

Howells William Dean

A Likely Story



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I

MR. AND MRS. WILLIS CAMPBELL

Mrs. Campbell: "Now this, I think, is the most exciting part of the whole affair, and the pleasantest." She is seated at breakfast in her cottage at Summering-by-the-Sea. A heap of letters of various stylish shapes, colors, and superscriptions lies beside her plate, and irregularly straggles about among the coffee-service. Vis-à-vis with her sits Mr. Campbell behind a newspaper. "How prompt they are! Why, I didn't expect to get half so many answers yet. But that shows that where people have nothing to do *but* attend to their social duties they are always prompt – even the men; women, of course, reply early anyway, and you don't really care for them; but in town the men seem to put it off till the very last moment, and then some of them call when it's over to excuse themselves for not having come after accepting. It really makes you wish for a leisure class. It's only the drive and hurry of American life that make our men seem wanting in the *convenances*; and if they had the time, with their instinctive delicacy, they would be perfect: it would come from the heart:

they're more truly polite now. Willis, just *look* at this!"

Campbell, behind his paper: "Look at what?"

Mrs. Campbell: "These replies. Why, I do believe that more than half the people have answered already, and the invitations only went out yesterday. That comes from putting on R.S.V.P. I knew I was right, and I shall always do it, I don't care what *you* say."

Campbell: "You didn't put on R.S.V.P. after all I said?" He looks round the edge of his paper at her.

Mrs. Campbell: "*Yes*, I did. The idea of your setting up for an authority in such a thing as that!"

Campbell: "Then I'm sorry I didn't ask you to do it. It's a shame to make people say whether they'll come to a garden-party from four till seven or not."

Mrs. Campbell: "A shame? How can you provide if you don't know how many are coming? I should like to know that. But of course I couldn't expect you to give in gracefully."

Campbell: "I should give in gracefully if I gave in at all, but I don't." He throws his paper down beside his chair. "Here, hand over the letters, and I'll be opening them for you while you pour out the coffee."

Mrs. Campbell, covering the letters with her hands: "Indeed you won't!"

Campbell: "Well, pour out the coffee, then, anyway."

Mrs. Campbell, after a moment's reflection: "No, I shall not do it. I'm going to open them every one before you get a drop of

coffee – just to punish you."

Campbell: "To punish me? For what?" Mrs. Campbell hesitates, as if at a loss what to say. "There! you don't know."

Mrs. Campbell: "Yes, I do: for saying I oughtn't to have put on R.S.V.P. Do you take it back?"

Campbell: "How can I till I've had some coffee? My mind won't work on an empty stomach. Well – " He rises and goes round the table towards her.

Mrs. Campbell, spreading both arms over the letters: "Willis, if you dare to touch them, I'll ring for Jane, and then she'll see you cutting up."

Campbell: "Touch what? I'm coming to get some coffee."

Mrs. Campbell: "Well, I'll give you some coffee; but don't you touch a single one of those letters – after what you've said."

Campbell: "All right!" He extends one hand for the coffee, and with the other sweeps all the letters together, and starts back to his place. As she flies upon him, "Look out, Amy; you'll make me spill this coffee all over the table-cloth."

Mrs. Campbell, sinking into her seat: "Oh, Willis, how can you be so base? *Give* me my letters. *Do!*"

Campbell, sorting them over: "You may have half."

Mrs. Campbell: "No; I shall have all. I insist upon it."

Campbell: "Well, then, you may have all the ladies' letters. There are twice as many of them."

Mrs. Campbell: "No; I shall have the men's, too. Give me the men's first."

Campbell: "How can I tell which are the men's without opening them?"

Mrs. Campbell: "How could you tell which were the ladies'? Come, now, Willis, don't tease me any longer. You know I hate it."

Campbell, studying the superscriptions, one after another: "I want to see if I can guess who wrote them. Don't you like to guess who wrote your letters before you open them?"

Mrs. Campbell, with dignity: "I don't like to guess who wrote other people's letters." She looks down at the table-cloth with a menace of tears, and Campbell instantly returns all the notes.

Campbell: "There, Amy; you may have them. I don't care who wrote them, nor what's in them. And I don't want you to interrupt me with any exclamations over them, if you please." He reaches to the floor for his newspaper, and while he sips his coffee, Mrs. Campbell loses no time in opening her letters.

Mrs. Campbell: "I shall do nothing *but* exclaim. The Curwens accept, of course – the very first letter. That means Mrs. Curwen; that is one, at any rate. The New York Addingses do, and the Philadelphia Addingses don't; I hardly expected they would, so soon after their aunt's death, but I thought I ought to ask them. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, naturally; it was more a joke than anything, sending their invitation. Mrs. and the Misses Carver regret very much; well, *I* don't. Professor and Mrs. Traine are very happy, and so am I; he doesn't go everywhere, and he's awfully nice. Mr. and Mrs. Lou Bemis are very happy, too, and

Dr. Lawton is very happy. Mrs. Bridges Dear Mrs. Campbells me, and is very sorry in the first person; she's always nice. Mr. Phillips, Mr. Rangeley, Mr. Small, Mr. Peters, Mr. Staples, Mr. Thornton, *all* accept, and they're all charming young fellows."

Campbell, around his paper: "Well, what of that?"

Mrs. Campbell, with an air of busy preoccupation: "Don't eavesdrop, please; I wasn't talking to you. The Merrills have the pleasure, and the Morgans are sorrow-stricken; the – "

Campbell: "Yes, but why should you care whether those fellows are charming or not? Who's going to marry them?"

Mrs. Campbell: "*I* am. Mrs. Stevenson is bowed to the earth; Colonel Murphree is overjoyed; the Misses Ja – "

Campbell, putting his paper down: "Look here, Amy. Do you know that you have one little infinitesimal ewe-lamb of a foible? You think too much of young men."

Mrs. Campbell: "*Younger* men, you mean. And *you* have a multitude of perfectly mammoth peccadilloes. You interrupt." She goes on opening and reading her letters. "Well, I didn't expect the Macklines *could*; but everybody seems to be coming."

Campbell: "You pay them too much attention altogether. It spoils them; and one of these days you'll be getting some of them in love with you, and *then* what will you do?"

Mrs. Campbell, with affected distraction: "What *are* you talking about? I'd refer them to you, and you could kill them. I suppose you killed lots of people in California. That's what you always gave me to understand." She goes on with her letters.

Campbell: "I never killed a single human being that I can remember; but there's no telling what I might do if I were provoked. Now, there's that young Welling. He's about here under my feet all the time; and he's got a way lately of coming in through the window from the piazza that's very intimate. He's a nice fellow enough, and sweet, as you say. I suppose he has talent, too, but I never heard that he had set any of the adjacent watercourses on fire; and I don't know that he could give the Apollo Belvedere many points in beauty and beat him."

Mrs. Campbell: "*I* do. Mrs. and Miss Rice accept, and her friend Miss Greenway, who's staying with her, and – yes! here's one from Mr. Welling! *Oh*, how glad I am! Willis, dearest, if I *could* be the means of bringing those two lovely young creatures together, I should be *so* happy! *Don't* you think, now, he *is* the most delicate-minded, truly refined, exquisitely modest young fellow that ever was?" She presses the unopened note to her corsage, and leans eagerly forward entreating a sympathetic acquiescence.

Campbell: "Well, as far as I can remember my own youth, no. But what does he say?"

Mrs. Campbell, regarding the letter: "I haven't looked yet. He writes the *most* characteristic hand, for a man, that I ever saw. And he has the divinest taste in perfumes! Oh, I wonder what *that* is? Like a memory – a regret." She presses it repeatedly to her pretty nose, in the endeavor to ascertain.

Campbell: "Oh, hello!"

Mrs. Campbell, laughing: "Willis, you *are* delightful. I should like to see you really jealous once."

Campbell: "You won't, as long as I know my own incomparable charm. But give me that letter, Amy, if you're not going to open it. I want to see whether Welling is going to come."

Mrs. Campbell, fondly: "Would you *really* like to open it? I've half a mind to let you, just for a reward."

Campbell: "Reward! What for?"

Mrs. Campbell: "Oh, I don't know. Being so nice."

Campbell: "That's something I can't help. It's no merit. Well, hand over the letter."

Mrs. Campbell: "I should have thought you'd insist on *my* opening it, after that."

Campbell: "Why?"

Mrs. Campbell: "To show your confidence."

Campbell: "When I haven't got any?"

Mrs. Campbell, tearing the note open: "Well, it's no use trying any sentiment with you, or any generosity either. You're always just the same; a teasing joke is your ideal. You can't imagine a woman's wanting to keep up a little romance all through; and a character like Mr. Welling's, who's all chivalry and delicacy and deference, is quite beyond you. That's the reason you're always sneering at him."

Campbell: "I'm not sneering at him, my dear. I'm only afraid Miss Rice isn't good enough for him."

Mrs. Campbell, instantly placated: "Well, she's the only girl

who's anywhere *near* it. I don't say she's faultless, but she has a great deal of character, and she's very practical; just the counterpart of his dreaminess; and she *is* very, *very* good-looking, don't you think?"

Campbell: "Her bang isn't so nice as his."

Mrs. Campbell: "No; and aren't his eyes beautiful? And that high, serious look! And his nose and chin are perfectly divine. He looks like a young god!"

Campbell: "I dare say; though I never saw an old one. Well, is he coming? I'm not jealous, but I'm impatient. Read it out loud."

Mrs. Campbell, sinking back in her chair for the more luxurious perusal of the note: "Indeed I shall not." She opens it and runs it hastily through, with various little starts, stares, frowns, smiles of arrested development, laughs, and cries: "Why – why! What does it mean? Is he crazy? Why, there's some mistake. No! It's his hand – and here's his name. I can't make it out." She reads it again and again. "Why, it's perfectly bewildering! Why, there must be some mistake. He couldn't have meant it. Could he have imagined? Could he have dared? There never has been the slightest thing that could be tortured into – But of course not. And Mr. Welling, of all men! Oh, I can't understand it! Oh, Willis, Willis, Willis! What *does*

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