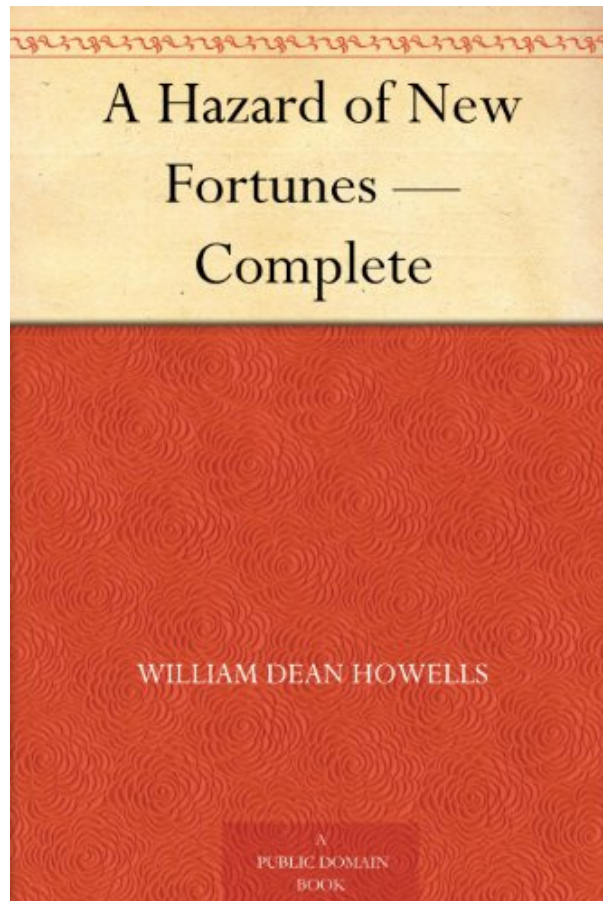
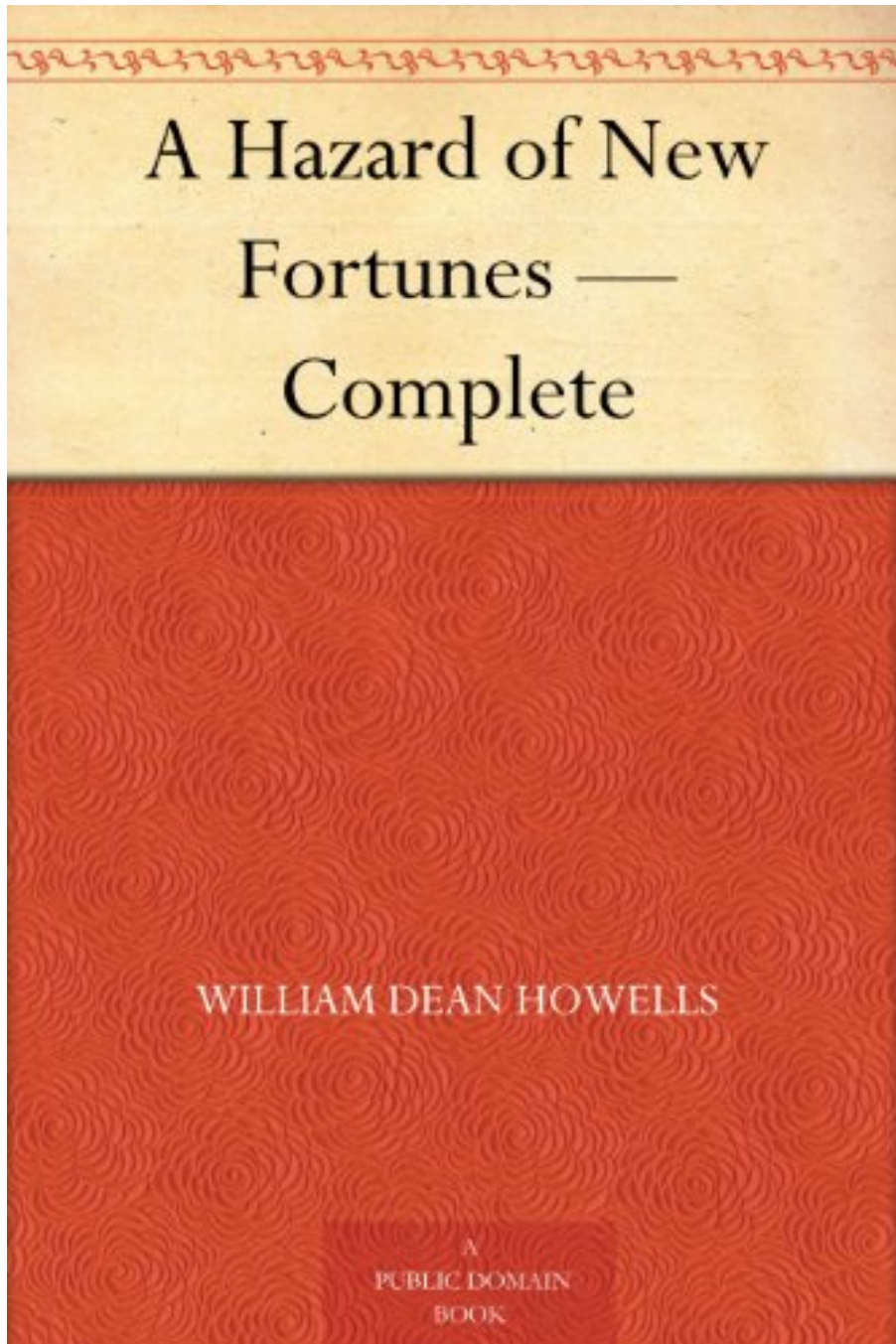


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- Published on: 2011-03-24
- Released on: 2011-03-24
- Format: Kindle eBook

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A hazard which has gloriously succeeded.

By Austin Elliott

William Dean Howells in his lifetime was ranked with his friend, Henry James as a writer of a new realistic kind of fiction, and however mild and idealistic it seems today, was considered by its admirers as refreshingly revolutionary and by others as cynical meanspiritedness seeking to sacrifice all that was "noble" in art. While actually having little in common with James, (he seems to be closer in spirit to Trollope) Howells' name was always side by side with James' and it was probably supposed that their future reputations would share a similar fate. Unfortunately, that was not the case-while Henry James is considered a giant of American belles lettres, Howells has been relegated to minor status and except by a happy few, little read. "A Hazard of New Fortunes", possibly Howells' best work, is one of the better known-but most people aren't aware that it is one of the greatest works of fiction in American literature. It is an impressive panorama of American life towards the end of the last century. People from Boston, the west, the south and Europe all converge in New York to enact a comedy of manners or tragedy, depending on their fortunes, that compares in its scope and masterly dissection of society, with "The Way We Live Now". Howell's light irony touches upon the eternal divisions between the haves and the have-nots, male and female, the socially secure and the unclassed, and with the Marches, the book's ostensible heroes, uses a typical normal middleclass family-with all of its intelligence, understanding, decency on one side and with all of its pretensions, timidity, selfishness on the other-to reflect the social unease and lack of justice in a supposedly sane and fair world. The book is subtle in its power and underneath its light tone probes the problems of its day with compassion and insight. Indeed, many of the problems it depicts are still relevant today. William Dean Howells wrote so many novels of worth that he deserves to have more than just a cult following; "A Hazard of New Fortunes" amply illustrates this.

19 of 19 people found the following review helpful.

A must for anyone interested in the Gilded Age

By ChicagoJen

Howells' "Hazard" is an extremely evocative novel of New York in the 1880s. Unlike the more famous works of Edith Wharton, Howells' characters carefully reflect the full spectrum of American society of the day. The character of Fulkerson is one of the earliest instances of that American institution, the born salesman. And the other archetypes are there as well: the fallen Southern beauty and her gracious father, the

German immigrant socialist, the farmer-cum-robber baron and grasping family, the society girl who turns to settlement house work. I have yet to find a novel that gives a more comprehensive snapshot of the era. Also of interest to any Atlantic readers like myself, Howells served as that monthly's editor for some twenty years. The book's office scenes are heavily based on the experience. It provides a very interesting bit of journalistic history.

19 of 20 people found the following review helpful.

Several Sideshows Jell Into A Novel

By Bob Newman

A usual book review outlines something of the plot, not enough to give everything away, but at least something to catch a potential reader's fancy. I cannot assure you that this book has much of plot---some men come together to run a new bi-weekly magazine in New York in the 1880s, their financial backer has hickish, conservative tendencies and he opposes a certain impoverished writer who supports socialism (then a wild-eyed fantasy. This rich man's son, who abhors any form of business, is made into the managing editor. A crisis develops, takes a sudden unexpected turn, and the men buy out the backer, who leaves for Europe. Most novels have a main character whose moods and motivations are central to the work. Not A HAZARD OF NEW FORTUNES. Several people figure almost equally in this respect, none of them women, but women are developed more than in most male-authored novels of the time, even including a sympathetic view of a very independent female character. Basil March might be taken for the main character, but that would be mostly because he is introduced first. He is abandoned for long stretches while we follow the lives and personalities of others.

Yet, I must say, I admired Howells' novel very much. It is not for those who require action, sex, or dramatic events. Rather, it is a slice of life of the period, of the place, of family life and social repartee that may be unequalled. Though Howells claimed to be a "realist" and he is often spoken of, it seems, as one of such a school in American literature, the novel oscillates between extremely vivid descriptions of all varieties of life in New York, humanist philosophizing, and mild melodrama, thus, I would not class it as a truly realist novel in the same sense as say, "McTeague" by Frank Norris. Howells had the American optimism, the reluctance to dwell on the darker sides of human nature. This novel may draw accusations, then, of naivete. I think that would be short-sighted. Henry James and Faulkner might be deeper psychologically and Hemingway more sculpted, but Howells sometimes puts his finger right on the very essence of American ways of thinking and on American character. Some sections, like for instance the long passage on looking for an apartment in New York-over thirty pages---simply radiate genius. The natural gas millionaire and his shrewish daughter; the gung-ho, go-getter manager of the magazine; the dreamy, but selfish artists, the Southern belle---all these may be almost stock characters in 20th century American letters, but can never have been better summarized than here. Two statements made by Basil March, a literary editor married into an old Boston family, sum up the feel of A HAZARD OF NEW FORTUNES, a novel that takes great cognizance of the potential for change in people (always an optimist's point of view). First, he says, "There's the making of several characters in each of us; we are each several characters and sometimes this character has the lead in us, and sometimes that." And lastly, he says "I don't know what it all means, but I believe it means good." Howells was no doubt a sterling man and this, perhaps his best novel, reflects that more than anything else.

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