

Howells William Dean

Evening Dress



William Howells

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Evening Dress Farce

I

Mrs. Edward Roberts: "Now, my dear, Amy and I will get there early, so as to make up for your coming a little late, but you *must* be there for the last half, at least. I would excuse you altogether if I could, for I know you must be dead tired, up all night, that way, on the train, but Mrs. Miller is one of those people who never *can* listen to reason, and she would take deadly offence if you missed her musicale, and wouldn't forgive us the longest day she lived. So you see?" Mrs. Roberts addresses herself to her husband in the library of their apartment in Hotel Bellingham, at Boston, as she stands before the fire pulling on a long glove and looking at him across his desk, where he has sunk into a weary heap in his swivel chair. "You *are* dreadfully used up, Edward, and I think it's cruel to make you go out; but what can I do? If it was anybody but Mrs. Miller I wouldn't *think* of having you go; I'm sure I never want to have her about, anyway. But that's just the kind of people that you're a perfect slave to! Now, dear, I've let the two girls go out, and you must remember that you're in the place alone with the children; but you needn't be troubled, because nobody will come after this hour till Willis does, and the girls will be back before that. Willis is to come and get you on his way to the Millers', and it's all been arranged for you, and you needn't think of a thing till Willis comes. You'll have to dress, of course; but you needn't begin that at once, and you can just sit here in your chair and rest." Mr. Roberts stretches his arms wildly abroad, and, throwing back his head, permits himself a yawn that eclipses his whole face. Mrs. Roberts lets both her arms fall at her side in token of extreme despair. "Edward! If you *should* go to sleep!"

Roberts, pulling himself together, with a gigantic effort: "No, no! You needn't be afraid, my dear. But, oh! what *wouldn't* I give for a chance to!"

Mrs. Roberts, who sinks into a chair and regards the unhappy man with a look of tender compassion: "You poor thing, I've almost a mind to *let* you!"

Roberts, heroically: "No, it wouldn't do, Agnes. I must – ow, ugh, ow – go. Ugh, ow, ugh!" He abandons himself to a succession of abysmal yawns, in which the sequence of his ideas is altogether lost.

Mrs. Roberts: "Well, then, I shall have to trust you." She gathers her train up for departure, and moves slowly towards the door. "I don't think I've forgotten anything. Let me see: fan, handkerchief, both gloves; pins, because you're never sure that they've put enough, and you don't know where you'll come apart; head scarf, yes, I've got that *on*; fur boots, I've got *them* on. I really believe I'm all here. But I shouldn't be, Edward, if it were not for the system I put into everything; and I do wish, dear, that you'd try it once, just to please me!"

Roberts, very drowsily: "Try what, Agnes?"

Mrs. Roberts: "Why, getting what you have to do by heart, and repeating it over. If you could *only* bring yourself to say: *Both girls out; me alone with the children; Willis at ten; mustn't go to sleep; last half, anyway; Mrs. Miller awfully angry.* There! If you could say that after me, I could go feeling so *much* easier! Won't you do it, Edward? I know it has a ridiculous sound, but – "

Roberts, yawning: "How am I to dress?"

Mrs. Roberts: "Edward! Well, I always *will* say that you're perfectly inspired! To think of my forgetting the most important thing, after all! Oh, I do believe there *is* an overruling Providence, I don't *care* what the agnostics pretend. Why, it's to be evening dress for the men, of course! Mrs. Miller would do it to be different from Mrs. Curwen, who let you come in your cutaways, even if it

wasn't the regular thing; and she's gone around ever since saying it was the most rowdy, Bohemian thing she ever heard of, and she might as well have had beer, at once."

Roberts: "Who?"

Mrs. Roberts: "Why, Mrs. Miller."

Roberts: "Mrs. Miller going to have beer?"

Mrs. Roberts: "Oh, Edward, I don't see how you *can* be so – But there! I won't blame you, dearest. I know you're just literally expiring for want of sleep, and it seems to me I must be the cruellest thing in the world to make you go. And if you'll say the word, I'll smash off a note now at the eleventh hour – though it's two hours of eleven yet! – and just *tell* Mrs. Miller that you've got home down sick, and I've had to stay and take care of you. Will you?"

Roberts: "Oh no, Agnes. It wouldn't be the truth."

Mrs. Roberts, in a rapture of admiration and affection: "Oh, who *cares* for the truth in such a cause, you poor heroic angel, you? Well, if you insist upon going, I suppose we must; and now the only way is for you to keep everything clearly in mind. You'd better say it over backward, now, and begin with evening dress, because that's the most important. Now! *Evening dress; Mrs. Miller awfully angry; last half, anyway; mustn't go to sleep; Willis at ten; me alone with the children; both girls out.* Now, do you think – Ow – e – e – e!" A ring at the door extorts a shriek from Mrs. Roberts, who simultaneously gathers her robes about her, in order to fall with decency in the event of burglars or fire, while her husband rises and goes to open the apartment door. "Who can it be, at this hour? Oh! Amy!"

Mrs. Willis Campbell, in the doorway: "Oh, Amy, indeed! How d' y' do, Edward! Glad to see you back alive, and just in time for Agnes to kill you with Mrs. Miller's musicale. May I ask, Agnes, how long you expected me to freeze to death down in that coupé before you came?"

Mrs. Roberts: "Oh, Amy, dear, you must forgive me! I was just staying to give Edward his charges – you know he's so terribly forgetful – and I forgot all about you!"

Mrs. Campbell: "Then I wish, the next time, he'd give *you* some charges, my dear. But come, now, do! We shall be rather late, anyway, and that simpleton will be perfectly furious."

Mrs. Roberts: "Yes, that's just what I was saying to Edward. She'll never forgive you. If it was anybody else, I shouldn't think of dragging him out to-night."

Mrs. Campbell: "The worst of a bore like her is that she's sure to come to all *your* things, and you can't get off from *one* of hers. Willis declares he's going to strike, and I couldn't have got him out to-night if I hadn't told him you were going to make Edward go."

Mrs. Roberts: "Oh, isn't it perfectly wicked, Amy! I know he's just going to have the grippe. See how drowsy he is! That's one of the first symptoms."

Mrs. Campbell: "It's one of the symptoms of having passed the night on a sleeping-car, too."

Mrs. Roberts: "That's true, and thank you, Amy. I forgot all about that. But now, Edward, dear, you *will* remember, won't you? If I could only stay with you – "

Roberts, who has been drowsily drooping in his chair during the exchange of these ideas between the ladies: "Oh, I'm all right, Agnes. Or – ow, ugh, ow! – I should be if I had a cup of tea."

Mrs. Roberts: "There! I *knew* it. If I had been worth anything at all as a wife I should have had you a cup of tea long ago. Oh, how heartless! And I've let both the girls go, and the fire's all out in the range, anyway. But I'll go and start it with my own hands – "

Mrs. Campbell: "In those gloves! You're crazy, Agnes! Edward, I'll tell you what Willis does, when he's out of sorts a little: he takes a taste of whiskey-and-water. He says nothing freshens him up like it."

Roberts: "That's a good idea."

Mrs. Roberts, bustling into the dining-room and reappearing with a tumbler and a decanter: "The very thing, Amy! And thank you *so* much. Trying to make Edward remember seems to put

everything out of my head! I might have thought of *whiskey*, though! If it's only loss of sleep, it will wake him up, and if it's grippe, it's the most nourishing thing in the world."

Roberts: "I'm not going to have the grippe, Agnes."

Mrs. Roberts: "Edward! Don't boast! You may be stricken down in an instant. I heard of one person who was taken so suddenly she hadn't time to get her things off, and tumbled right on the bed. You must put some water in it, of course; and hot water is very soothing. You can use some out of the pipes; it's perfectly good."

Mrs. Campbell: "Agnes, are you *never* coming?"

Roberts: "Yes, go along, Agnes, do! I shall get on quite well, now. You needn't wait."

Mrs. Roberts: "Oh, if I could only stay and think *for* you, dearest! But I can't, and you must do the best you can. Do keep repeating it all over! It's the only way – "

Mrs. Campbell, from the door: "Agnes!"

Mrs. Roberts: "Amy, I'm coming instantly."

Mrs. Campbell: "I declare I shall go without you!"

Mrs. Roberts: "And I shouldn't blame you a bit, Amy! And *if* it turns out to be the grippe, Edward, don't lose an instant. Send for the doctor as fast as the district messenger can fly; give him his car fare, and let one come for me; and jump into bed and cover up warm, and keep up the nourishment with the whiskey; there's another bottle in the sideboard; and perhaps you'd better break a raw egg in it. I heard of one person that they gave three dozen raw eggs a day to in typhoid fever, and even *then* he died; so you must nourish yourself all you can. And – "

Mrs. Campbell: "Agnes! I'm going!"

Mrs. Roberts: "I'm coming! Edward!"

Roberts: "Well?"

Mrs. Roberts: "There is something else, very important. And I can't think of it!"

Roberts: "Liebig's extract of beef?"

Mrs. Roberts, distractedly: "No, no! And it wasn't oysters, either, though they're very nourishing, too. Oh, dear! What – "

Mrs. Campbell: "Going, Agnes!"

Mrs. Roberts: "Coming, Amy! Try to think of something else that I ought to remember, Edward!"

Roberts: "Some word to the girls when they come in?"

Mrs. Roberts: "No!"

Roberts: "About the children, something?"

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