

**THE VACATION OF THE  
KELWYNS; AN  
IDYL OF THE MIDDLE  
EIGHTEEN-SEVENTIES**

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The Vacation of the Kelwyns; An Idyl of the Middle Eighteen-Seventies by William Dean Howells

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# THE VACATION OF THE KELWYNS

*An Idyl of the Middle  
Eighteen-Seventies*

By  
WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS



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THE VACATION OF THE KELWYNS



WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS



# THE VACATION OF THE KELWYNS

## AN IDYL OF THE MIDDLE EIGHTEEN-SEVENTIES

### I

KELWYN'S salary as a lecturer in the post-graduate courses would not have been enough for his family to live upon; but his wife had some money of her own, and this with his salary enabled them to maintain themselves upon the scale of refined frugality which was the rule in the university town, and to indulge, now and then, a guarded hospitality. Like the other university people, they spent their whole income on their living, except the sum which Kelwyn paid for his life insurance. They kept two maids, and had, in common with four other university families, the use of one undivided one-fifth of a man, who took care of their furnace and shovelled the snow off their paths in winter, and cut their grass in the spring and fall; in the summer when they were away they let the grass tangle at will.

Mrs. Kelwyn passed this season largely in a terror of moths, especially the hairy sort called buffalo-bugs, which began to introduce themselves by that name at the date of our story. In dreams and in many a fearful reverie she saw them gorging themselves upon her

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carpets and furniture and blankets and all her other woollens, and treating the camphor the things were put up in as an agreeable condiment. She was, in fact, a New England housekeeper of the most exacting sort, with a conscience that gave those she loved very little peace, in its manifold scruples, anxieties, and premonitions. She was so far in the divine confidence as to be able to prophesy events with much precision, especially disastrous events, and especially disastrous events which her husband thought would not come to pass. In this, as in other things, she was entirely devoted to him and to their children; to hear her talk you would suppose there was a multitude of them.

She pampered Kelwyn and flattered him, and she did what she could to make him believe that because he had, after many years as a post-graduate student, become a post-graduate lecturer, he was something different from other men, and merited attention from destiny. He was really a very well-read and careful scholar in his department of Historical Sociology, with no thought of applying his science to his own life or conduct. In person, he was not tall, but he was very straight; he carried himself with a sort of unintentional pomp, and walked with short, stiff steps. He was rather dim behind the spectacles he wore; but he was very pleasant when he spoke, and his mind was not as dry as his voice; when pushed to the wall he was capable of a joke; in fact, he had a good deal of ancestral Yankee humor which he commonly repressed, but which came out in the stress put upon him by his wife's requisitions in hypothetical cases of principle and practice. He suffered at times from indigestion; but he was indefatigably industrious, and had thought the blond hair thin on his head in places; he wore a reddish mustache. He was either not quite so tall as his wife, or he looked

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not quite so tall, because of her skirts, and her aquiline profile; she seemed always to have him in charge when they were together, which made him appear smaller still; they were both of about the same blondness, though hers tended rather more to dust color.

Kelwyn's father had been first a farm boy, and then a country merchant, who reserved him for an intellectual career; and his career since he first entered school had been as purely intellectual as if he had been detached from the soil by generations of culture and affluence. His associations had always been with nice people, in college and afterward; he liked that sort, and they liked him, for Kelwyn was a pleasant fellow, and was noticeably a gentleman, if not a gentleman by birth. In America society does not insist that one shall be a gentleman by birth; that is generally impossible; but it insists that he shall be intelligent and refined, and have the right sort of social instincts; and then it yields him an acceptance which ignores any embarrassing facts in his origin, and asks nothing but that he shall ignore them too. Kelwyn did this so completely that he never thought of them. His father and mother were now dead, and he had been an only child, so that he had not even a duty to the past. All his duties were to the present, and they were so agreeable that he could easily discharge them with conscience and credit. In a day when people were just beginning to look into sociology, and most people were still regarding it as the driest branch on the tree of knowledge, he made it one of the most important of the post-graduate courses at the university. The students liked him, and they took such a gratifying interest in their work under him that some of them had a habit, which he encouraged, of coming to talk with him about it at his house out of hours. He made them very welcome in his li-