding-house; and there was a large circular room in which we often improvised dances. We young fellows who lodged in the place were half a dozen journalists, lawyers, and law-students; one was, like myself, a writer for the "Atlantic," and we saw life with joyous eyes. We read the new books, and talked them over with the young ladies whom we seem to have been always calling upon. I remember those years in Columbus as among the happiest years of my life.

*Boyesen.* From Columbus you went as consul to Venice, did not you?

*Howells.* Yes. You remember I had written a campaign "Life of Lincoln." I was, like my father, an ardent Antislavery man. I went myself to Washington soon after President Lincoln's inauguration. I was first offered the

consulate to Rome; but as it depended entirely upon perquisites, which amounted only to three or four hundred dollars a year, I declined it, and they gave me Venice. The salary was raised to fifteen hundred dollars, which seemed to me quite beyond the dreams of avarice.

*Boyesen.* Do not you regard that Venetian experience as a very valuable one?

*Howells.* Oh, of course. In the first place, it gave me four years of almost uninterrupted leisure for study and literary work. There was, to be sure, occasionally an invoice to be verified, but that did not take much time. Secondly, it gave me a wider outlook upon the world than I had hitherto had. Without much study of a systematic kind, I had acquired a notion of English, French, German, and Spanish literature. I had been an eager and constant reader, always guided in my choice of books by my own inclination. I had learned German. Now, my first task was to learn Italian; and one of my early teachers was a Venetian priest, whom I read Dante with. This priest in certain ways suggested Don Ippolito in "A Foregone Conclusion."

*Boyesen.* Then he took snuff, and had a supernumerary calico handkerchief?

*Howells.* Yes. But what interested me most about him was his religious skepticism. He used to say, "The saints are the gods baptized." Then he was a kind of baffled inventor; though whether his inventions had the least merit I was unable to determine.

*Boyesen.* But his love story?

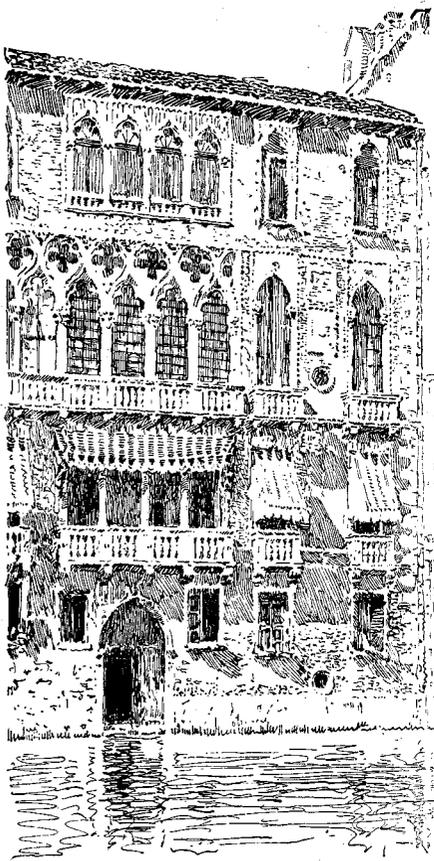
*Howells.* That was wholly fictitious.

*Boyesen.* I remember you gave me, in 1874, a letter of introduction to a Venetian friend of yours, named Brunetta, whom I failed to find.

*Howells.* Yes, Brunetta was the first friend I had in Venice. He was a distinctly Latin character—sober, well-regulated, and probity itself.

*Boyesen.* Do you call that the Latin character?

*Howells.* It is not our conventional idea of it; but it is fully as characteristic, if not more so, than the light,



THE GIUSTINIANI PALACE, HOWELLS' HOME IN VENICE.

mercurial, pleasure-loving type which somehow in literature has displaced the other. Brunetta and I promptly made the discovery that we were congenial. Then we became daily companions. I had a number of other Italian friends too, full of beautiful *bonhomie* and Southern sweetness of temperament.

*Boyesen.* You must have acquired Italian in a very short time?

*Howells.* Yes; being domesticated in that way in the very heart of that Italy, which was then *Italia irridente*, I could not help steeping myself in its atmosphere and breathing in the language, with the rest of its very composite flavors.

*Boyesen.* Yes; and whatever I know of Italian literature I owe largely to the completeness of that soaking process of yours. Your book on the Italian poets is one of the most charmingly sympathetic and illuminative bits of criticism that I know.

*Howells.* I am glad you think so; but the book was never a popular success. Of all the Italian authors, the one I delighted in the most was Goldoni. His exquisite realism fascinated me. It was the sort of thing which I felt I ought not to like; but for all that I liked it immensely.

*Boyesen.* How do you mean that you ought not to like it?

*Howells.* Why, I was an idealist in those days. I was only twenty-four or twenty-five years old, and I knew the world chiefly through literature. I was all the time trying to see things as others had seen them, and I had a notion that, in literature, persons and things should be nobler and better than they are in the sordid reality; and this

romantic glamour veiled the world to me, and kept me from seeing things as they are. But in the lanes and alleys of Venice I found Goldoni everywhere. Scenes from his plays were enacted

before my eyes, with all the charming Southern vividness of speech and gesture, and I seemed at every turn to have stepped at unawares into one of his comedies. I believe this was the beginning of my revolt. But it was a good while yet before I found my own bearings.

*Boyesen.* But permit me to say that it was an exquisitely delicate set of fresh Western senses you brought with you to Venice. When I was in Venice in 1878, I could not get away from you, however much I tried. I saw your old Venetian senator, in his august rags, roasting coffee; and I promenaded about for days in the chapters of your "Venetian Life," like the Knight Huldbrand, in the Enchanted Forest in "Undine," and I could not find my way out. Of course, I know that, being what you were, you could not have helped writing that book, but what was



W. D. HOWELLS, AFTER HIS RETURN FROM VENICE.

the immediate cause of your writing it?

*Howells.* From the day I arrived in Venice I kept a journal in which I noted down my impressions. I found a young pleasure in registering my sensations at the sight of notable things, and literary reminiscences usually shimmered through my observations. Then I received an offer from the "Boston Daily Advertiser," to write weekly or bi-weekly letters, for which they paid me five dollars, in greenbacks, a column, nonpareil. By the time this sum reached Venice, shaven

and shorn by discounts for exchange in gold premium, it had usually shrunk to half its size or less. Still I was glad enough to get even that, and I kept on writing joyously. So the book grew in my hands until, at the time I resigned in 1865, I was trying to have it published. I offered it successively to a number of English publishers; but they all declined it. At last Mr. Trübner agreed to take it, if I could guarantee the sale of five hundred copies in the United States, or induce an American publisher to buy that number of copies in sheets. I happened to cross the ocean with Mr. Hurd of the New York firm of Hurd & Houghton, and repeated Mr. Trübner's proposition to him. He refused to commit himself; but some weeks after my arrival in New York, he told me that the risk was practically nothing at all, and that his firm would agree to take the five hundred copies. The book was an instant success. I don't know how many editions of it have been printed, but I should say that its sale has been upward of forty thousand copies, and it still continues. The English weeklies gave me long complimentary notices, which I carried about for months in my pocket like love-letters, and read surreptitiously at odd

*Howells.* Yes; I was for a while a free lance in literature. I did whatever came in my way, and sold my articles to the newspapers, going about from office to office, but I was finally offered a place in "The Nation," where I obtained a fixed position at a salary. I had at times a sense that, by going abroad, I had fallen out of the American procession of progress; and, though I was elbowing my way energetically through the crowd, I seemed to have a tremendous difficulty in recovering my lost place on my native soil, and asserting my full right to it. So, when young men beg me to recommend them for consulships, I always feel in duty bound to impress on them this great danger of falling out of the procession, and asking them whether they have confidence in their ability to reconquer the place they have deserted, for while they are away it will be pretty sure to be filled by somebody else. A man returning from a residence of several years abroad has a sense of superfluity in his own country—he has become a mere supernumerary whose presence or absence makes no particular difference.

*Boyesen.* What year did you leave "The Nation" and assume the editorship of "The Atlantic"?

*Howells.* I took the editorship in 1872, but went to live in Cambridge six or seven years before. I was first assistant editor under James T. Fields, who was uniformly kind and considerate, and with whom I got along perfectly. It was a place that he could have made odious to me, but he made it delightful. I have the tenderest regard and the highest respect for his memory.

*Boyesen.* I need scarcely ask you if your association with Lowell was agreeable?

*Howells.* It was in every way charming. He was twenty years my senior, but he always treated me as an equal and a contemporary. And you know the difference between thirty and fifty is far greater than between forty and sixty, or fifty and seventy. I dined with him every week, and he showed the friendliest appreciation of the work I was trying to do. We took long



W. D. HOWELLS. FROM A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN AT CAMBRIDGE IN 1868.

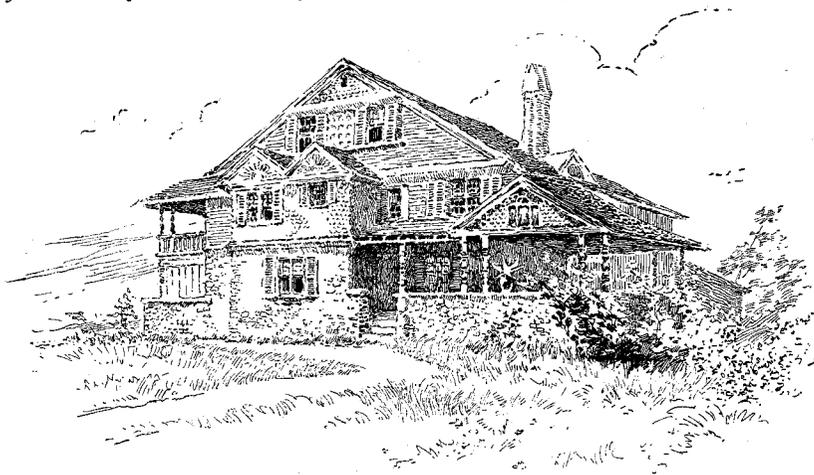
moments. I thought it was curious that other people to whom I showed the reviews did not seem much interested.

*Boyesen.* After returning to this country, did not you settle down in New York?

walks together; and you know what a rare talker he was. Somehow I got much nearer to him than to Longfellow. As a man, Longfellow was flawless. He was full of noble friendliness and encouragement to all literary workers in whom he believed.

*Boyesen.* Do you remember you once

low for not using a single one of those beautiful anecdotes I sent him illustrative of the warmer and more genial side of the poet's character. He evidently wanted to portray a Plutarchian man of heroic size, and he therefore had to exclude all that was subtly individualizing.



W. D. HOWELLS' SUMMER HOME AT BELMONT IN 1878.

said to me that he was a most inveterate praiser?

*Howells.* I may have said that; for in the kindness of his heart, and his constitutional reluctance to give pain, he did undoubtedly often strain a point or two in speaking well of things. But that was part of his beautiful kindness of soul and admirable urbanity. Lowell, you know, confessed to being "a tory in his nerves;" but Longfellow, with all his stateliness of manner, was nobly and perfectly democratic. He was ideally good; I think he was without a fault.

*Boyesen.* I have never known a man who was more completely free from snobbishness and pretence of all kinds. It delighted him to go out of his way to do a man a favor. There was, however, a little touch of Puritan pallor in his temperament, a slight lack of robustness; that is, if his brother's biography can be trusted. What I mean to say is, that he appears there a trifle too perfect; too bloodlessly, and almost frostily, statuesque. I have always had a little diminutive grudge against the Reverend Samuel Longfel-

*Howells.* Well, there is always room for another biography of Longfellow.

*Boyesen.* At the time when I made your acquaintance in 1871, you were writing "Their Wedding Journey." Do you remember the glorious talks we had together while the hours of the night slipped away unnoticed? We have no more of those splendid conversational rages now-a-days. How eloquent we were, to be sure; and with what delight you read those chapters on "Niagara," "Quebec," and "The St. Lawrence;" and with what rapture I listened! I can never read them without supplying the cadence of your voice, and seeing you seated, twenty-two years younger than now, in that cosy little library in Berkeley Street.

*Howells.* Yes; and do you mind our sudden attacks of hunger, when we would start on a foraging expedition into the cellar, in the middle of the night, and return, you with a cheese and crackers, and I with a watermelon and a bottle of champagne? What jolly meals we improvised! Only it is a wonder to me that we survived them.

*Boyesen.* You will never suspect what

an influence you exerted upon my fate by your friendliness and sympathy in those never-to-be-forgotten days. You Americanized me. I had been an alien, and felt alien in every fibre of my soul, until I met you. Then I became do-

*Boyesen.* Yes; your small son "Bua" insisted upon calling him "Big Man Keeler" in spite of his small size.

*Howells.* Yes, Bua was the only one who ever saw Keeler life-size.

*Boyesen.* I remember how he sat in



THE AUTHOR OF "ANNIE KILBURN."

mesticated. I found a kindred spirit who understood me, and whom I understood; and that is the first and indispensable condition of happiness. It was at your house, at a luncheon, I think, that I met Henry James.

*Howells.* Yes; James and I were constant companions. We took daily walks together, and his father, the elder Henry James, was an incomparably delightful and interesting man.

*Boyesen.* Yes; I remember him well. I doubt if I ever heard a more brilliant talker.

*Howells.* No; he was one of the best talkers in America. And didn't the immortal Ralph Keeler appear upon the scene during the summer of '71 or '72?

your library and told stories of his negro minstrel days and his wild adventures in many climes, and did not care whether you laughed with him or at him, but would join you from sheer sympathy, and how we all laughed in chorus until our sides ached!

*Howells.* Poor Keeler! He was a sort of migratory, nomadic survival; but he had fine qualities, and was well equipped for a sort of fiction. If he had lived he might have written the great American novel. Who knows?

*Boyesen.* Was not it at Cambridge that Björnstjerne Björnson visited you?

*Howells.* No; that was in 1881, at Belmont, where we went in order to be in the country, and give the children

the benefit of country air. When I met Björnson before, we had always talked Italian; but the first thing he said to me at Belmont, was: "Now we will speak English." And when he had got into the house, he picked up a book and said in his abrupt way: "We do not put enough in;" meaning thereby, that we ignored too much of life in our fiction—excluded it out of regard for propriety. But when I met him, some years later, in Paris, he had changed his mind about that, for he detested the French naturalism, and could find nothing to praise in Zola.

*Boyesen.* I am going to ask you one of the interviewer's stock questions, but you need not answer, you know: Which of your books do you regard as the greatest?

*Howells.* I have always taken the most satisfaction in "A Modern Instance." I have there come closest to American life as I know it.

*Boyesen.* But in "Silas Lapham" it seems to me that you have got a still firmer grip on American reality.

*Howells.* Perhaps. Still I prefer "A

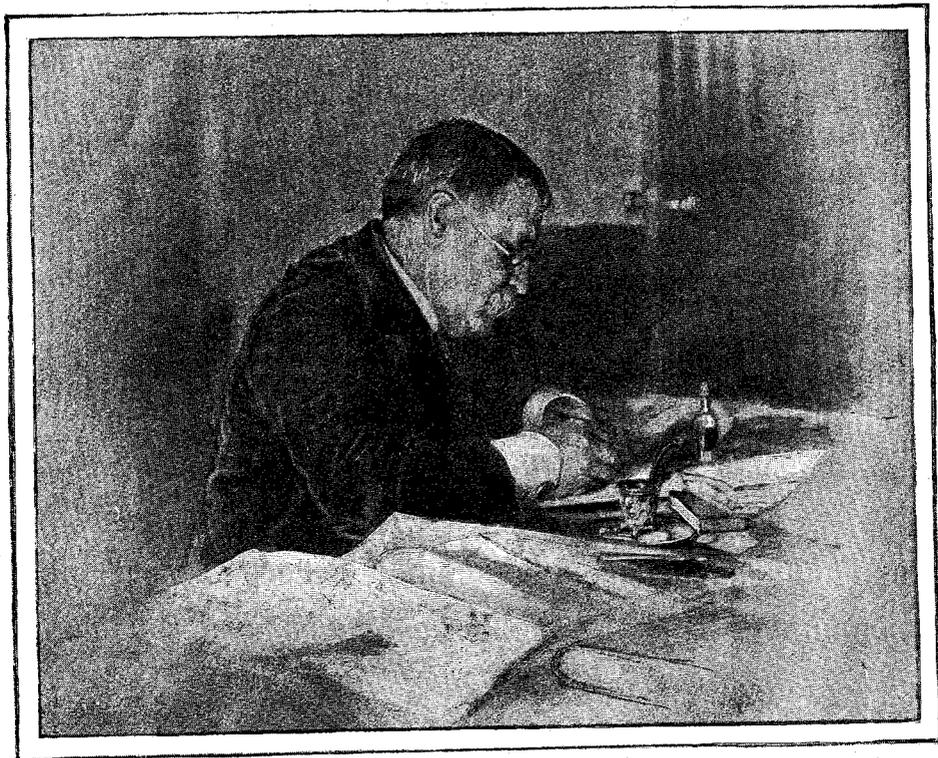
Modern Instance." "Silas Lapham" is the most successful novel I have published, except "A Hazard of New Fortunes," which has sold nearly twice as many copies as any of the rest.

*Boyesen.* What do you attribute that to?

*Howells.* Possibly to the fact that the scene is laid in New York; the public throughout the country is far more interested in New York than in Boston. New York, as Lowell once said, is a huge pudding, and every town and village has been helped to a slice, or wants to be.

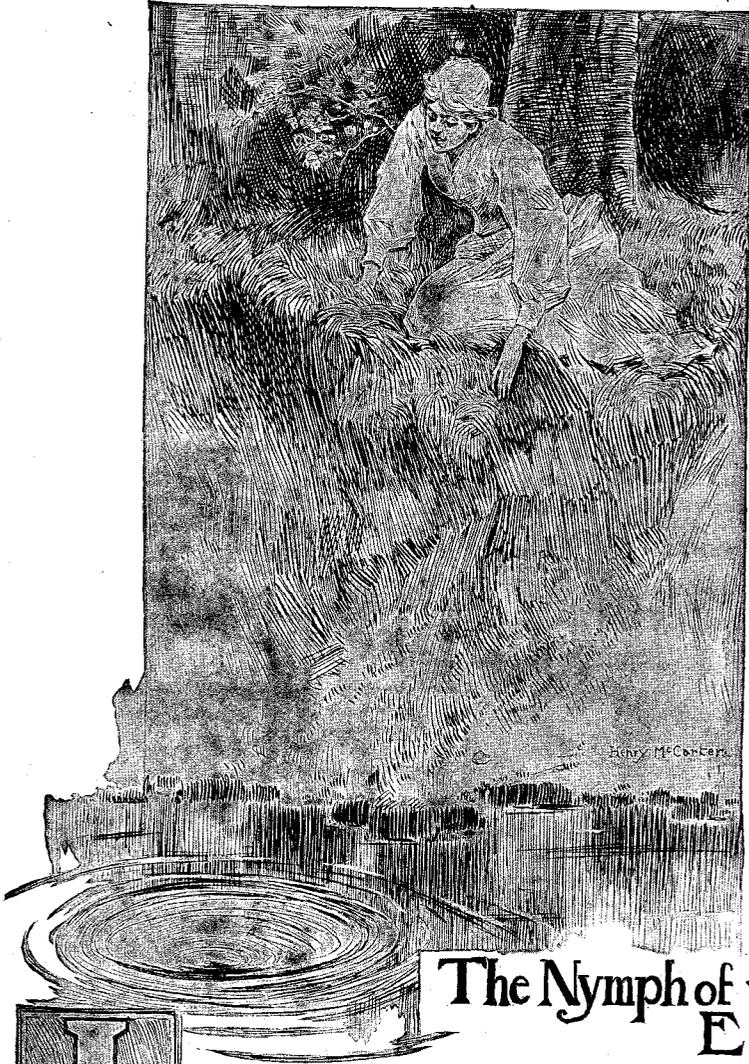
*Boyesen.* I rejoice that New York has found such a subtly appreciative and faithful chronicler as you show yourself to be in "A Hazard of New Fortunes." To the equipment of a great city—a world-city as the Germans say—belongs a great novelist; that is to say, at least one. And even though your modesty may rebel, I shall persist in regarding you henceforth as *the* novelist *par excellence* of New York.

*Howells.* Ah, you don't expect me to live up to *that* bit of taffy!



# PARABLES OF A PROVINCE.—I.

BY GILBERT PARKER.



## The Nymph of the Eddy.

**I**T lay in the sharp angle of a wooded shore near Pontiac. When the river was high it had all the temper of a maelstrom, but in the hot summer, when the logs had ceased to run, and the river wallowed idly away to the rapids, it was like a molten mirror which, with the regularity of a pulse, resolved itself into a funnel, as though somewhere beneath