DR. BREEN'S PRACTICE

W. D. HOWELLS

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Dr. Breen's Practice, W. D. Howells
Jazzybee Verlag Jürgen Beck
86450 Altenmünster, Loschberg 9
Deutschland

ISBN: 9783849657376

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CONTENTS:

I.

Near the verge of a bold promontory stands the hotel, and looks southeastward over a sweep of sea unbroken to the horizon. Behind it stretches the vast forest, which after two hundred years has resumed the sterile coast wrested from it by the first Pilgrims, and has begun to efface the evidences of the inroad made in recent years by the bold speculator for whom Jocelyn's is named. The young birches and spruces are breast high in the drives and avenues at Jocelyn's; the low blackberry vines and the sweet fern cover the carefully-graded sidewalks, and obscure the divisions of the lots; the children of the boarders have found squawberries in the public square on the spot where the band-stand was to have been. The notion of a sea-side resort at this point was courageously conceived, and to a certain extent it was generously realized. Except for its remoteness from the railroad, a drawback which future enterprise might be expected to remedy in some way, the place has many natural advantages. The broad plateau is cooled by a breeze from the vast forests behind it, which comes laden with health and freshness from the young pines; the sea at its feet is warmed by the Gulf Stream to a temperature delicious for bathing. There are certainly mosquitoes from the woods; but there are mosquitoes everywhere, and the report that people have been driven away by them is manifestly untrue, for whoever comes to Jocelyn's remains. The beach at the foot of the bluff is almost a mile at its curve, and it is so smooth and hard that it glistens like polished marble when newly washed by the tide. It is true that you reach it from the top by a flight of eighty steps, but it was intended to have an elevator, like

those near the Whirlpool at Niagara. In the mean time it is easy enough to go down, and the ladies go down every day, taking their novels or their needle-work with them. They have various notions of a bath: some conceive that it is bathing to sit in the edge of the water, and emit shrieks as the surge sweeps against them; others run boldly in, and after a moment of poignant hesitation jump up and down half-a-dozen times, and run out; yet others imagine it better to remain immersed to the chin for a given space, looking toward the shore with lips tightly shut and the breath held. But after the bath they are all of one mind; they lay their shawls on the warm sand, and, spreading out their hair to dry, they doze in the sun, in such coils and masses as the unconscious figure lends itself to. When they rise from their beds, they sit in the shelter of the cliff and knit or sew, while one of them reads aloud, and another stands watch to announce the coming of the seals, which frequent a reef near the shore in great numbers. It has been said at rival points on the coast that the ladies linger there in despair of ever being able to remount to the hotel. A young man who clambered along the shore from one of those points reported finding day after day the same young lady stretched out on the same shawl, drying the same yellow hair, who had apparently never gone upstairs since the season began. But the recurrence of this phenomenon in this spot at the very moment when the young man came by might have been accounted for upon other theories. Jocelyn's was so secluded that she could not have expected any one to find her there twice, and if she had expected this she would not have permitted it. Probably he saw a different young lady each time.

Many of the same boarders come year after year, and these tremble at the suggestion of a change for the better in Jocelyn's. The landlord has always believed that Jocelyn's would come up, some day, when times got better. He believes that the narrow-gauge railroad from New Leyden

—arrested on paper at the disastrous moment when the fortunes of Jocelyn's felt the general crash—will be pushed through yet; and every summer he promises that next summer they are going to have a steam-launch running twice a day from Leyden Harbor. But at present his house is visited once a day by a barge, as the New England coast-folks call the vehicle in which they convey city boarders to and from the station, and the old frequenters of the place hope that the station will never be nearer Jocelyn's than at present. Some of them are rich enough to afford a sojourn at more fashionable resorts; but most of them are not, though they are often people of polite tastes and of aesthetic employments. They talk with slight of the large watering-places, and probably they would not like them, though it is really economy that inspires their passion for Jocelyn's with most of them, and they know of the splendid weariness of Newport mostly by hearsay. New arrivals are not favored, but there are not often new arrivals at Jocelyn's. The chief business of the barge is to bring fresh meat for the table and the gaunt bag which contains the mail; for in the first flush of the enterprise the place was made a post-office, and the landlord is postmaster; he has the help of the lady-boarders in his official duties.

Scattered about among the young birches there are several of those pine frames known as shells, within easy walk of the hotel, where their inmates board. They are picturesque interiors, and are on informal terms with the public as to many domestic details. The lady of the house, doing her back hair at her dressing-room glass, is divided from her husband, smoking at the parlor fire-place, only by a partition of unlathed studding. The arrest of development in these shells is characteristic of everything about the place. None of the improvements invented since the hard times began have been added to Jocelyn's; lawntennis is still unknown there; but there is a croquet-ground before the hotel, where the short, tough grass is kept in tolerable

order. The wickets are pretty rusty, and it is usually the children who play; but toward the close of a certain, afternoon a young lady was pushing the balls about there. She seemed to be going over a game just played, and trying to trace the cause of her failure. She made bad shots, and laughed at her blunders. Another young lady drooped languidly on a bench at the side of the croquet-ground, and followed her movements with indifference.

“I don't see how you did it, Louise,” panted the player; “it's astonishing how you beat me.”

The lady on the bench made as if to answer, but ended by coughing hoarsely.

“Oh, dear child!” cried the first, dropping her mallet, and running to her. “You ought to have put on your shawl!” She lifted the knit shawl lying beside her on the bench, and laid it across the other's shoulders, and drew it close about her neck.

“Oh, don't!” said the other. “It chokes me to be bundled up so tight.” She shrugged the shawl down to her shoulders with a pretty petulance. “If my chest's protected, that's all that's necessary.” But she made no motion to drape the outline which her neatly-fitted dress displayed, and she did not move from her place, or look up at her anxious friend.

“Oh, but don't sit here, Louise,” the latter pleaded, lingering near her. “I was wrong to let you sit down at all after you had got heated.”

“Well, Grace, I had to,” said she who was called Louise. “I was so tired out. I'm not going to take more cold. I can always tell when I am. I'll put on the shawl in half a minute; or else I'll go in.”

“I'm sure there's nothing to keep me out. That's the worst of these lonely places: my mind preys upon itself. That's what Dr. Nixon always said: he said it was no use in air so long as my mind preyed upon itself. He said that I ought to divert my mind all I could, and keep it from preying upon itself; that it was worth all the medicine in the world.”

“That's perfectly true.”

“Then you ought n't to keep reminding me all the time that I'm sick. That's what starts my mind to preying upon itself; and when it gets going once I can't stop it. I ought to treat myself just like a well person; that's what the doctor said.”

The other stood looking at the speaker in frowning perplexity. She was a serious-faced girl, and now when she frowned her black brows met sternly above her gray eyes. But she controlled any impulse she had to severity, and asked gently, “Shall I send Bella to you?”

“Oh, no! I can't make society out of a child the whole time. I'll just sit here till the barge comes in. I suppose it will be as empty as a gourd, as usual.” She added, with a sick and weary negligence, “I don't even know where Bella is. She's run off, somewhere.”

“It's quite time she should be looked up, for tea. I'll wander out that way and look for her.” She indicated the wilderness generally.

“Thanks,” said Louise. She now gratefully drew her shawl up over her shoulders, and faced about on the bench so as to command an easy view of the arriving barge. The other met it on her way to the place in the woods where the children usually played, and found it as empty as her friend had foreboded. But the driver stopped his horses, and leaned out of the side of the wagon with a little package in his hand. He read the superscription, and then glanced consciously at the girl. “You're Miss Breen, ain't you?”

“Yes,” she said, with lady-like sweetness and a sort of business-like alertness.

“Well,” suggested the driver, “this is for Miss Grace Breen, M. D.”

“For me, thank you,” said the young lady. “I'm Dr. Breen.” She put out her hand for the little package from the homoeopathic pharmacy in Boston; and the driver yielded it with a blush that reddened him to his hair. “Well,” he said

slowly, staring at the handsome girl, who did not visibly share his embarrassment, “they told me you was the one; but I could n't seem to get it through me. I thought it must be the old lady.”

“My mother is Mrs. Breen,” the young lady briefly explained, and walked rapidly away, leaving the driver stuck in the heavy sand of Sea-Glimpse Avenue.

“Why, get up!” he shouted to his horses. “Goin' to stay here all day?” He craned his neck round the side of the wagon for a sight of her. “Well, dumm 'f I don't wish I was sick! Steps along,” he mused, watching the swirl and ripple of her skirt, “like—I dunno what.”

With her face turned from him Dr. Breen blushed, too; she was not yet so used to her quality of physician that she could coldly bear the confusion to which her being a doctor put men. She laughed a little to herself at the helplessness of the driver, confronted probably for the first time with a graduate of the New York homoeopathic school; but she believed that she had reasons for taking herself seriously in every way, and she had not entered upon this career without definite purposes. When she was not yet out of her teens, she had an unhappy love affair, which was always darkly referred to as a disappointment by people who knew of it at the time. Though the particulars of the case do not directly concern this story, it may be stated that the recreant lover afterwards married her dearest girl-friend, whom he had first met in her company. It was cruel enough, and the hurt went deep; but it neither crushed nor hardened her. It benumbed her for a time; she sank out of sight; but when she returned to the knowledge of the world she showed no mark of the blow except what was thought a strange eccentricity in a girl such as she had been. The world which had known her—it was that of an inland New England city—heard of her definitely after several years as a student of medicine in New York. Those who had more of her intimacy understood that she had chosen this work

with the intention of giving her life to it, in the spirit in which other women enter convents, or go out to heathen lands; but probably this conception had its exaggerations. What was certain was that she was rich enough to have no need of her profession as a means of support, and that its study had cost her more than the usual suffering that it brings to persons of sensitive nerves. Some details were almost insuperably repugnant; but in schooling herself to them she believed that she was preparing to encounter anything in the application of her science.

Her first intention had been to go back to her own town after her graduation, and begin the practice of her profession among those who had always known her, and whose scrutiny and criticism would be hardest to bear, and therefore, as she fancied, the most useful to her in the formation of character. But afterwards she relinquished her purpose in favor of a design which she thought would be more useful to others: she planned going to one of the great factory towns, and beginning practice there, in company with an older physician, among the children of the operatives. Pending the completion of this arrangement, which was waiting upon the decision of the other lady, she had come to Jocelyn's with her mother, and with Mrs. Maynard, who had arrived from the West, aimlessly sick and unfriended, just as they were about leaving home. There was no resource but to invite her with them, and Dr. Breen was finding her first patient in this unexpected guest. She did not wholly regret the accident; this, too, was useful work, though not that she would have chosen; but her mother, after a fortnight, openly repined, and could not mention Mrs. Maynard without some rebellious murmur. She was an old lady, who had once kept a very vigilant conscience for herself; but after making her life unhappy with it for some threescore years, she now applied it entirely to the exasperation and condemnation of others. She especially devoted it to fretting a New England girl's

naturally morbid sense of duty in her daughter, and keeping it in the irritation of perpetual self-question. She had never actively opposed her studying medicine; that ambition had harmonized very well with certain radical tendencies of her own, and it was at least not marriage, which she had found tolerable only in its modified form of widowhood; but at every step after the decisive step was taken she was beset with misgivings lest Grace was not fully alive to the grave responsibilities of her office, which she accumulated upon the girl in proportion as she flung off all responsibilities of her own. She was doubtless deceived by that show of calm which sometimes deceived Grace herself, who, in tutoring her soul to bear what it had to bear, mistook her tense effort for spiritual repose, and scarcely realized through her tingling nerves the strain she was undergoing. In spite of the bitter experience of her life, she was still very ardent in her hopes of usefulness, very scornful of distress or discomfort to herself, and a little inclined to exact the heroism she was ready to show. She had a child's severe morality, and she had hardly learned to understand that there is much evil in the world that does not characterize the perpetrators: she held herself as strictly to account for every word and deed as she held others, and she had an almost passionate desire to meet the consequence of her errors; till that was felt, an intolerable doom hung over her. She tried not to be impulsive; that was criminal in one of her calling; and she struggled for patience with an endeavor that was largely successful.

As to the effect of her career outside of herself, and of those whom her skill was to benefit, she tried to think neither arrogantly nor meanly. She would not entertain the vanity that she was serving what is called the cause of woman, and she would not assume any duties or responsibilities toward it. She thought men were as good as women; at least one man had been no worse than one

woman; and it was in no representative or exemplary character that she had chosen her course. At the same time that she held these sane opinions, she believed that she had put away the hopes with the pleasures that might once have taken her as a young girl. In regard to what had changed the current of her life, she mentally asserted her mere nullity, her absolute non-existence. The thought of it no longer rankled, and that interest could never be hers again. If it had not been so much like affectation, and so counter to her strong aesthetic instinct, she might have made her dress somehow significant of her complete abeyance in such matters; but as it was she only studied simplicity, and as we have seen from the impression of the barge-driver she did not finally escape distinction in dress and manner. In fact, she could not have escaped that effect if she would; and it was one of the indomitable contradictions of her nature that she would not.

When she came back to the croquet-ground, leading the little girl by the hand, she found Mrs. Maynard no longer alone and no longer sad. She was chatting and laughing with a slim young fellow, whose gay blue eyes looked out of a sunburnt face, and whose straw hat, carried in his hand, exposed a closely shaven head. He wore a suit of gray flannel, and Mrs. Maynard explained that he was camping on the beach at Birkman's Cove, and had come over in the steamer with her when she returned from Europe. She introduced him as Mr. Libby, and said, “Oh, Bella, you dirty little thing!”

Mr. Libby bowed anxiously to Grace, and turned for refuge to the little girl. “Hello, Bella!” “Hello!” said the child. “Remember me?” The child put her left hand on that of Grace holding her right, and prettily pressed her head against the girl's arm in bashful silence. Grace said some coldly civil words to the young man: without looking at Mrs. Maynard, and passed on into the house.

“You don't mean that's your doctor?” he scarcely more than whispered.

“Yes, I do,” answered Mrs. Maynard. “Is n't she too lovely? And she's just as good! She used to stand up at school for me, when all the girls were down on me because I was Western. And when I came East, this time, I just went right straight to her house. I knew she could tell me exactly what to do. And that's the reason I'm here. I shall always recommend this air to anybody with lung difficulties. It's the greatest thing! I'm almost another person. Oh, you need n't look after her, Mr. Libby! There's nothing flirtatious about Grace,” said Mrs. Maynard.

The young man recovered himself from his absentminded stare in the direction Grace had taken, with a frank laugh. “So much the better for a fellow, I should say!”

Grace handed the little girl over to her nurse, and went to her own room, where she found her mother waiting to go down to tea.

“Where is Mrs. Maynard?” asked Mrs. Breen.

“Out on the croquet-ground,” answered the daughter.

“I should think it would be damp,” suggested Mrs. Green.

“She will come in when the tea-bell rings. She wouldn't come in now, if I told her.”

“Well,” said the elder lady, “for a person who lets her doctor pay her board, I think 'she's very independent.”

“I wish you would n't speak of that, mother,” said the girl.

“I can't help it, Grace. It's ridiculous,—that's what it is; it's ridiculous.”

“I don't see anything ridiculous in it. A physician need not charge anything unless he chooses, or she; and if I choose to make Louise my guest here it's quite the same as if she were my guest at home.”

“I don't like you to have such a guest,” said Mrs. Green. “I don't see what claim she has upon your hospitality.”

“She has a double claim upon it,” Grace answered, with a flush. “She is in sickness and in trouble. I don't see how she

could have a better claim. Even if she were quite well I should consider the way she had been treated by her husband sufficient, and I should want to do everything I could for her."

"I should want her to behave herself," said Mrs. Breen dryly.

"How behave herself? What do you mean?" demanded Grace, with guilty heat.

"You know what I mean, Grace. A woman in her position ought to be more circumspect than any other woman, if she wants people to believe that her husband treated her badly."

"We ought n't to blame her for trying to forget her troubles. It's essential to her recovery for her to be as cheerful as she can be. I know that she's impulsive, and she's free in her manners with strangers; but I suppose that's her Westernism. She's almost distracted. She was crying half the night, with her troubles, and kept Bella and me both awake."

"Is Bella with her now?"

"No," Grace admitted. "Jane's getting her ready to go down with us. Louise is talking with a gentleman who came over on the steamer with her; he's camping on the beach near here. I didn't wait to hear particulars."

When the nurse brought the little girl to their door, Mrs. Green took one hand and Grace the other, and they led her down to tea. Mrs. Maynard was already at table, and told them all about meeting Mr. Libby abroad.

Until the present time she and Grace had not seen each other since they were at school together in Southington, where the girl used to hear so much to the disadvantage of her native section that she would hardly have owned to it if her accent had not found her out. It would have been pleasanter to befriend another person, but the little Westerner suffered a veritable persecution, and that was enough to make Grace her friend. Shortly after she

returned home from school she married, in that casual and tentative fashion in which so many marriages seem made. Grace had heard of her as travelling in Europe with her husband, from whom she was now separated. She reported that he had known Mr. Libby in his bachelor days, and that Mr. Libby had travelled with them. Mr. Maynard appeared to have left to Mr. Libby the arrangement of his wife's pleasures, the supervision of her shopping, and the direction of their common journeys and sojourns; and it seemed to have been indifferent to him whether his friend was smoking and telling stories with him, or going with his wife to the opera, or upon such excursions as he had no taste for. She gave the details of the triangular intimacy with a frank unconsciousness; and after nine o'clock she returned from a moonlight walk on the beach with Mr. Libby.

Grace sat waiting for her at the little one's bedside, for Bella had been afraid to go to sleep alone.

“How good you are!” cried Louise, in a grateful under-tone, as she came in. She kissed Grace, and choked down a cough with her hand over her mouth.

“Louise,” said Grace sternly, “this is shameful! You forget that you are married, and ill, too.”

“Oh, I'm ever so much better, to-night. The air's just as dry! And you needn't mind Mr. Libby. He's such an old friend! Besides, I'm sure to gain the case.”

“No matter. Even as a divorced woman, you oughtn't to go on in this way.”

“Well, I would n't, with every one. But it's quite different with Mr. Libby. And, besides, I have to keep my mind from preying on itself somehow.”

II.

Mrs. Maynard sat in the sun on the seaward-looking piazza of the hotel, and coughed in the warm air. She told the ladies, as they came out from breakfast, that she was ever so much better generally, but that she seemed to have more of that tickling in her throat. Each of them advised her for good, and suggested this specific and that; and they all asked her what Miss Breen was doing for her cough. Mrs. Maynard replied, between the paroxysms, that she did not know: it was some kind of powders. Then they said they would think she would want to try something active; even those among them who were homoeopathists insinuated a fine distrust of a physician of their own sex. “Oh, it's nothing serious,” Mrs. Maynard explained. “It's just bronchial. The air will do me more good than anything. I'm keeping out in it all I can.”

After they were gone, a queer, gaunt man came and glanced from the doorway at her. He had one eye in unnatural fixity, and the other set at that abnormal slant which is said to qualify the owner for looking round a corner before he gets to it. A droll twist of his mouth seemed partly physical, but: there is no doubt that he had often a humorous intention. It was Barlow, the man-of-all-work, who killed and plucked the poultry, peeled the potatoes and picked the peas, pulled the sweet-corn and the tomatoes, kindled the kitchen fire, harnessed the old splayfooted mare,—safe for ladies and children, and intolerable for all others, which formed the entire stud of the Jocelyn House stables,—dug the clams, rowed and sailed the boat, looked after the bath-houses, and came in

contact with the guests at so many points that he was on easy terms with them all. This ease tended to an intimacy which he was himself powerless to repress, and which, from time to time, required their intervention. He now wore a simple costume of shirt and trousers, the latter terminated by a pair of broken shoes, and sustained by what he called a single gallows; his broad-brimmed straw hat scooped down upon his shoulders behind, and in front added to his congenital difficulty of getting people in focus. “How do you do, this morning, Mrs. Maynard?” he said.

“Oh, I'm first-rate, Mr. Barlow. What sort of day do you think it's going to be for a sail?”

Barlow came out to the edge of the piazza, and looked at the sea and sky. “First-rate. Fog's most burnt away now. You don't often see a fog at Jocelyn's after ten o'clock in the mornin'.”

He looked for approval to Mrs. Maynard, who said, “That's so. The air's just splendid. It 's doing everything for me.”

“It's these pine woods, back o' here. Every breath on 'em does ye good. It's the balsam in it. D' you ever try,” he asked, stretching his hand as far up the piazza-post as he could, and swinging into a conversational posture,—“d' you ever try whiskey—good odd Bourbon whiskey—with white-pine chips in it?”

Mrs. Maynard looked up with interest, but, shaking her head, coughed for no.

“Well, I should like to have you try that.”

“What does it do?” she gasped, when she could get her breath.

“Well, it's soothin' t' the cough, and it builds ye up, every ways. Why, my brother,” continued the factotum, “he died of consumption when I was a boy,—reg'lar old New England consumption. Don't hardly ever hear of it any more, round here. Well, I don't suppose there's been a case of reg'lar old New England consumption—well, not the old New England