



ENRICHED
CLASSIC

OLD NEW YORK
FOUR NOVELLAS

EDITH WHARTON

Includes an introduction and critical commentary

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"Mrs. Wharton Looks at Society: In Four Novelettes She Re-creates Four Successive Decades in New York Life."

Lloyd Morris, *New York Times Book Review*, May 18, 1924.

In the dusty arena of contemporary American fiction Edith Wharton long ago achieved the cool isolation of distinction. Few of our living writers equal her in speculative interest: in *Ethan Frome* she wrote what is perhaps the most distinguished work of fiction produced in this century by any American writer, yet she has not infrequently produced books that, at best, may charitably be dismissed as unworthy of her proved capacity. Her admirable equipment and her occasional high accomplishment have set an exacting standard for her work. Her best is so far superior to mere adequacy as to make a merely competent performance by Mrs. Wharton seem little more than negligible. More than any of her contemporaries, Mrs. Wharton is taxed by the discipline which she herself has imposed upon the expectations of her readers.

These expectations she has once again amply fulfilled. In "The Old Maid" she has written a story as universally significant and as enduringly beautiful as *Ethan Frome*, a story which exercises the inevitable authority of great art. Mrs. Wharton's lucid intelligence, sensitive perception and delicate irony have been admirably tempered by the passing years. In this story she has brought them to bear upon material in every way worthy of their subtle precision. "The Old Maid" affirms Mrs. Wharton's absolute command over the elements of her art, and again reveals that capacity to achieve flawless beauty which she has too often been content to deny.

INTRODUCTION

The theme of the four stories of old New York which she has brought together in a sequence is the theme with which she has principally concerned herself in her previous work; namely, a conflict between individual purpose or desire and a compact society which seeks to control it. She has always excelled in portraying the conditions under which such a society circumscribes and ultimately defeats the errant individual, whether the caprice is held to be sin, or stupidity, or mere unprecedented innovation. In the communities to which she has devoted her attention a rigorous decorum establishes the pattern of life, and to deviate, however briefly, from strict conformity is to invite a disproportionate expiation. The old New York of the four stories is represented in four successive decades of its progress, yet its life reveals no qualitative expansion under the flow of time, and its social organism suffers no least modification. Of the society of all four decades Mrs. Wharton might truthfully have said, as she says of that of the fifties, that it "lived in a genteel monotony of which the surface was never stirred by the dumb dramas now and then enacted underground." Four such dramas constitute her stories, and the protagonists are four individuals who violate the established pattern. "Sensitive souls," observes Mrs. Wharton, "in those days were like muted keyboards on which Fate played without a sound."

It may be that these four stories owe their inception to *The Age of Innocence*. In any event, readers who, like the present reviewer, hold that novel to be the most finely achieved of Mrs. Wharton's later work will welcome this group of stories in which an archaic and faded background of bygone day only intensifies the emotional mood and dramatic action. Against this background of an obsolete and vanished society the human conflict projects with the sharpened relief of absolute contrast. Irony seldom deserts Mrs. Wharton's pen, but too often she has blunted its edge with satire. In two of the four stories, "The Old Maid" and "New Year's Day," the fine thrust of her irony is unhampered by complications of mood; in one of them, "The Old Maid," irony is the vehicle of concentrated tragic passion which lifts the story high above the circumstances of narrow convention in which it arises, and makes it an austere and potent reading of life.

In the two remaining stories, "False Dawn" and "The Spark," Mrs. Wharton writes as a satirist, and though irony and lucidity are not wholly absent from them, they have neither the significance nor

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the beauty of their companions. "False Dawn," dealing with the New York of the forties, that New York which lived below Canal Street and had its country estates on the East River, tells of the disaster involved by a collection of paintings. In it, individual caprice, viewed by a compact society as stupidity, suffers a heavy penalty and cruel expiation. Lewis Raycie, the sensitive son of a socially ambitious merchant, is commissioned by his father to collect a gallery of Italian paintings during the grand tour which is to prepare him for his future as a cultivated gentleman and man of fortune. Old Mr. Raycie views the members of his family as pallid reflections of his own tyrannical ego; they exist merely to translate into conduct the course of action which he has planned and willed for them. And so, with regard to his gallery of paintings, he has selected the artists approved by the conventional opinion of the society of which he is a respected member. But Lewis, pathetically sensitive and spiritually malleable, permits himself to drift into unprecedented innovation. Under the influence of the young John Ruskin and Dante Rossetti he makes the egregious error of substituting paintings by the Italian Primitives for the Raphaels and Carlo Dolcis and Guercinos socially approved by the conservative New York bankers of the 'forties and ordered by his father. His cruel expiation of this brief deviation from conformity and decorum constitutes the plot of the story. Mrs. Wharton deals with the affair of the pictures with a shrewdly satiric touch; they bring only tragedy into the lives of all who possess them, until three-quarters of a century later their chance discovery by a mercenary and meretricious descendant of the Raycies precipitates a fortune into the lap of an unworthy and stupid woman.

"The Spark" professes to deal with the New York of the sixties, but the action passes almost exclusively in the very late years of the last century. It concerns the domestic difficulties of Hayley Delane, a man of wealth whose stupidity and conventionality and preoccupation with the trivial amusements common to his circle conceal deep currents of unacknowledged idealism and instinctive chivalry. His tradition has made him essentially a respecter of convention, decorum and inherited preconceptions, yet a single event in his life has undermined the conservative foundations of tradition and driven him into sporadic rebellion. The event in question occurred in a hospital in Washington during the Civil War. Delane had run away from school to enlist in the Union forces, was wounded at Bull Run, and in hospital came in contact with a "queer fellow—a sort

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of backwoodsman," who spent his time caring for the wounded, and whose ideas left an indelible impression upon Delane. At moments of decision throughout Delane's life the figure of this uncouth, vigorous thinker kept returning to him in memory, forcing him into courses of conduct in absolute variance with the habitual decorum of his environment and with all the principles cherished by the tradition which he inherited. Delane never knew the name of the man who so profoundly affected his subsequent life; and only by chance at the end of his career picked up a book of incomprehensible verse in which he saw the portrait of his old friend. And Mrs. Wharton closes the story with a touch of delicate irony:

"Yes, that's it. Old Walt—that was what all the fellows used to call him. He was a great chap; I'll never forget him. I rather wish, though," he added, in his mildest tone of reproach, "you hadn't told me that he wrote all that rubbish!"

"The Old Maid," which reasserts the theme previously outlined, does so in a mood so far removed from the intellectual detachment and subtle cynicism of Mrs. Wharton's satiric vein. The story is one which lends itself to pure irony, and to that profound irony from which the accent of tragedy is seldom absent. It is a story which demands precisely the treatment given it by Mrs. Wharton. As she has told it, the story has the austere and uncompromising beauty of classic art. It is an illustration of Mrs. Wharton's solicitude for perfection of expression that the form of this story impresses the reader as being not only appropriate, but inevitable to its content. Seldom, indeed, does a writer achieve such absolute and flawless beauty as Mrs. Wharton has achieved in "The Old Maid." The incident upon which the story is based is meagrely simple, as simple as that which supports *The Scarlet Letter*. An impoverished member of the tight little society of old New York has had a concealed love affair with a man too poor to marry her. Somewhat later she falls in love with and becomes engaged to a young and wealthy member of that society. But, unknown to her friends and to society in general, the earlier episode has had the consequence of making her the mother of a child, and the child has been farmed out as a foundling. The question which confronts her is the future of the child. Shall she part herself from it, or shall she reject marriage and happiness to continue her furtive care of her baby? Her heart is torn by the divided interest of her desire for

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personal happiness and her love of her child. In her dilemma she goes to a married cousin, the jilted flame of her earlier lover, the woman who, had circumstances been propitious, might have been the child's mother. To this woman she tells her story, putting her destiny in her cousin's hands. The cousin, eminently respectable but thoroughly tender, determines that Charlotte may retain her child by making herself responsible for its support, but exacts as the price for this solution the cancellation of Charlotte's engagement.

Somewhat later Charlotte and her child are taken in by the cousin, now a widow, and the ties of affection between the child and her benefactor become poignantly close. To conceal her relationship to the child, Charlotte trains herself to an exaggerated prudishness and conventionality, but the little girl, inheriting the impulsive character of her father and mother, has nothing but amused tolerance for the severely constrained woman who is forced always to suppress and deny her passionate maternal soul. Ultimately Charlotte's misadventure threatens to repeat itself in the life of her child, and the child is saved only by a second intervention on the part of the benefactress, who now legally adopts her as her own, and spiritually assumes the burden of motherhood. The tragedy in the life of Charlotte centres in the ironical and terrible expiation involved by the relationship of herself and her cousin to her child, now a girl about to be married.

Only a superbly accomplished artist could dredge so deeply into the secret places of the human spirit on so narrow a canvas, and only a great writer could transmute such recalcitrant material into noble imaginative beauty. Mrs. Wharton achieves this with the greatest economy of means, but each stroke, each line, each word tells profoundly. She achieves complete characterization in two sentences: "The Ralstons were of middle-class English stock. They had not come to the Colonies to die for a creed but to live for a bank account." She implies the meaning of her story in scarcely more words:

As the truth stole upon Delia her heart melted with the old compassion for Charlotte. She saw that it was a terrible, a sacrilegious thing to interfere with another's destiny, to lay the tenderest touch upon any human being's right to love and suffer after his own fashion. Delia had twice intervened in Charlotte Lovel's life; it was natural that Charlotte should be her enemy. If only she did not revenge herself by wounding Time!

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And, within the limits of four slight episodes, Mrs. Wharton has revealed the complete character and experience of three people in all the conflicting and complicated threads of their relationship to one another. It is true that the essential theme of the story is the conflict between individual impulse and the inflexible decorum of established convention. But as Mrs. Wharton has written it, her story transcends the significance of her theme. In the opinion of the present reviewer "The Old Maid" is assured of literary immortality. It stands as one of the most imperishably beautiful and perfect stories in the whole range of American literature.

After "The Old Maid," "New Year's Day," which tells of the tragic consequences involved for a woman by her superb sacrifice of her virtue in order that she may save the life of the husband whom she passionately loves—after "The Old Maid" this story seems slightly facile and effective only as melodrama. It is not that Mrs. Wharton's intelligence and irony have deserted her. The irony is implicit from the opening lines, which constitute one of the most brilliant beginnings of a story ever achieved by Mrs. Wharton:

"She was bad . . . always. They used to meet at the Fifth Avenue Hotel," said my mother, as if the scene of the offense added to the guilt of the couple whose past she was revealing.

No, it is not the absence of irony which makes "New Year's Day" seem the lesser achievement. It is, perhaps, the effect of conscious artifice, of plot too painstakingly contrived, of character too obviously whittled down to type. A good story, and by any other hand an excellent story, is "New Year's Day." But adequate fiction—a merely competent, well-articulated story, is beneath Mrs. Wharton's capacities.

The four stories which constitute *Old New York* deserve wide popularity. Of them, one, "The Old Maid," deserves and should acquire enduring fame. Not to read this story is to deliberately deny one's self an acquaintance with the finest contribution to our fiction made by any author in many years.

America's most famous woman of letters and the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize, Edith Wharton was born into one of New York's old and rich families in 1862. Educated privately, she was married to Edward Wharton in 1885, and they spent the next few years in the high society of Newport, Rhode Island; then Lenox, Massachusetts; and Europe. Though she published several volumes of fiction around the turn of the century, including *The Greater Inclination* (1899), *The Touchstone* (1900), *Crucial Instances* (1901), *The Valley of Decision* (1902), *Sanctuary* (1903), and *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* (1904), it wasn't until 1905, with the publication of the bestselling *The House of Mirth*, that Wharton was recognized as one of the most important novelists of her time. In 1906, Wharton visited Paris, which inspired *Madame de Treymes* (1907), and she made her home there in 1907, finally divorcing her husband in 1912. The years before the outbreak of World War I—when *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Reef* (1912), and *The Custom of the Country* (1913) were published—represent the core of her artistic achievement. She also wrote two novels about the war—*The Marne* (1918) and *A Son at the Front* (1923)—and continued, from France, to write about the New England and Newport society she had known so well, producing *Summer*, the companion to *Ethan Frome*, in 1917 and *The Age of Innocence* (which is also available as a Pocket Books Enriched Classic) in 1920. The collection *Old New York* was published in 1924. Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence*. As a keen observer and chronicler of society, Edith Wharton is without peer. She died in 1937 in France.

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FALSE DAWN
(The 'Forties)



Part One

I

HAY, verbena and mignonette scented the languid July day. Large strawberries, crimsoning through sprigs of mint, floated in a bowl of pale yellow cup on the verandah table: an old Georgian bowl, with complex reflections on polygonal flanks, engraved with the Raycie arms between lion's heads. Now and again the gentlemen, warned by a menacing hum, slapped their cheeks, their brows or their bald crowns; but they did so as furtively as possible, for Mr. Halston Raycie, on whose verandah they sat, would not admit that there were mosquitoes at High Point.

The strawberries came from Mr. Raycie's kitchen garden; the Georgian bowl came from his great-grandfather (father of the Signer); the verandah was that of his country-house, which stood on a height above the Sound, at a convenient driving distance from his town house in Canal Street.

"Another glass, Commodore," said Mr. Raycie, shaking out a cambric handkerchief the size of a table-cloth, and applying a corner of it to his steaming brow.

Mr. Jameson Ledgely smiled and took another glass. He was known as "the Commodore" among his intimates because of having been in the Navy in his youth, and having taken part, as a midshipman under Admiral Porter, in the war of 1812. This jolly sunburnt bachelor, whose face resembled that of

one of the bronze idols he might have brought back with him, had kept his naval air, though long retired from the service; and his white duck trousers, his gold-braided cap and shining teeth, still made him look as if he might be in command of a frigate. Instead of that, he had just sailed over a party of friends from his own place on the Long Island shore; and his trim white sloop was now lying in the bay below the point.

The Halston Raycie house overlooked a lawn sloping to the Sound. The lawn was Mr. Raycie's pride: it was mown with a scythe once a fortnight, and rolled in the spring by an old white horse specially shod for the purpose. Below the verandah the turf was broken by three rounds of rose-geranium, heliotrope and Bengal roses, which Mrs. Raycie tended in gauntlet gloves, under a small hinged sunshade that folded back on its carved ivory handle. The house, remodelled and enlarged by Mr. Raycie on his marriage, had played a part in the Revolutionary war as the settler's cottage where Benedict Arnold had had his headquarters. A contemporary print of it hung in Mr. Raycie's study; but no one could have detected the humble outline of the old house in the majestic stone-coloured dwelling built of tongued-and-grooved boards, with an angle tower, tall narrow windows, and a verandah on chamfered posts, that figured so confidently as a "Tuscan Villa" in Downing's "Landscape Gardening in America." There was the same difference between the rude lithograph of the earlier house and the fine steel engraving of its successor (with a "specimen" weeping beech on the lawn) as between the buildings themselves. Mr. Raycie had reason to think well of his architect.

He thought well of most things related to himself by ties of blood or interest. No one had ever been

quite sure that he made Mrs. Raycie happy, but he was known to have the highest opinion of her. So it was with his daughters, Sarah Anne and Mary Adeline, fresher replicas of the lymphatic Mrs. Raycie; no one would have sworn that they were quite at ease with their genial parent, yet every one knew how loud he was in their praises. But the most remarkable object within the range of Mr. Raycie's self-approval was his son Lewis. And yet, as Jameson Ledgely, who was given to speaking his mind, had once observed, you wouldn't have supposed young Lewis was exactly the kind of craft Halston would have turned out if he'd had the designing of his son and heir.

Mr. Raycie was a monumental man. His extent in height, width and thickness was so nearly the same that whichever way he was turned one had an almost equally broad view of him; and every inch of that mighty circumference was so exquisitely cared for that to a farmer's eye he might have suggested a great agricultural estate of which not an acre is untilled. Even his baldness, which was in proportion to the rest, looked as if it received a special daily polish; and on a hot day his whole person was like some wonderful example of the costliest irrigation. There was so much of him, and he had so many planes, that it was fascinating to watch each runnel of moisture follow its own particular watershed. Even on his large fresh-looking hands the drops divided, trickling in different ways from the ridges of the fingers; and as for his forehead and temples, and the raised cushion of cheek beneath each of his lower lids, every one of these slopes had its own particular stream, its hollow pools and sudden cataracts; and the sight was never unpleasant, because his whole vast bubbling surface was of such a clean and hearty pink, and the exuding