

**AN OPEN-EYED
CONSPIRACY: AN IDYL
OF SARATOGA, PP. 3-181**

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An Open-Eyed Conspiracy: An Idyl of Saratoga, pp. 3-181 by W. D. Howells

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AN OPEN-EYED CONSPIRACY

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AN IDYL OF SARATOGA

BY

W. D. HOWELLS

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"THE COAST OF BOHEMIA" "APRIL HOPES"
"A HAZARD OF NEW FORTUNES" ETC.



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filthy little hands, with a frown of superior virtue, though I did not find her so very much cleaner herself. I cannot see children beaten without a heart-ache, and I continued to suffer for this small wretch even after he had avenged himself by eating a handful of peanut shells, which would be sure to disagree with him and make his mother more trouble. In fact, I experienced no relief till his mother, having spent her insensate passion, gathered him up with sufficient tenderness, and carried him away. Then, for the first time, I noticed a girl sitting in a chair just outside the kiosk, and showing a graceful young figure as she partly turned to look after the departing mother and her child. When she turned again and glanced in my direction, at the noise I made in placing my chair, I could see two things—that she had as much beauty as grace, and that she was disappointed in me. The latter fact did not wound me, for I felt its profound impersonality. I was not wrong in myself; I was simply wrong in being an elderly man with a gray beard instead of the handsome shape and phase of youth which her own young beauty had a right to in my place. I was not only not wounded, but I was not sorry not to be that shape and phase of youth, except as I hate to disappoint any one.

Her face was very beautiful; it was quite perfectly beautiful, and of such classic mould that she might well have been the tutelary goddess of that temple (if it was a temple, and not a kiosk), in the white duck costume which the goddesses were wearing that summer. Her features were Greek, but her looks were American; and she was none the less a goddess, I decided, because of that air of something exacting, of not quite satisfied, which made me more and more willing to be elderly and gray-bearded. I at least should not be expected to supply the worship necessary to keep such a goddess in good humor.

I do not know just how I can account for a strain of compassion which mingled with this sense of irresponsibility in me; perhaps it was my feeling of security that attuned me to pity; but certainly I did not look at this young girl long without beginning to grieve for her, and to weave about her a web of possibilities, which grew closer and firmer in texture when she was joined by a couple who had apparently not left her a great while before, and who spoke, without otherwise saluting her, as they sat down on either side of her. I instantly interpreted her friends to be the young wife and middle-aged husband of a second marriage; for they were evidently man and wife, and he

must have been nearly twice as old as she. In person he tended to the weight which expresses settled prosperity, and a certain solidification of temperament and character; as to his face, it was kind, and it was rather humorous, in spite of being a little slow in the cast of mind it suggested. He wore an iron-gray beard on his cheeks and chin, but he had his strong upper lip clean shaven; some drops of perspiration stood upon it, and upon his forehead, which showed itself well up toward his crown under the damp strings of his scanty hair. He looked at the young goddess in white duck with a sort of trouble in his friendly countenance, and his wife (if it was his wife) seemed to share his concern, though she smiled, while he let the corners of his straight mouth droop. She was smaller than the young girl, and I thought almost as young; and she had the air of being somehow responsible for her, and cowed by her, though the word says rather more than I mean. She was not so well dressed; that is, not so stylishly, though doubtless her costume was more expensive. It seemed the inspiration of a village dress-maker; and her husband's low-cut waistcoat, and his expanse of plaited shirt-front, betrayed a provincial ideal which she would never decry—which she would perhaps never find different from the most worldly.

He had probably, I swiftly imagined, been wearing just that kind of clothes for twenty years, and telling his tailor to make each new suit like the last; he had been buying for the same period the same shape of Panama hat, regardless of the continually changing type of straw hats on other heads. I cannot say just why, as he tilted his chair back on its hind-legs, I felt that he was either the cashier of the village bank at home, or one of the principal business men of the place. Village people I was quite resolute to have them all; but I left them free to have come from some small manufacturing centre in western Massachusetts or southern Vermont or central New York. It was easy to see that they were not in the habit of coming away from their place, wherever it was; and I wondered whether they were finding their account in the present excursion.

I myself think Saratoga one of the most delightful spectacles in the world, and Mrs. March is of the same mind about it. We like all the waters, and drink them without regard to their different properties; but we rather prefer the Congress spring, because it is such a pleasant place to listen to the Troy military band in the afternoon, and the more or less vocal concert in the evening. All the Saratoga world comes and goes

before us, as we sit there by day and by night, and we find a perpetual interest in it. We go and look at the deer (a herd of two, I think) behind their wire netting in the southward valley of the park, and we would feed the trout in their blue tank if we did not see them suffering with surfeit, and hanging in motionless misery amid the clear water under a cloud of bread crumbs. We are such devotees of the special attractions offered from time to time that we do not miss a single balloon ascension or pyrotechnic display. In fact, it happened to me one summer that I studied so earnestly and so closely the countenance of the lady who went up (in trunk-hose), in order to make out just what were the emotions of a lady who went up every afternoon in a balloon, that when we met near the end of the season in Broadway I thought I must have seen her somewhere in society, and took off my hat to her (she was not at the moment in trunk-hose). We like going about to the great hotels, and sponging on them for the music in the forenoon; we like the gaudy shops of modes kept by artists whose addresses are French and whose surnames are Irish; and the bazaars of the Armenians and Japanese, whose rugs and bric-à-brac are not such bargains as you would think. We even go to the races sometimes; we are not sure it is quite

right, but as we do not bet, and are never decided as to which horse has won, it is perhaps not so wrong as it might be.

Somehow I could not predicate these simple joys of the people I have been talking of, for the very reason that they were themselves so simple. It was our sophistication which enabled us to taste pleasures which would have been insipidities to them. Their palates would have demanded other flavors—social excitements, balls, flirtations, almost escapades. I speak of the two women; the man, doubtless, like most other Americans of his age, wanted nothing but to get back to business in the small town where he was important; and still more I speak of the young girl; for the young wife I fancied very willing to go back to her house-keeping, and to be staying on in Saratoga only on her friend's account.