



Howells

Novels 1886–1888

The Minister's Charge
April Hopes
Annie Kilburn

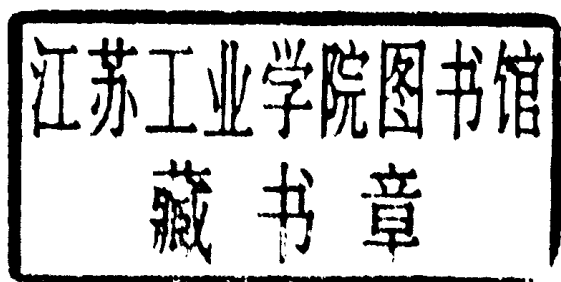
WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

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Annie Kilburn



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THE MINISTER'S CHARGE

or

The Apprenticeship of Lemuel Barker

I

ON THEIR WAY BACK to the farm-house where they were boarding, Sewell's wife reproached him for what she called his recklessness. "You had no right," she said, "to give the poor boy false hopes. You ought to have discouraged him—that would have been the most merciful way—if you knew the poetry was bad. Now, he will go on building all sorts of castles in the air on your praise, and sooner or later they will come tumbling about his ears—just to gratify your passion for saying pleasant things to people."

"I wish you had a passion for saying pleasant things to me, my dear," suggested her husband evasively.

"Oh, a nice time I should have!"

"I don't know about *your* nice time, but I feel pretty certain of my own. How do you know— Oh, *do* get up, you implacable cripple!" he broke off to the lame mare he was driving, and pulled at the reins.

"Don't saw her mouth!" cried Mrs. Sewell.

"Well, let her get up, then, and I won't. I don't like to saw her mouth; but I have to do something when you come down on me with your interminable consequences. I dare say the boy will never think of my praise again. And besides, as I was saying when this animal interrupted me with her ill-timed attempts at grazing, how do you know that I knew the poetry was bad?"

"How? By the sound of your voice. I could tell you were dishonest in the dark, David."

"Perhaps the boy knew that I was dishonest too," suggested Sewell.

"Oh, no, he didn't. I could see that he pinned his faith to every syllable."

"He used a quantity of pins, then; for I was particularly profuse of syllables. I find that it requires no end of them to make the worse appear the better reason to a poet who reads his own verses to you. But come, now, Lucy, let me off a syllable or two. I—I have a conscience, you know well enough, and if I thought— But pshaw! I've merely cheered a

lonely hour for the boy, and he'll go back to hoeing potatoes to-morrow, and that will be the end of it."

"I *hope* that will be the end of it," said Mrs. Sewell, with the darkling reserve of ladies intimate with the designs of Providence.

"Well," argued her husband, who was trying to keep the matter from being serious, "perhaps he may turn out a poet yet. You never can tell where the lightning is going to strike. He has some idea of rhyme, and some perception of reason, and—yes, some of the lines *were* musical. His general attitude reminded me of Piers Plowman. Didn't he recall Piers Plowman to you?"

"I'm glad you can console yourself in that way, David," said his wife relentlessly.

The mare stopped again, and Sewell looked over his shoulder at the house, now black in the twilight, on the crest of the low hill across the hollow behind them. "I declare," he said, "the loneliness of that place almost broke my heart. There!" he added, as the faint sickle gleamed in the sky above the roof, "I've got the new moon right over my left shoulder for my pains. That's what comes of having a sympathetic nature."

The boy was looking at the new moon, across the broken gate which stopped the largest gap in the tumbled stone wall. He still gripped in his hand the manuscript which he had been reading to the minister.

"There, Lem," called his mother's voice from the house, "I guess you've seen the last of 'em for one while. I'm 'fraid you'll take cold out there'n the dew. Come in, child."

The boy obeyed. "I was looking at the new moon, mother. I saw it over my right shoulder. Did you hear—hear him," he asked in a broken and husky voice,—“hear how he praised my poetry, mother?"

"Oh, *do* make her get up, David!" cried Mrs. Sewell. "These mosquitoes are eating me alive!"

"I will saw her mouth all to the finest sort of kindling-wood, if she doesn't get up this very instant," said Sewell, jerking the reins so wildly that the mare leaped into a galvanic canter, and continued without further urging for twenty

paces. "Of course, Lucy," he resumed, profiting by the opportunity for conversation which the mare's temporary activity afforded, "I should feel myself greatly to blame if I thought I had gone beyond mere kindness in my treatment of the poor fellow. But at first I couldn't realize that the stuff was so bad. Their saying that he read all the books he could get, and was writing every spare moment, gave me the idea that he *must* be some sort of literary genius in the germ, and I listened on and on, expecting every moment that he was coming to some passage with a little lift or life in it; and when he got to the end, and hadn't come to it, I couldn't quite pull myself together to say so. I had gone there so full of the wish to recognize and encourage, that I couldn't turn about for the other thing. Well! I shall know another time how to value a rural neighborhood report of the existence of a local poet. Usually there is some hardheaded cynic in the community with native perception enough to enlighten the rest as to the true value of the phenomenon; but there seems to have been none here. I ought to have come sooner to see him, and then I could have had a chance to go again and talk soberly and kindly with him, and show him gently how much he had mistaken himself. Oh, *get* up!" By this time the mare had lapsed again into her habitual absent-mindedness, and was limping along the dark road with a tendency to come to a full stop, from step to step. The remorse in the minister's soul was so keen that he could not use her with the cruelty necessary to rouse her flagging energies; as he held the reins he flapped his elbows up toward his face, as if they were wings, and contrived to beat away a few of the mosquitoes with them; Mrs. Sewell, in silent exasperation, fought them from her with the bough which she had torn from an overhanging birch-tree.

In the morning they returned to Boston, and Sewell's parish duties began again; he was rather faithfuller and busier in these than he might have been if he had not laid so much stress upon duties of all sorts, and so little upon beliefs. He declared that he envied the ministers of the good old times who had only to teach their people that they would be lost if they did not do right; it was much simpler than to make them understand that they were often to be good for reasons not immediately connected with their present or future comfort,

and that they could not confidently expect to be lost for any given transgression, or even to be lost at all. He found it necessary to do his work largely in a personal way, by meeting and talking with people, and this took up a great deal of his time, especially after the summer vacation, when he had to get into relations with them anew, and to help them recover themselves from the moral lassitude into which people fall during that season of physical recuperation.

He was occupied with these matters one morning late in October when a letter came addressed in a handwriting of copybook carefulness, but showing in every painstaking stroke the writer's want of training, which, when he read it, filled Sewell with dismay. It was a letter from Lemuel Barker, whom Sewell remembered, with a pang of self-upbraiding, as the poor fellow he had visited with his wife the evening before they left Willoughby Pastures; and it inclosed passages of a long poem which Barker said he had written since he got the fall work done. The passages were not submitted for Sewell's criticism, but were offered as examples of the character of the whole poem, for which the author wished to find a publisher. They were not without ideas of a didactic and satirical sort, but they seemed so wanting in literary art beyond a mechanical facility of versification, that Sewell wondered how the writer should have mastered the notion of anything so literary as publication, till he came to that part of the letter in which Barker spoke of their having had so much sickness in the family that he thought he would try to do something to help along. The avowal of this meritorious ambition inflicted another wound upon Sewell's guilty consciousness; but what made his blood run cold was Barker's proposal to come down to Boston, if Sewell advised, and find a publisher with Sewell's assistance.

This would never do, and the minister went to his desk with the intention of dispatching a note of prompt and total discouragement. But in crossing the room from the chair into which he had sunk, with a cheerful curiosity, to read the letter, he could not help some natural rebellion against the punishment visited upon him. He could not deny that he deserved punishment, but he thought that this, to say the least, was very ill-timed. He had often warned other sinners

who came to him in like resentment that it was this very quality of inopportuneness that was perhaps the most sanative and divine property of retribution; the eternal justice fell upon us, he said, at the very moment when we were least able to bear it, or thought ourselves so; but now in his own case the clear-sighted prophet cried out and revolted in his heart. It was Saturday morning, when every minute was precious to him for his sermon, and it would take him fully an hour to write that letter; it must be done with the greatest sympathy; he had seen that this poor foolish boy was very sensitive, and yet it must be done with such thoroughness as to cut off all hope of anything like literary achievement for him.

At the moment Sewell reached his desk, with a spirit disciplined to the sacrifice required of it, he heard his wife's step outside his study door, and he had just time to pull open a drawer, throw the letter into it, and shut it again before she entered. He did not mean finally to conceal it from her, but he was willing to give himself breath before he faced her with the fact that he had received such a letter. Nothing in its way was more terrible to this good man than the righteousness of that good woman. In their case, as in that of most other couples who cherish an ideal of dutiful living, she was the custodian of their potential virtue, and he was the instrument, often faltering and imperfect, of its application to circumstances; and without wishing to spare himself too much, he was sometimes aware that she did not spare him enough. She worked his moral forces as mercilessly as a woman uses the physical strength of a man when it is placed at her direction.

"What is the matter, David?" she asked, with a keen glance at the face he turned upon her over his shoulder.

"Nothing that I wish to talk of at present, my dear," answered Sewell, with a boldness that he knew would not avail him if she persisted in knowing.

"Well, there would be no time if you did," said his wife. "I'm dreadfully sorry for you, David, but it's really a case you can't refuse. Their own minister is taken sick, and it's appointed for this afternoon at two o'clock, and the poor thing has set her heart upon having you, and you must go. In fact, I promised you would. I'll see that you're not disturbed this morning, so that you'll have the whole forenoon to yourself.

But I thought I'd better tell you at once. It's only a child—a little boy. You won't have to say much."

"Oh, of course I must go," answered Sewell, with impatient resignation; and when his wife left the room, which she did after praising him and pitying him in a way that was always very sweet to him, he saw that he must begin his sermon at once, if he meant to get through with it in time, and must put off all hope of replying to Lemuel Barker till Monday at least. But he chose quite a different theme from that on which he had intended to preach. By an immediate inspiration he wrote a sermon on the text, "The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel," in which he taught how great harm could be done by the habit of saying what are called kind things. He showed that this habit arose not from goodness of heart, or from the desire to make others happy, but from the wish to spare one's self the troublesome duty of formulating the truth so that it would perform its heavenly office without wounding those whom it was intended to heal. He warned his hearers that the kind things spoken from this motive were so many sins committed against the soul of the flatterer and the soul of him they were intended to flatter; they were deceits, lies; and he besought all within the sound of his voice to try to practice with one another an affectionate sincerity, which was compatible not only with the brotherliness of Christianity, but the politeness of the world. He enforced his points with many apt illustrations, and he treated the whole subject with so much fullness and fervor, that he fell into the error of the literary temperament, and almost felt that he had atoned for his wrong-doing by the force with which he had portrayed it.

Mrs. Sewell, who did not always go to her husband's sermons, was at church that day, and joined him when some ladies who had lingered to thank him for the excellent lesson he had given them at last left him to her.

"Really, David," she said, "I wondered your congregation could keep their countenances while you were going on. Did you think of that poor boy up at Willoughby Pastures when you were writing that sermon?"

"Yes, my dear," replied Sewell gravely; "he was in my mind the whole time."

"Well, you were rather hard upon yourself; and I think I was rather too hard upon you, that time, though I *was* so vexed with you. But nothing has come of it, and I suppose there are cases where people are so lost to common sense that you can't do anything for them by telling them the truth."

"But you'd better tell it, all the same," said Sewell, still in a glow of righteous warmth from his atonement; and now a sudden temptation to play with fire seized him. "You wouldn't have excused me if any trouble had come of it."

"No, I certainly shouldn't," said his wife. "But I don't regret it altogether if it's made you see what danger you run from that tendency of yours. What in the world made you think of it?"

"Oh, it came into my mind," said Sewell.

He did not find time to write to Barker the next day, and on recurring to his letter he saw that there was no danger of his taking another step without his advice, and he began to postpone it: when he had time he was not in the mood; he waited for the time and the mood to come together, and he also waited for the most favorable moment to tell his wife that he had got that letter from Barker and to ask her advice about answering it. If it had been really a serious matter, he would have told her at once; but being the thing it was, he did not know just how to approach it, after his first concealment. He knew that, to begin with, he would have to account for his mistake in attempting to keep it from her, and would have to bear some just upbraiding for this unmanly course, and would then be miserably led to the distasteful contemplation of the folly by which he had brought this trouble upon himself. Sewell smiled to think how much easier it was to make one's peace with one's God than with one's wife; and before he had brought himself to the point of answering Barker's letter, there came a busy season in which he forgot him altogether.

II

ONE DAY in the midst of this Sewell was called from his study to see some one who was waiting for him in the reception-room, but who sent in no name by the housemaid.

"I don't know as you remember me," the visitor said, rising awkwardly, as Sewell came forward with a smile of inquiry. "My name's Barker."

"Barker?" said the minister, with a cold thrill of instant recognition, but playing with a factitious uncertainty till he could catch his breath in the presence of the calamity. "Oh, yes! How do you do?" he said; and then planting himself adventurously upon the commandment to love one's neighbor as one's self, he added: "I'm very glad to see you!"

In token of his content, he gave Barker his hand and asked him to be seated.

The young man complied, and while Sewell waited for him to present himself in some shape that he could grapple with morally, he made an involuntary study of his personal appearance. That morning, before starting from home by the milk-train that left Willoughby Pastures at 4:05, Barker had given his Sunday boots a coat of blacking, which he had eked out with stove-polish, and he had put on his best pantaloons, which he had outgrown, and which, having been made very tight a season after tight pantaloons had gone out of fashion in Boston, caught on the tops of his boots and stuck there in spite of his efforts to kick them loose as he stood up, and his secret attempts to smooth them down when he had reseated himself. He wore a single-breasted coat of cheap broadcloth, fastened across his chest with a carnelian clasp-button of his father's, such as country youth wore thirty years ago, and a belated summer scarf of gingham, tied in a breadth of knot long since abandoned by polite society.

Sewell had never thought his wife's reception-room very splendidly appointed, but Barker must have been oppressed by it, for he sat in absolute silence after resuming his chair, and made no sign of intending to open the matter upon which he came. In the kindness of his heart Sewell could not refrain from helping him on.

"When did you come to Boston?" he asked with a cheeriness which he was far from feeling.

"This morning," said Barker, briefly, but without the tremor in his voice which Sewell expected.

"You've never been here before, I suppose," suggested Sewell, with the vague intention of generalizing or particularizing the conversation, as the case might be.

Barker abruptly rejected the overture, whatever it was. "I don't know as you got a letter from me a spell back," he said.

"Yes, I did," confessed Sewell. "I did receive that letter," he repeated, "and I ought to have answered it long ago. But the fact is——" He corrected himself when it came to his saying this, and said, "I mean that I put it by, intending to answer it when I could do so in the proper way, until, I'm very sorry to say, I forgot it altogether. Yes, I forgot it, and I certainly ask your pardon for my neglect. But I can't say that as it's turned out I altogether regret it. I can talk with you a great deal better than I could write to you in regard to your"—Sewell hesitated between the words poems and verses, and finally said—"work. I have blamed myself a great deal," he continued, wincing under the hurt which he felt that he must be inflicting on the young man as well as himself, "for not being more frank with you when I saw you at home in September. I hope your mother is well?"

"She's middling," said Barker, "but my married sister that came to live with us since you was there has had a good deal of sickness in her family. Her husband's laid up with the rheumatism most of the time."

"Oh!" murmured Sewell sympathetically. "Well! I ought to have told you at that time that I could not see much hope of your doing acceptable work in a literary way; and if I had supposed that you ever expected to exercise your faculty of versifying to any serious purpose,—for anything but your own pleasure and entertainment,—I should certainly have done so. And I tell you now that the specimens of the long poem you have sent me give me even less reason to encourage you than the things you read me at home."

Sewell expected the audible crash of Barker's air-castles to break the silence which the young man suffered to follow upon these words; but nothing of the kind happened, and for