



Edith Wharton

The Buccaneers



Kharkiv
«Folio»
2025

Book I

CHAPTER I

It was the height of the racing season at Saratoga. The thermometer stood over ninety, and a haze of sun-powdered dust hung in the elms along the street facing the *Grand Union Hotel*, and over the scant triangular lawns planted with young firs, and protected by a low white rail from the depredations of dogs and children.

Mrs. St George, whose husband was one of the gentlemen most interested in the racing, sat on the wide hotel verandah, a jug of iced lemonade at her elbow and a palmetto fan in one small hand, and looked out between the immensely tall white columns of the portico, which so often reminded cultured travelers of the Parthenon at Athens (Greece). On Sunday afternoons, this verandah was crowded with gentlemen in tall hats and frockcoats, enjoying cool drinks and Havana cigars, and surveying the long country street planted with spindling elms. But today the gentlemen were racing, and the rows of chairs were occupied by ladies and young girls listlessly awaiting their return, in a drowsy atmosphere of swayed fans and iced refreshments.

Mrs. St George eyed most of these ladies with a melancholy disfavor, and sighed to think how times had changed since she had first—some ten years earlier, trailed her crinolined skirts up and down that same verandah.

Mrs. St George's vacant hours, which were many, were tilled by such wistful reflections. Life had never been easy, but it had certainly been easier when Colonel St George devoted less time to poker, and to Wall Street; when the children were little, crinolines were still worn, and Newport had not yet eclipsed all rival watering places. What, for instance, could be prettier, or more suitable for a lady, than a black alpaca skirt looped up like a window drapery above a scarlet serge underskirt, the whole surmounted by a wide-sleeved black poplin jacket with ruffled muslin undersleeves, and a flat "porkpie" hat like the one the Empress Eugenie was represented as wearing on the beach at Biarritz?

But now there seemed to be no definite fashions. Everybody wore what they pleased, and it was as difficult to look like a lady in those tight perpendicular polonaises bunched up at the back that the Paris dressmakers were sending over as in the outrageously low square-cut evening gowns, which Mrs. St George had viewed with disapproval at the Opera in New York. The fact was, you could hardly tell a lady now from an actress, or—er—the other kind of woman; and society at Saratoga, now that all the best people were going to Newport, had grown as mixed and confusing as the fashions. Everything was changed since crinolines had gone out and bustles come in. Who, for instance, was that new woman, a Mrs. Closson, or some such name, who had such a dusky skin for her auburn hair, such a fat body for her small uncertain feet, and who, when she wasn't strumming on the hotel piano, was credibly reported by the domestics to lie for hours on her bedroom sofa

Smoking—yes, smoking big Havana cigars? The gentlemen, Mrs. St George believed, treated the story as a good joke; to a woman of refinement it could be only

a subject for painful meditation. Mrs. St George had always been rather distant in her manner to the big and exuberant Mrs. Elmsworth who was seated at this moment nearby on the verandah. (Mrs. Elmsworth was always "edging up.") Mrs. St George was instinctively distrustful of the advances of ladies who had daughters of the age of her own, and Lizzy Elmsworth, the eldest of her neighbor's family, was just about the age of Virginia St George, and might by some (those who preferred the brunette to the very blond type) be thought as handsome.

And besides, where did the Elmsworths come from, as Mrs. St George had often asked her husband, an irreverent jovial man who invariably replied, "If you were to begin by telling me where we do... so absurd on the part of a gentleman as well known as Colonel St George in some unspecified district of what Mrs. St George called the Sa-outh.

But at the thought of that new dusky Closson woman with the queer-looking girl who was so ugly now, but might suddenly turn into a beauty (Mrs. St George had seen such cases), the instinct of organized defense awoke in her vague bosom, and she felt herself drawn to Mrs. Elmsworth, and to the two Elmsworth girls, as to whom one already knew just how good-looking they were going to be.

A good many hours of Mrs. St George's days were spent in mentally cataloguing and appraising the physical attributes of the young ladies in whose company her daughters trailed up and down the verandahs, and waltzed and polkaed for hours every night in the long bare hotel parlors, so conveniently divided by sliding doors, which slipped into the wall and made the two rooms into one. Mrs. St George remembered the day when she had been agreeably awestruck by this vista, with its expectant

lines of bentwood chairs against the walls, and its row of windows draped in crimson brocatelle heavily festooned from overhanging gilt cornices.

In those days, the hotel ballroom had been her idea of a throne-room in a palace; but since her husband had taken her to a ball at the Seventh Regiment Armory in New York, her standards had changed, and she regarded the splendors of the Grand Union almost as contemptuously as the arrogant Mrs. Eglinton of New York, who had arrived there the previous summer on her way to Lake George, and after being shown into the yellow damask "bridal suite" by the obsequious landlord, had said she supposed it would do well enough for one night.

Mrs. St George, in those earlier years, had even been fluttered by an introduction to Mrs. Elmsworth, who was an older *habitué* of Saratoga than herself and had a big showy affable husband with lustrous black whiskers, who was reported to have made a handsome fortune on the New York Stock Exchange. But that was in the days when Mrs. Elmsworth drove daily to the races in a high barouche sent from New York, which attracted perhaps too much attention. Since then Mr. Elmsworth's losses in Wall Street had obliged his wife to put down her barouche, and stay at home on the hotel verandah with the other ladies, and she now no longer inspired Mrs. St George with awe or envy.

Indeed, had it not been for this new Closson danger Mrs. Elmsworth in her present situation would have been negligible; but now that Virginia St George and Lizzy Elmsworth were "out" (as Mrs. St George persisted in calling it, though the girls could not see much difference in their lives) now that Lizzy Elmsworth's looks seemed to Mrs. St George at once more to be admired and less to

be feared, and Mabel, the second Elmsworth girl, who was a year older than her own youngest, to be too bony and lantern jawed for future danger, Mrs. St George began to wonder whether she and her neighbor might not organize some sort of joint defense against new women with daughters.

Later it would not so much matter, for Mrs. St George's youngest, Nan, though certainly not a beauty like Virginia, was going to be what was called fascinating, and by the time her hair was put up the St George girls need fear no rivalry. Week after week, day after day, the anxious mother had gone over Miss Elmsworth's points, comparing them one by one with Virginia's. As regards hair and complexion, there could be no doubt; Virginia, all rose and pearl, with sheaves of full fair hair heaped above her low forehead, was as pure and luminous as an apple blossom.

But Lizzy's waist was certainly at least an inch smaller (some said two), Lizzy's dark eyebrows had a bolder curve, and Lizzy's foot—ah, where in the world did an upstart Elmsworth get that arrogant instep? Yes; but it was some comfort to note that Lizzy's complexion was opaque and lifeless compared to Virginia's, and that her fine eyes showed temper, and would be likely to frighten the young men away. Still, she had to an alarming degree what was called "style", and Mrs. St George suspected that in the circles to which she longed to introduce her daughters style was valued even more highly than beauty.

These were the problems, among which her thoughts moved during the endless sweltering afternoon hours, like torpid fish turning about between the weary walls of a too small aquarium. But now a new presence had invaded that sluggish element. Mrs. St George no longer compared her eldest daughter and Lizzy Elmsworth with each other;

she began to compare them both with the newcomer, the daughter of the unknown Mrs. Closson.

It was small comfort to Mrs. St George (though she repeated it to herself so often) that the Clossons were utterly unknown, that though Colonel St George played poker with Mr. Closson, and had what the family called "business connections" with him, they were nowhere near the stage when it becomes a pleasing duty for a man to introduce a colleague to his family. Neither did it matter that Mrs. Closson's own past was if anything obscurer than her husband's, and that those who said she was a poor Brazilian widow when Closson had picked her up on a business trip to Rio were smiled at and corrected by others, presumably better informed, who suggested that divorcee was the word, and not widow.

Even the fact that the Closson girl (so called) was known not to be Closson's daughter, but to bear some queer exotic name like Santos-Dios ("the Colonel says that's not swearing, it's the language," Mrs. St George explained to Mrs. Elmsworth when they talked the newcomers over)—even this was not enough to calm Mrs. St George. The girl, whatever her real name, was known as Conchita Closson; she addressed as "Father" the noncommittal pepper-and-salt-looking man who joined his family over Sundays at the Grand Union; and it was of no use for Mrs. St George to say to herself that Conchita was plain and therefore negligible, for she had the precise kind of plainness, which, as mothers of rival daughters know, may suddenly blaze into irresistible beauty.

At present, Miss Closson's head was too small, her neck was too long, she was too tall and thin, and her hair—well, her hair (oh, horror) was nearly red. And her skin was dark, under the powder which (yes, my dear—

at eighteen) Mrs. St George was sure she applied to it; and the combination of red hair and sallow complexion would have put off anybody who had heard a description of them, instead of seeing them triumphantly embodied in Conchita Closson. Mrs. St George shivered under her dotted muslin ruffled with Valenciennes, and drew a tippet edged with swans down over her shoulders. At that moment her own daughters, Virginia and Nan, wandered by, one after the other; and the sight somehow increased Mrs. St George's irritation.

"Virginia," she called. Virginia halted, seemed to hesitate as to whether the summons were worth heeding, and then sauntered across the verandah toward her mother.

"Virginia, I don't want you should go round any more with that strange girl," Mrs. St George began.

Virginia's sapphire eyes rested with a remote indifferent gaze on the speaker's tightly buttoned bronze kid boots; and Mrs. St George suddenly wondered if she had burst a buttonhole.

"What girl?" Virginia drawled. "How do I know? Goodness knows who they are. Your pa says she was a widow from one of those South American countries when she married Mr. Closson—the mother was, I mean."

"Well, if he says so, I suppose she was."

"But some people say she was just divorced. And I don't want my daughters associating with that kind of people." Virginia removed her blue gaze from her mother's boots to the little mantle trimmed with swans down. "I should think you'd roast with that thing on," she remarked.

"Jinny. Now you listen to what I say," her mother ineffectually called after her. Nan St George had taken no part in the conversation; at first, she had hardly heeded what was said.

CONTENTS

Book I

Chapter I	3
Chapter II	14
Chapter III	22
Chapter IV	34
Chapter V	43
Chapter VI	56
Chapter VII	67

Book II

Chapter VIII	84
Chapter IX	94
Chapter X	106
Chapter XI	116
Chapter XII	126
Chapter XIII	137
Chapter XIV	148
Chapter XV	157

Chapter XVI	168
Chapter XVII	189
Chapter XVIII	205

Book III

Chapter XIX	214
Chapter XX	223
Chapter XXI	237
Chapter XXII	247
Chapter XXIII	257
Chapter XXIV	265
Chapter XXV	275
Chapter XXVI	288
Chapter XXVII	297
Chapter XXVIII	306
Chapter XXIX	313