

**AN OPEN-EYED
CONSPIRACY: AN
IDYL OF SARATOGA**

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An Open-Eyed Conspiracy: An Idyl of Saratoga by W. D. Howells

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BY

W. D. HOWELLS

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



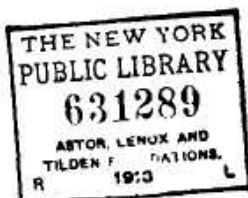
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AN OPEN-EYED CONSPIRACY:

A SARATOGA IDYL.

I.

THE day had been very hot under the tall trees which everywhere embower and stifle Saratoga, for they shut out the air as well as the sun; and after tea (they still have an early dinner at all the hotels in Saratoga, and tea is the last meal of the day) I strolled over to the pretty Congress Park, in the hope of getting a breath of coolness there. Mrs. March preferred to take the chances on the veranda of our pleasant little hotel, where I left her with the other ladies, forty fanning like one, as they looked to and fro under the roof lifted to the third story by those lofty shafts peculiar to the Saratoga architecture. As far as coolness was concerned I thought she was wise after I reached the park, for I found none of it there. I tried first a chair in the arabesque pavilion (I call it arabesque in despair; it might very well be Swiss; it is charming, at

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all events), and studied to deceive myself with the fresh-looking ebullition of the spring in the vast glass bowls your goblets are served from (people say it is pumped, and artificially aerated); but after a few moments this would not do, and I went out to a bench, of the rows beside the graveled walks. It was no better there; but I fancied it would be better on the little isle in the little lake, where the fountain was flinging a sheaf of spray into the dull air. This looked even cooler than the bubbling spring in the glass vases, and it sounded vastly cooler. There would be mosquitos there, of course, I admitted in the debate I had with myself before I decided to make experiment of the place, and the event proved me right. There were certainly some mosquitos in the Grecian temple (if it is not a Turkish kiosk; perhaps we had better compromise, and call it a Grecian kiosk), which you reach by a foot-bridge from the mainland, and there was a damp in the air, which might pass for coolness. There were three or four people standing vaguely about in the kiosk; but my idle mind fixed itself upon a young French-Canadian mother of low degree, who sat, with her small boy, on the verge of the pavement near the water. She scolded him in their parlance for having got himself so dirty, and then she smacked his poor,

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 deery—which she would perhaps never find different from the most worldly.