


**Molly Elliot Seawell**



*Despotism and  
Democracy: A Study  
in Washington  
Society and Politics*

**Molly Elliot Seawell**

# **Despotism and Democracy: A Study in Washington Society and Politics**



Published by Good Press, 2022

[goodpress@okpublishing.info](mailto:goodpress@okpublishing.info)

EAN 4064066425630

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One MEN AND WOMEN

Chapter Two THE RISE OF A PREMIER AND SOMETHING ABOUT TWO HEARTS

Chapter Three DOWN AMONG THE CAPTAINS AND THE SHOUTING

Chapter Four GOVERNMENT WITHOUT THE CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED

Chapter Five A RAPTUROUS HOUR WHICH WAS RUDELY INTERRUPTED

Chapter Six DEVILS AND ANGELS FIGHT FOR THE SOULS OF MEN

Chapter Seven HOW VARIOUS PERSONS SPENT A MAY SUNDAY IN WASHINGTON

Chapter Eight A NEW SENATOR—A RAILWAY JOURNEY—THE ROSE OF THE FIELD AND THE ROSES OF THE GARDEN

Chapter Nine CONCERNING THINGS NOT TO BE MENTIONED IN THE SOCIETY JOURNALS

Chapter Ten THERE ARE MEN WHO CAN RESIST EVERYTHING EXCEPT TEMPTATION

Chapter Eleven IN THE SWEET-DO-NOTHING OF THE SUMMER-TIME

Chapter Twelve WHAT IS IT TO BE HONEST IN POLITICS AND TRUE IN LOVE?

Chapter Thirteen WAR AND PEACE





# DESPOTISM AND DEMOCRACY

# ***Chapter One***

## **MEN AND WOMEN**

### Table of Contents

Certain aspects of Washington, both outward and inward, are like Paris. Especially is this true of the outward aspect on a wet night, when the circles of yellow-flaring gas lamps are reflected in the shining expanse of asphalt, when the keen-flashing electric lights blaze upon the white façades of great buildings and the numerous groups of statuary against a black background of shrubbery, and when some convention or other brings crowds of people to swarm upon the usually dull Washington streets. The Honourable Geoffrey Thorndyke, M.C., spoke of this Parisian resemblance to his colleague, the Honourable Julian Crane, M.C., as they sat together on a warm, rainy April night in the bay-window of Thorndyke's apartment. The rooms were lofty, wide, and dark, according to the style of forty years ago, and overlooked one of those circular parks in Washington which fashion seemed only to have patronised briefly in order to desert permanently. But the rooms and the situation suited Thorndyke perfectly, and he had spent there all of the five terms of Congress which he had served. Thorndyke's remaining in that locality secretly surprised Crane, a man from the Middle West. He himself had an apartment in a modish hotel, which cost him more than he could afford and was not half so comfortable as Thorndyke's. But then Thorndyke was born to that which Crane was toilsomely achieving—for this vigorous product of the Middle West was sent into the world with enormous ambitions of all sorts, and

not the least of these was social ambition. And combined with this social ambition was a primitive enjoyment of society such as the Indian gets out of his pow-wows with unlimited tobacco and fire-water. Crane, although bred on the prairie, cared nothing for fields and woods and the skies of night and the skies of morning. Men, women, and their affairs alone interested him. Thorndyke, on the contrary, although town-bred, cared for the God-made things, and at that very moment was studying with interest the great tulip-tree, dark and dank before his window. When he made the remark about Washington having sometimes a look of Paris, he added:

“And I expected to be in Paris at this very moment but for this”—here he interjected an impolite adjective—“extra session. However,” he continued, good-humouredly, “I hardly expect you to agree with me, considering your late streak of luck—or, rather, your well-deserved promotion, as I shall call it on the floor of the House.”

Crane acknowledged this with a smile and a request for another cigar, if possible, not so bad as the last. He was tall and well made, and had a head and face like the bust of the young Augustus in the Vatican gallery. He was elaborately groomed, manicured and all, judging that time spent on beauty like his was not thrown away. In contrast to this classic beauty was Thorndyke—below, rather than above, the middle height, with scanty hair and light-blue eyes, and who could not be called handsome by the mother that bore him. But when women were about, Geoffrey Thorndyke could always put the handsomest man in the room behind the door.

And he had a peculiarly soft and musical voice which made everything he said sound pleasant, even when he proceeded to make uncomfortable remarks about the late turn in national affairs which had sent Crane's political fortunes upward with a bound.

"For my part," he said, knocking the ash off his cigar, "I have lived long enough and read enough to know that such a stupendous opportunity as your party has now is generally fatal to that party before the next Presidential election. See—in the middle of a Presidential term, you carry the Congressional elections by a close shave. The new Congress is not expected to meet for thirteen months afterward. The Brazilian matter reaches an acute stage, and the President is forced to call an extra session in April instead of the regular meeting in December. Of course, the Brazilian matter will come out all right. Any party, at any time, in any civilised country, is capable of managing a foreign affair in which all the people think the same way. But when it comes to domestic affairs—my dear fellow, when the President saw how things were going and that he really could invite you to make fools of yourselves for the next fourteen months before the Presidential convention, it was beer and skittles to him."

Crane turned in his chair and sighed. The intricacies of national politics, the wheels within wheels, the way of putting out a pawn to be taken, puzzled and confused him. It had seemed to him the most unmixed political good to him when his party had secured control of the House at an international crisis. It could vote supplies with splendid profusion, it could shout for the flag, it could claim the credit



for everything done, while the Senate and the Administration being in opposition, very little real responsibility attached to anything the House might leave undone. And when the man who was certain to be the caucus nominee for Speaker had sent for Crane at one o'clock in the morning and had offered him the chairmanship of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to succeed Thorndyke, Crane had felt his cup of joy to be overflowing. Everything was in his favour. Without the least doubt about his powers, which were considerable, he had some diffidence on the score of experience; but Thorndyke, who would be the ranking member of the minority on the committee, would help him out, quietly and generously. In the midst of his elation Crane remembered that Thorndyke had not been wholly satisfied with the chairmanship of that great committee—and Thorndyke had been suffered to exercise a degree of power far greater than Crane felt would be permitted him for some time to come. On most Congressional committees there are two or three men who have come into the world booted and spurred, while the remainder were born saddled and bridled. Thorndyke was one of those who got into the saddle early, and yet, the saddle or the steed had not seemed to suit his taste exactly. Crane spoke of this, and bluntly asked the reason.

“Because,” replied Thorndyke, coolly, “there was no more promotion for me—and I was made to accept it, whether I wanted it or not. You see, although the Constitution guarantees every State a republican form of government, all the States don't have it. Mine hasn't, nor has yours. My boss, however, is a good deal more astute than your boss.

Mine never lets any man have what he wants. Unluckily, when I was a Congressional tenderfoot I wanted the earth and the fulness thereof, and I worked for it as well as I knew how. When the next nominating convention was held I was left out in the cold world. I waited two years. Then, being still green, with all the courage of inexperience, I went to my boss. I said to him that I wished to get back in public life, and to stay there—and he said——”

Thorndyke paused and blushed a little.

“Out with it,” said Crane, encouragingly.

“My boss has some extraordinary virtues—all real bosses have—among them a very engaging frankness. He said, without beating about the bush a moment, that it wasn’t his policy to promote men who might—who might one day get a little too big for him. That was about what he said. He told me if I would be satisfied with a seat in Congress and the chairmanship of a good committee, I could have it as long as I kept out of State politics, and didn’t make myself offensively prominent at national conventions. Then he proceeded to advise me as Cardinal Wolsey advised Thomas Cromwell. He charged me to fling away ambition, and reminded me that by that sin the angels fell, and likewise a number of very imprudent young politicians—I don’t use the word statesman any more—all over the State. I squirmed, and the old fellow grinned and told me if at any time I hankered after a foreign mission I could get it. I thanked him and told him I had no fancy to be buried until I was dead, and at last we compromised on his first proposition. I like the life—God knows why. The salary is enough for me to live on and support an invalid sister—all I have in the world. I

have sense enough to see that I am better off than if I gave a loose rein to my ambition and was forever chasing rainbows. A man without fortune, who lives upon the hopes of an office which will beggar him if he gets it——”

“That’s it!” cried Crane, suddenly interrupting, his eyes lighting up with anxiety. “That’s it, Thorndyke. I know all about it. I’ll tell you the whole story—the story I never even told my wife——”

There is something touching and appealing when a man lays bare his wounds and bruises. Thorndyke, without saying a word, gave a look, a slight movement of the head that brought out Crane’s story. He told it readily enough—he had the mobile mouth and quick imagination of the orator, and he was always eloquent when he was talking about himself.

“You see, when I got the nomination to Congress it was that or bankruptcy. For two months before the convention was held I’d walk the floor half the night, and the other half I’d pretend to be asleep, to keep my wife from breaking her heart with anxiety. Annette is a good woman—too good for me. I had neglected my law practice for politics until I had no practice left, and then I was transported to Congress and Heaven and five thousand dollars a year. I determined to do two things—cut a wide swath in Washington and save one-third of my salary.”

“Great fool—you,” murmured Thorndyke, sympathetically.

“But—I didn’t know what a wide swath was. I didn’t know anything about it. I came to Washington and brought my wife and three children. We went to a boarding-house on Eleventh Street—you called to see us there.”

“Yes. I remember thinking Mrs. Crane the prettiest, sweetest woman I had seen that season.”

This was true, for Annette Crane had the beauty of form, of colour, of sweetness and gentleness to an extraordinary degree. She was no Perdita—no one would have taken her for a princess stolen in infancy. But not Ruth in the harvest-field was more natural, more sweetly graceful than this lady from Circleville, somewhere in the Middle West.

“Annette admired you tremendously,” continued Crane, in the easy tone of a man who knows his wife is desperately in love with him, and thinks her fully justified. “She said it was kind of you to call. Like me, she thought we were going to do wonderful things—I believe she used to pray that our hearts might not be hardened by our social triumphs. Well, you know all about it. We were asked to the President’s receptions, and my wife called on the Cabinet officers’ families, and at the houses of the Senators and the Representatives from our own State. We were asked to dinner at our junior Senator’s house. I thought it would be grand. It was, in a way—the old man is pretty well heeled—but it was exactly like one of those banquets a Chamber of Commerce gives to a distinguished citizen. Annette was the prettiest woman there, but she didn’t wear a low-necked gown like the other women, and that embarrassed her. In the end she found out more things than I did. She said to me before the season was over:

“Julian, it’s not being rich that makes people in Washington. If it were, we shouldn’t mind not being in it. But there are plenty of people, like the Senator, who have the money and the wish to make a stir socially—but they can’t,

while a plenty of poor ones do. Look at Mr. Thorndyke'—she hit upon you the first man—'he's asked everywhere, and he says he is as poor as a church-mouse. No, Julian, to be as you would wish to be here, needs not only the money we haven't got, but something else we haven't got and can't acquire, so let's give it up. Another winter I'll stay in Circleville—it will be better for the children, better for me, better for you'—for I own up to having been deuced surly all that winter. So we adopted that plan, and Annette has never been to Washington since. But—I'll confess this, too—I had from the beginning a fancy to see the inside of those houses where the people live who make up this world of Washington. It wasn't merely idle curiosity. I was convinced, and I am so still, that the number and variety of people in Washington must make these Washington parlours—drawing-rooms, you call them—the most interesting of their kind in the world. Well—I've got into some of them. It's a good deal easier for a man without his wife than a man with her; and Thorndyke, I own up, I am bewitched. Oh, it's not so much to you; you've known it too long, and seen too much of it all over the world to know how it strikes a man born and brought up until he is thirty-five years old in Circleville. I swear when I get a dinner invitation I am like the girls out our way, who will drive twenty miles in a sleigh to go to a dance. The mere look of the table—the glass, the silver, the flowers—goes to my head. The terrapin intoxicates me. Those quick, soft-moving servants fascinate me. And the conversation! They let me talk all I want."

"You are a vastly entertaining fellow in your own mental bailiwick," interjected Thorndyke.

“And the women! So unaffected—so unconscious of their clothes! And such listeners! I have never been to a stupid dinner in Washington. And the club—I never knew a man of leisure in my life until I came to Washington. I daresay you think me a fool.” Crane paused, with a feeling rare to him that he could not express half what was in him, but Thorndyke’s knowledge supplied the rest.

“No, I don’t. It is quite as you say, but you are taking it all too seriously.”

“Circleville,” murmured Crane.

“Well, three-fourths of these people you so admire came from Circlevilles. Forty years ago, how many of them, do you think, had a servant to answer the door-bell? Just consider, my dear young friend, that, except at the South, servants were unknown to a large proportion of the American people until a short time ago. The parents of these people you see here, with eighteen-horse-power automobiles, and with crests upon their writing-paper, their carriages, their footmen’s buttons, thought themselves in clover when they could afford a maid-of-all-work. So far, they are merely at the imitative stage. Their grandparents were pioneers and lived mostly in log cabins, and although the three generations are divided by only fifty years, it is as if æons of time existed between them! By Jove! It is one of the most astounding things in American life!”

“That’s so,” replied Crane. “It is said that one-half the world doesn’t know how the other half lives, but in these United States about nine-tenths of the society people have no more notion how their grandparents lived than they have of life on Mars or Saturn. I went to a wedding the other day.



It was magnificent beyond words. The two young people had been brought up in——”

“Barbaric luxury,” Thorndyke interrupted. “It’s barbarous to bring children up as those two were—I know whom you mean. The girl had her own suite of rooms almost from her birth, her own maid, her own trap. Even when there was an affectation of simplicity it cost enough to have swamped her grandfather’s general store at Meekins’s Cross Roads, where he laid the foundation of his fortune. When she came out in society it simply meant more of everything. No daughter of the Cæsars was ever more conscious of the gulf between her and the common people—I say common people with the deepest respect for the term—than this girl is conscious of the gulf between herself and the class to which her grandparents belonged. The young man’s story was the same *da capo*, except that he was given a boy’s luxuries instead of a girl’s. It has been carefully concealed from them by their parents that their grandparents swept, dusted, chopped wood, traded at country stores, and did all those plain but useful and respectable things which made their fortune. To hear them talk about ‘grandmamma’ and ‘grandpapa’ is the very essence of simplicity.”

“And yet those people constitute the most exclusive set in Washington,” said Crane, angrily, as if thereby some wrong was inflicted on him.

“Naturally,” replied Thorndyke. “Don’t you see that the first result of their prosperity in their own community was to segregate them from their less fortunate friends and neighbours? Don’t you see how inevitably it came about that their children were separated from their neighbours’

children? And in the end they were drawn from the Circlevilles and the Meekins's Cross Roads by sheer necessity? They became fugitives, as it were, from their own class, and how natural it was for them to be afraid of their own and every other class except the recognised few, and to build up a wall around themselves and their children."

"I wonder if you would dare to use that word class on the floor of the House?" asked Crane.

"I would dare to but I shouldn't care to," answered Thorndyke. "One reason why I have so little to say on the floor of the House is because it involves many explanations to men who know just as well what you mean as you do, and agree with you thoroughly. But there's Buncombe County to be considered."

"At all events," said Crane, returning to himself as a subject of consideration, "this social side of life appeals to me powerfully—too powerfully, I am afraid. I feel an odd sort of kinship with those old ladies of seventy that I see going the rounds in Paris gowns and high-heeled shoes, with their scanty white hair crimped and curled within an inch of their lives. It's serious business with them; and, by George, it's serious with me, too. Of course I am a blamed fool for acknowledging so much."

"Not in the least. But you must know that it can only be a pastime with you. There is Circleville, and Annette, and the babies——"

Thorndyke saw Crane's face grow a little pale, and he fell silent for a minute or two, and while Thorndyke was watching the current of his thought, as revealed by a

singularly expressive and untrained countenance, Crane burst out:

“The best in the way of women I’ve seen yet is Constance Maitland—I wonder why she never married. She’s nearer forty than thirty; that she told me herself.”

It was now Thorndyke’s turn to grow pale. Constance Maitland was responsible to a great degree for most that had happened to him for the last eighteen years, and in all that time he had not seen her once; but the mere mention of her name was enough to agitate him; and she was in Washington and he had not known it——

It was a minute or two before he recovered himself and began to pull at the cigar in his mouth. Then he saw by Crane’s face that Constance Maitland was something to him, too. Had the poor devil fallen in love with her as he had with Washington dinners? Thorndyke was disgusted with his friend, and showed it by saying, coldly:

“I knew Miss Maitland well some years ago. She is very charming. But, Crane, it’s bad manners to call ladies by their first names.” Thorndyke used the old-fashioned word “ladies” where the moderns say “women.”

Crane coloured furiously. He did not mind in the least being coached in legislative affairs, but he winced at being taught manners. However, he had the highest admiration for Thorndyke’s manners, so he replied, carelessly:

“I accept the amendment. As you say, Con—Miss Maitland is very charming, and has been charming men for the past twenty years. Now, in Circleville she would have been called an old maid ten years ago.”

Yes, of course, she had always had a train of men after her, and the fact that she remained unmarried showed either that she had no heart—or—sometimes a wild thought had crossed Thorndyke's mind—suppose Constance Maitland still remembered him? This thought, coming into his head, set his heart to pounding like a steam-engine while Crane talked on.

“That woman epitomises the charm of Washington life to me. First, she is unlike any woman I ever saw before; that is in itself a charm. Then, she has an environment; that, too, is new to me. I went to see her four times last winter.” Then he mentioned where she lived. “Her parlour—I mean drawing-room—was nothing compared with the others I'd been in here, but it was distinctive. It wasn't furnished from bric-à-brac shops and art-sale catalogues. All the antiques came from her own family—all the miniatures and portraits were her own kinsfolk. And, after having lived in Europe for twenty years, as she told me—because she doesn't mind mentioning dates—and having seen more of European society than one American woman in ten thousand, she loves and admires her own country, and came back here to live the first minute she was free. That struck me all of a heap, because, though you wouldn't judge so from my Fourth of July speeches at Circleville, I should think that Europe would be something between Washington and Paradise.”

“You haven't been there yet,” was Thorndyke's response to this. And then Crane proceeded to tell a story which Thorndyke knew by heart.

“It seems, so I heard from other people, she was brought up by an old crank of an aunt, who had married a Baron Somebody-or-other in Germany. This old feminine party tried to make Constance marry some foreign guy, and when she wouldn’t, the old lady, in a rage, made a will, giving all she had to Constance on condition that she did not marry an American. It was thought the old lady wasn’t exactly in earnest, but unluckily she died the week after, and so the will stands—and that’s why Con—Miss Maitland never married, I guess.”

Just then a band came blaring down the street, followed by the usual crowd of negroes, dancing, shouting, and grimacing along the sidewalk, and looking weird in the high lights and black shadows of the night. Crane, to whom the negroes had never ceased to be a raree show, got up and went to the window, whistling the air the band played; meanwhile Thorndyke lay back in his chair trying to get used to the knowledge that Constance Maitland had been in Washington months and he had not known it. There was a prologue to the story just told by Crane—and Crane had no suspicion of this prologue. A young American of good birth but slender fortune—himself, in fact—was the primary cause of the old Baroness von Hesselt’s remarkable will. It was he whom the old lady held responsible for Constance Maitland’s flat refusal to marry the son of an imperial privy councillor with seven points to his coronet. Oh, those days at the Villa Flora on Lake Como—those days that come only in youth, when the whole world seems young! When, from the terrace, Constance and himself watched the sunset trembling in the blue lake and making another heaven

there! And those starlit nights when Constance and himself were in a boat alone together, and she sang to her guitar for him, and he repeated verses from Childe Harold to her! They were both young and singularly innocent, and were deeply in love—of that Thorndyke could never doubt; and because they were young and innocent and in love with each other the old Baroness thought them the wickedest and most designing creatures on earth. She had spent all her life in Europe, had frankly married for a title, and wished Constance to do the same. The old Baron, a helpless invalid, was not reckoned in the equation.

The Baroness von Hesselt had acquired what many Americans who live abroad acquire—a spite against her own country. This was accentuated by the fact that she was a Southerner of the old régime, who hated liberty, equality, and fraternity from the bottom of her heart, and who instinctively realised her unfitness for America. She had also forgotten a good deal about it, and thought a very effective way to keep Constance from marrying Thorndyke or any other American was to cut her off from a fortune in that event. The will was made, and the old Baroness proclaimed it loudly for a week. At the end of that time the gentleman on the pale horse unexpectedly summoned her. There was but one thing for any man to do in Geoffrey Thorndyke's circumstances, and that was, to go far away from Constance Maitland. No definite words or promises had passed between them, but unless eyes and tones of the voice, and all sweet, unutterable things are liars, they were pledged to one another.



Thorndyke, being in those days a very human youngster, hoped that Constance would send him a line—a word—and doubted not for a moment that his love would make up to her for a fortune. But no line or word ever came. As years went on Thorndyke reached the sad knowledge that modern life requires something more than bread and cheese and kisses, and felt a sense of relief that it had not been in his power to take Constance Maitland's fortune from her with only love to give in return. But this knowledge did not make him content. On the contrary, year by year had her memory become more poignant to him. It was that which had made him throw himself with all his being and equipment into public life. It was that which made him tender to all innocent, sweet women like Annette Crane—innocent, sweet women brought back to him something of his lost love. He knew she had never married, but all else concerning her was a blank to him. He was consumed with a desire to ask Crane something about her—all about her—but he had noted instantly that in Crane's eye and voice was a manner which revealed a dangerous interest in Constance Maitland; and Thorndyke was held back and urged forward to speak of her.

The band passed on, the street once more grew quiet, and Crane returned to his seat. Thorndyke smoked savagely to keep from mentioning Constance Maitland's name. Crane did likewise with the same motive, but having less self-control than Thorndyke he could not but hark back to the ticklish subject.

“So you say you knew Miss Maitland?”

“Yes. A long time ago.”

“She’s very old-fashioned; enough so to stay out of society when she is wearing mourning. She’s been in mourning for her uncle by marriage ever since she’s been in Washington—six months. The exclusives don’t stay in mourning more than six months for husbands, wives, or children. Parents and aunts and uncles don’t count.”

“The exclusives don’t have any aunts and uncles,” Thorndyke put in shortly. “They have nieces and nephews who are presentable after they have been washed and combed—but they can’t go back as far as uncles and aunts.”

“So they can’t. Their uncles and aunts are just like *my* uncles and aunts. Well, I gather that the old Baron for whom Miss Maitland has worn mourning wasn’t a bad old party—better, perhaps, than his American wife.”

“He was,” said Thorndyke.

Crane looked at him suspiciously and then kept on.

“Miss Maitland is going out this spring. She says I’m quite right in thinking there is a delightful society attainable here in Washington, but she’s so pleased to be back in her own country that she praises everything right and left. She doesn’t even mind the Dupont statue, and won’t discuss the Pension building. To see her flow of spirits you would think her the happiest woman in the world. Yet she told me once that she wasn’t really happy.”

“All women tell you that before you get through with them,” growled Thorndyke.

“Annette never has,” said Crane, rising and throwing away his cigar. “Some time, if you wish to call on Miss Maitland, I’ll take you round.”