

Howells William Dean

Five O'Clock Tea: Farce



William Howells
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I

MRS. SOMERS; MR. WILLIS CAMPBELL

MRS. Amy Somers, in a lightly floating tea-gown of singularly becoming texture and color, employs the last moments of expectance before the arrival of her guests in marching up and down in front of the mirror which fills the space between the long windows of her drawing-room, looking over either shoulder for different effects of the drifting and eddying train, and advancing upon her image with certain little bobs and bows, and retreating from it with a variety of fan practice and elaborated courtesies, finally degenerating into burlesque, and a series of grimaces and "mouths" made at the responsive reflex. In the fascination of this amusement she is first ignorant, and then aware, of the presence of Mr. Willis Campbell, who on the landing space between the drawing-room and the library stands, hat in hand, in the pleased contemplation of Mrs. Somers's manœuvres and contortions as the mirror reports them to him. Mrs. Somers does not permit herself the slightest start on seeing him in the glass,

but turns deliberately away, having taken time to prepare the air of gratification and surprise with which she greets him at half the length of the drawing-room.

Mrs. Somers, giving her hand: "Why, Mr. Campbell! How very nice of you! How long have you been prowling about there on the landing? So stupid of them not to have turned up the gas!"

Campbell: "I wasn't much incommoded. That sort of pitch-darkness is rather becoming to my style of beauty, I find. The only objection was that I couldn't see you."

Mrs. Somers: "Do you often make those pretty speeches?"

Campbell: "When I can found them on fact."

Mrs. Somers: "What can I say back? Oh! That I'm sorry I couldn't have met you when you were looking your best."

Campbell: "Um! Do you think you could have borne it? We might go out there."

Mrs. Somers: "On second thoughts, no. I shall ring to have them turn up the gas."

Campbell: "No; let me." He prevents her ringing, and going out into the space between the library and drawing-room, stands with his hand on the key of the gas-burner. "Now how do I look?"

Mrs. Somers: "Beautiful."

Campbell, turning up the gas: "And now?"

Mrs. Somers: "Not *half* so well. Decidedly pitch-darkness is becoming to you. Better turn it down again."

Campbell, rejoining her in the drawing-room: "No; it isn't so becoming to you; and I'm not envious, whatever I am."

Mrs. Somers: "You are generosity itself."

Campbell: "If you come to phrases, I prefer magnanimity."

Mrs. Somers: "Well, *say* magnanimity. Won't you sit down – while you have the opportunity?" She sinks upon the sofa, and indicates with her fan an easy-chair at one end of it.

Campbell, dropping into it: "Are there going to be so many?"

Mrs. Somers: "You never can tell about five o'clock tea. There mayn't be more than half a dozen; there may be thirty or forty. But I wished to affect your imagination."

Campbell: "You had better have tried it in some other kind of weather. It's snowing like – "

Mrs. Somers, running to the window, and peeping out through the side of the curtain: "It is! like – cats and dogs!"

Campbell: "Oh no! You can't say that! It only rains that way. I was going to say it myself, but I stopped in time."

Mrs. Somers, standing before the window with clasped hands: "No matter! There will simply be nobody but bores. *They* come in any sort of weather."

Campbell: "Thank you, Mrs. Somers. I'm glad I ventured out."

Mrs. Somers, turning about: "What?" Then realizing the situation: "Oh, *poor* Mr. Campbell!"

Campbell: "Oh, don't mind *me*! I can stand it if you can. I belong to a sex, thank you, that doesn't pretend to have any tact. I would just as soon tell a man he was a bore as not. But I thought it might worry a lady, perhaps."

Mrs. Somers: "Worry? I'm simply aghast at it. Did you ever

hear of anything worse?"

Campbell: "Well, not much worse."

Mrs. Somers: "What can I do to make you forget it?"

Campbell: "I can't think of anything. It seems to me that I shall always remember it as the most fortunate speech a lady ever made to me – and they have said some flattering things to me in my time."

Mrs. Somers: "Oh, don't be entirely heartless. Wouldn't a cup of tea blot it out? With a Peak & Freat?" She advances beseechingly upon him. "Come, I will give you a cup at once."

Campbell: "No, thank you; I would rather have it with the rest of the bores. They'll be sure to come."

Mrs. Somers, resuming her seat on the sofa: "You are implacable. And I thought you said you were generous."

Campbell: "No; merely magnanimous. I can't forget your cruel frankness; but I know *you* can, and I ask you to do it." He throws himself back in his chair with a sigh. "And who knows? Perhaps you were right."

Mrs. Somers: "About what?"

Campbell: "My being a bore."

Mrs. Somers: "I should think *you* would know."

Campbell: "No; that's the difficulty. Nobody would be a bore if he knew it."

Mrs. Somers: "Oh, *some* would, I think."

Campbell: "Do you mean me?"

Mrs. Somers: "Well, no, then. I don't believe you would be a

bore, if you knew it. Is that enough? or do you expect me to say something more?"

Campbell: "No, it's quite enough, thank you." He remains pensively silent.

Mrs. Somers, after waiting for him to speak: "Bores for bores, don't you hate the silent ones most?"

Campbell, desperately rousing himself: "Mrs. Somers, if you only knew how disagreeable I was going to make myself just before I concluded to hold my tongue!"

Mrs. Somers: "Really? What were you going to say?"

Campbell: "Do you actually wish to know?"

Mrs. Somers: "Oh no; I only thought you wished to tell."

Campbell: "Not at all. You complained of my being silent."

Mrs. Somers: "Did I? I was wrong. I will never do so again." She laughs in her fan.

Campbell: "And I complain of your delay. You can tell me now, just as well as two weeks hence, whether you love me enough to marry me or not."

Mrs. Somers: "You promised not to recur to that subject without some hint from me. You have broken your promise."

Campbell: "Well, you wouldn't give me any hint."

Mrs. Somers: "How can I believe you care for me if you are false in this?"

Campbell: "It seems to me that my falsehood is another proof of my affection."

Mrs. Somers: "Very well, then; you can wait till I know my

mind."

Campbell: "I'd rather know your heart. But I'll wait." After a pause: "Why do you carry a fan on a day like this? I ask, to make general conversation."

Mrs. Somers, spreading the fan in her lap, and looking at it curiously: "I don't know." After a moment: "Oh yes; for the same reason that I shall have ice-cream after dinner to-day."

Campbell: "That's no reason at all." After a moment: "Are you going to have ice-cream to-day after dinner?"

Mrs. Somers: "I might. If I had company."

Campbell: "Oh, I couldn't stay after hinting. I'm too proud for that." He pulls his chair nearer and joins her in examining the fan in her lap. "What is so very strange about your fan?"

Mrs. Somers: "Nothing. I was just seeing how a fan looked that was the subject of gratuitous criticism."

Campbell: "I didn't criticise the *fan*." He regards it studiously.

Mrs. Somers: "Oh! *Not* the fan?"

Campbell: "No; I think it's extremely pretty. I like big fans."

Mrs. Somers: "So good of you! It's Spanish. That's why it's so large."

Campbell: "It's hand-painted, too."

Mrs. Somers, leaning back, and leaving him to the inspection of the fan: "You're a connoisseur, Mr. Campbell."

Campbell: "Oh, I can tell hand-painting from machine-painting when I see it. 'Tisn't so good."

Mrs. Somers: "Thank you."

Campbell: "Not at all. Now, that fellow – cavalier, I suppose, in Spain – making love in that attitude, you can see at a glance that *he's*

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