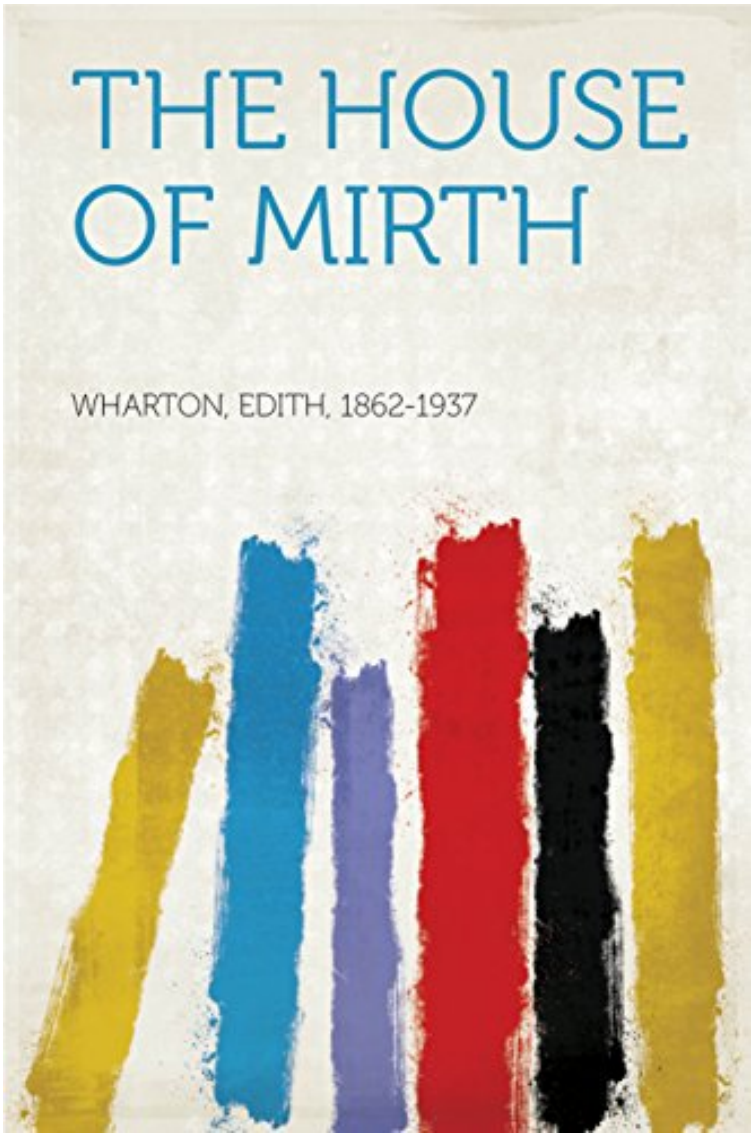
The House of Mirth



Par Edith, 1862-1937 Wharton
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[FREE] The House of Mirth

Par Edith, 1862-1937 Wharton : The House of Mirth before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The House of Mirth:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurHardPress Classic Books Series.com"The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth," warns Ecclesiastes 7:4, and so does the novel by Edith Wharton that takes its title from this call to heed. New York at the turn of the century was a time of opulence and frivolity for those who could afford it. But for those who couldn't and yet wanted desperately to keep up with the whirlwind, like Wharton's charming Lily Bart, it was something else altogether: a gilded cage rather than the Gilded Age. One of Wharton's earliest descriptions of her heroine, in the library of her bachelor friend and sometime suitor Lawrence Selden, indicates that she appears "as though she were a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing room." Indeed, herein lies Lily's problem. She has, we're told, "been brought up to be ornamental," and yet her spirit is larger than what this ancillary role

requires. By today's standards she would be nothing more than a mild rebel, but in the era into which Wharton drops her unmercifully, this tiny spark of character, combined with numerous assaults by vicious society women and bad luck, ultimately renders Lily persona non grata. Her own ambivalence about her position serves to open the door to disaster: several times she is on the verge of "good" marriage and squanders it at the last moment, unwilling to play by the rules of a society that produces, as she calls them, "poor, miserable, marriageable girls. Lily's rather violent tumble down the social ladder provides a thumbnail sketch of the general injustices of the upper classes (which, incidentally, Wharton never quite manages to condemn entirely, clearly believing that such life is cruel but without alternative). From her start as a beautiful woman at the height of her powers to her sad finale as a recently fired milliner's assistant addicted to sleeping drugs, Lily Bart is heroic, not least for her final admission of her own role in her downfall. "Once--twice--you gave me the chance to escape from my life and I refused it: refused it because I was a coward," she tells Selden as the book draws to a close. All manner of hideous socialite beasts--some of whose treatment by Wharton, such as the token social-climbing Jew, Simon Rosedale, date the book unfortunately--wander through the novel while Lily plummets. As her tale winds down to nothing more than the remnants of social grace and cold hard cash, it's hard not to agree with Lily's own assessment of herself: "I have tried hard--but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else." Nevertheless, it's even harder not to believe that she deserved better, which is why The House of Mirth remains so timely and so vital in spite of its crushing end and its unflattering portrait of what life offers up. --Melanie RehakExtraitChapter OneSELDEN PAUSED in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart.It was a Monday in early September, and he was returning to his work from a hurried dip into the country; but what was Miss Bart doing in town at that season? If she had appeared to be catching a train, he might have inferred that he had come on her in the act of transition between one and another of the country-houses which disputed her presence after the close of the Newport season; but her desultory air perplexed him. She stood apart from the crowd, letting it drift by her to the platform or the street, and wearing an air of irresolution which might, as he surmised, be the mask of a very definite purpose. It struck him at once that she was waiting for some one, but he hardly knew why the idea arrested him. There was nothing new about Lily Bart, yet he could never see her without a faint movement of interest: it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation, that her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions.An impulse of curiosity made him turn out of his direct line to the door, and stroll past her. He knew that if she did not wish to be seen she would contrive to elude him; and it amused him to think of putting her skill to the test."Mr. Seldenwhat good luck!"She came forward smiling, eager almost, in her resolve to intercept him. One or two persons, in brushing past them, lingered to look; for Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveller rushing to his last train.Selden had never seen her more radiant. Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room, and under her dark hat and veil she regained the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing. Was it really eleven years, Selden found himself wondering, and had she indeed reached the nine-and-twentieth birthday with which her rivals credited her?"What luck!" she repeated. "How nice of you to come to my rescue!"He responded joyfully that to do so was his mission in life, and asked what form the rescue was to take."Oh, almost anyeven to sitting on a bench and talking to me. One sits out a cotillionwhy not sit out a train? It isn't a bit hotter here than in Mrs. Van Osburgh's conservatoryand some of the women are not a bit uglier."She broke off, laughing, to explain that she had come up to town from Tuxedo, on her way to the Gus Trenors' at Bellomont, and had missed the three-fifteen train to Rhinebeck."And there isn't another till half-past five." She consulted the little jeweled watch among her laces. "Just two hours to wait. And I don't know what to do with myself. My maid came up this morning to do some shopping for me, and was to go on to Bellomont at one o'clock, and my aunt's house is closed, and I don't know a soul in town." She glanced plaintively about the station. "It is hotter than Mrs. Van Osburgh's, after all. If you can spare the time, do take me somewhere for a breath of air."He declared himself entirely at her disposal: the adventure struck him as diverting. As a spectator, he had always enjoyed Lily Bart; and his course lay so far out of her orbit that it amused him to be drawn for a moment into the sudden intimacy which her proposal implied."Shall we go over to Sherry's for a cup of tea?"She smiled assentingly, and then made a slight grimace."So many people come up to town on a Mondayone is sure to meet a lot of bores. I'm as old as the hills, of course, and it ought not to make any difference; but if I'm old

enough, you're not," she objected gaily. "I'm dying for teabut isn't there a quieter place?"He answered her smile, which rested on him vividly. Her discretions interested him almost as much as her imprudences: he was so sure that both were part of the same carefully-elaborated plan. Inj udging Miss Bart, he had always made use of the "argument from design.""The resources of New York are rather meagre," he said; "but I'll find a hansom first, and then we'll invent something."He led her through the throng of returning holiday-makers, past shallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans. Was it possible that she belonged to the same race? The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was.A rapid shower had cooled the air, and clouds still hung refreshingly over the moist street."How delicious! Let us walk a little," she said as they emerged from the station.They turned into Madison Avenue and began to stroll northward. As she moved beside him, with her long light step, Selden was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness: in the modelling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hairwas it ever so slightly brightened by art?and the thick planting of her straight black lashes. Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine. He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?As he reached this point in his speculations the sun came out, and her lifted parasol cut off his enjoyment. A moment or two later she paused with a sigh."Oh, dear, I'm so hot and thirstyand what a hideous place New York is!" She looked despairingly up and down the dreary thoroughfare. "Other cities put on their best clothes in summer, but New York seems to sit in its shirt-sleeves." Her eyes wandered down one of the side-streets. "Some one has had the humanity to plant a few trees over there. Let us go into the shade.""I am glad my street meets with your approval," said Selden as they turned the corner."Your street? Do you live here?"She glanced with interest along the new brick and limestone house-fronts, fantastically varied in obedience to the American craving for novelty, but fresh and inviting with their awnings and flower-boxes."Ah, yesto be sure: The Benedick. What a nice-looking building! I don't think I've ever seen it before." She looked across at the flat-house with its marble porch and pseudo-Georgian facade. "Which are your windows? Those with the awnings down?""On the top flooryes.""And that nice little balcony is yours? How cool it looks up there!"He paused a moment. "Come up and see," he suggested. "I can give you a cup of tea in no timeand you won't meet any bores."Her colour deepenedshe still had the art of blushing at the right timebut she took the suggestion as lightly as it was made."Why not? It's too temptingI'll take the risk," she declared."Oh, I'm not dangerous," he said in the same key. In truth, he had never liked her as well as at that moment. He knew she had accepted without afterthought: he could never be a factor in her calculations, and there was a surprise, a refreshment almost, in the spontaneity of her consent.On the threshold he paused a moment, feeling for his latch-key."There's no one here; but I have a servant who is supposed to come in the mornings, and it's just possible he may have put out the tea-things and provided some cake."He ushered her into a slip of a hall hung with old prints. She noticed the letters and notes heaped on the table among his gloves and sticks; then she found herself in a small library, dark but cheerful, with its walls of books, a pleasantly faded Turkey rug, a littered desk, and, as he had foretold, a tea-tray on a low table near the window. A breeze had sprung up, swaying inward the muslin curtains, and bringing a fresh scent of mignonette and petunias from the flower-box on the balcony.Lily sank with a sigh into one of the shabby leather chairs."How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman." She leaned back in a luxury of discontent.Selden was rummaging in a cupboard for the cake."Even women," he said, "have been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat.""Oh, governessesor widows. But not girlsnot poor, miserable, marriageable girls!""I even know a girl who lives in a flat."She sat up in surprise. "You do?""I do," he assured her, emerging from the cupboard with the sought-for cake."Oh, I knowyou mean Gerty Farish." She smiled a little unkindly. "But I said marriageableand besides, she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap. I should hate that, you know.""You shouldn't dine with her on wash-days," said Selden, cutting the cake.They both laughed, and he knelt by the table to light the lamp under the kettle, while she measured out the tea into a little tea-pot of green glaze. As he watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist, he was struck with the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his

cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen. She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.She seemed to read his thought. "It was horrid of me to say that of Gerty," she said with charming compunction. "I forgot she was your cousin. But we're so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy. And besides, she is free and I am not. If I were, I daresay I could manage to be happy even in her flat. It must be pure bliss to arrange the furniture just as one likes, and give all the horrors to the ash-man. If I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room I know I should be a better woman.""Is it so very bad?" he asked sympathetically.She smiled at him across the tea-pot which she was holding up to be filled."That shows how seldom you come there. Why don't you come oftener?""When I do come, it's not to look at Mrs. Peniston's furniture.""Nonsense," she said. "You don't come at alland yet we get on so well when we meet.""Perhaps that's the reason," he answered promptly. "I'm afraid I haven't any cream, you knowshall you mind a slice of lemon instead?""I shall like it better." She waited while he cut the lemon and dropped a thin disk into her cup. "But that is not the reason," she insisted."The reason for what?""For your never coming." She leaned forward with a shade of perplexity in her charming eyes. "I wish I knewI wish I could make you out. Of course I know there are men who don't like meone can tell that at a glance. And there are others who are afraid of me: they think I want to marry them." She smiled up at him frankly. "But I don't think you dislike meand you can't possibly think I want to marry you.""NoI absolve you of that," he agreed."Well, then?"He had carried his cup to the fireplace, and stood leaning against the chimney-piece and looking down on her with an air of indolent amusement. The provocation in her eyes increased his amusementhe had not supposed she would waste her powder on such small game; but perhaps she was only keeping her hand in; or perhaps a girl of her type had no conversation but of the personal kind. At any rate, she was amazingly pretty, and he had asked her to tea and must live up to his obligations."Well, then," he said with a plunge, "perhaps that's the reason.""What?""The fact that you don't want to marry me. Perhaps I don't regard it as such a strong inducement to go and see you." He felt a slight shiver down his spine as he ventured this, but her laugh reassured him."Dear Mr. Selden, that wasn't worthy of you. It's stupid of you to make love to me, and it isn't like you to be stupid." She leaned back, sipping her tea with an air so enchantingly judicial that, if they had been in her aunt's drawing-room, he might almost have tried to disprove her deduction."Don't you see," she continued, "that there are men enough to say pleasant things to me, and that what I want is a friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable ones when I need them? Sometimes I have fancied you might be that friendI don't know why, except that you are neither a prig nor a bounder, and that I shouldn't have to pretend with you or be on my guard against you." Her voice had dropped to a note of seriousness, and she sat gazing up at him with the troubled gravity of a child."You don't know how much I need such a friend," she said. "My aunt is full of copy-book axioms, but they were all meant to apply to conduct in the early fifties. I always feel that to live up to them would include wearing book-muslin with gigot sleeves. And the other womenmy best friendswell, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me. I've been about too longpeople are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry."There was a moment's pause, during which Selden meditated one or two replies calculated to add a momentary zest to the situation; but he rejected them in favour of the simple question: "Well, why don't you?"She coloured and laughed. "Ah, I see you are a friend after all, and that is one of the disagreeable things I was asking for.""It wasn't meant to be disagreeable," he returned amicably. "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?"She sighed. "I suppose so. What else is there?"