



Edith Wharton

*The Glimpses
of the Moon*



Kharkiv
«Folio»

Part I

CHAPTER I

It rose for them—their honey-moon—over the waters of a lake so famed as the scene of romantic raptures that they were rather proud of not having been afraid to choose it as the setting of their own.

“It required a total lack of humor, or as great a gift for it as ours, to risk the experiment,” Susy Lansing opined, as they hung over the inevitable marble balustrade and watched their tutelary orb roll its magic carpet across the waters to their feet.

“Yes—or the loan of Strefford’s villa,” her husband emended, glancing upward through the branches at a long low patch of paleness to which the moonlight was beginning to give the form of a white house-front.

“Oh, come when we’d five to choose from. At least if you count the Chicago flat.”

“So we had—you wonder!” He laid his hand on hers, and his touch renewed the sense of marveling exultation, which the deliberate survey of their adventure always roused in her.... It was characteristic that she merely added, in her steady laughing tone, “Or, not counting the flat—for I hate to brag—just consider the others: Violet Melrose’s place at Versailles, your aunt’s villa at Monte Carlo—and a moor!”

She was conscious of throwing in the moor tentatively, and yet with a somewhat exaggerated emphasis, as if to

make sure that he shouldn't accuse her of slurring it over. However, he seemed to have no desire to do so. "Poor old Fred!" he merely remarked; and she breathed out carelessly: "Oh, well—"

His hand still lay on hers, and for a long interval, while they stood silent in the enveloping loveliness of the night, she was aware only of the warm current running from palm to palm, as the moonlight below them drew its line of magic from shore to shore.

Nick Lansing spoke at last. "Versailles in May would have been impossible: all our Paris crowd would have run us down within twenty-four hours. Moreover, Monte Carlo is ruled out because it's exactly the kind of place everybody expected us to go. So—with all respect to you—it wasn't much of a mental strain to decide on Como."

His wife instantly challenged this belittling of her capacity. "It took a good deal of argument to convince you that we could face the ridicule of Como!"

"Well, I should have preferred something in a lower key; at least I thought I should till we got here. Now I see that this place is idiotic unless one is perfectly happy; and that then it's—as good as any other."

She sighed out a blissful assent. "And I must say that Streffy has done things to a turn. Even the cigars—who do you suppose gave him those cigars?" She added thoughtfully, "You'll miss them when we have to go."

"Oh, I say, don't let's talk tonight about going. Aren't we outside of time and space...? Smell that guinea-a-bottle stuff over there: what is it? Stephanotis?"

"Y—yes.... I suppose so. Or gardenias.... Oh, the fireflies! Look... there, against that splash of moonlight on the water. Apples of silver in a net-work of gold...." They leaned

together, one flesh from shoulder to fingertips, their eyes held by the snared glitter of the ripples.

"I could bear," Lansing remarked, "even a nightingale at this moment..."

A faint gurgle shook the magnolias behind them, and a long liquid whisper answered it from the thicket of laurel above their heads.

"It's a little late in the year for them: they're ending just as we begin."

Susy laughed. "I hope when our turn comes we shall say goodbye to each other as sweetly."

It was in her husband's mind to answer: "They're not saying goodbye, but only settling down to family cares." However, as this did not happen to be in his plan, or in Susy's, he merely echoed her laugh and pressed her closer.

The spring night drew them into its deepening embrace. The ripples of the lake had gradually widened and faded into a silken smoothness, and high above the mountains the moon was turning from gold to white in a sky powdered with vanishing stars. Across the lake, the lights of a little town went out, one after another, and the distant shore became a floating blackness. A breeze that rose and sank brushed their faces with the scents of the garden; once it blew out over the water a great white moth like a drifting magnolia petal. The nightingales had paused and the trickle of the fountain behind the house grew suddenly insistent.

When Susy spoke, it was in a voice languid with visions. "I have been thinking," she said, "that we ought to be able to make it last at least a year longer."

Her husband received the remark without any sign of surprise or disapprobation; his answer showed that he not

only understood her, but also had been inwardly following the same train of thought.

“You mean,” he enquired after a pause, “without counting your grandmother’s pearls?”

“Yes—without the pearls.”

He pondered a while, and then rejoined in a tender whisper: “Tell me again just how.”

“Let’s sit down, then. No, I like the cushions best.” He stretched himself in a long willow chair, and she curled up on a heap of boat-cushions and leaned her head against his knee. Just above her, when she lifted her lids, she saw bits of moon-flooded sky incrustated like silver in a sharp black patterning of plane-boughs. All about them breathed of peace, beauty, and stability, and her happiness was so acute that it was almost a relief to remember the stormy background of bills and borrowing against which its frail structure had been reared. “People with a balance can’t be as happy as all this,” Susy mused, letting the moonlight filter through her lazy lashes.

People with a balance had always been Susy Branch’s bugbear; they were still, and more dangerously, to be Susy Lansing’s. She detested them, detested them doubly, as the natural enemies of mankind and as the people one always had to put one’s self out for. The greater part of her life having been passed among them, she knew nearly all that there was to know about them, and judged them with the contemptuous lucidity of nearly twenty years of dependence. But at the present moment her animosity was diminished not only by the softening effect of love but by the fact that she had got out of those very people more—yes, ever so much more—than she and Nick, in their hours of most reckless planning, had ever dared to hope for.

“After all, we owe them this!” she mused.

Her husband, lost in the drowsy beatitude of the hour, had not repeated his question; but she was still on the trail of the thought he had started. A year—yes, she was sure now that with a little management they could have a whole year of it! “It” was their marriage, their being together, and away from bores and bothers, in a comradeship of which both of them had long ago guessed the immediate pleasure, but she at least had never imagined the deeper harmony.

It was at one of their earliest meetings—at one of the heterogeneous dinners that the Fred Gillows tried to think “literary”—that the young man who chanced to sit next to her, and of whom it was vaguely rumored that he had “written,” had presented himself to her imagination as the sort of luxury to which Susy Branch, heiress, might conceivably have treated herself as a crowning folly. Susy Branch, pauper, was fond of picturing how this fancied double would employ her millions: it was one of her chief grievances against her rich friends that they disposed of theirs so unimaginatively.

“I’d rather have a husband like that than a steam-yacht!” she had thought at the end of her talk with the young man who had written, and as to whom it had at once been clear to her that nothing his pen had produced, or might hereafter set down, would put him in a position to offer his wife anything more costly than a row-boat.

“His wife! As if he could ever have one! For he’s not the kind to marry for a yacht either.” In spite of her past, Susy had preserved enough inner independence to detect the latent signs of it in others, and to ascribe it impulsively to those of the opposite sex who happened to interest her. She had a natural contempt for people who gloried in what they need only have endured. She herself meant eventually to marry, because one couldn’t forever hang on

to rich people; but she was going to wait until she found someone who combined the maximum of wealth with at least a minimum of companionableness.

She had at once perceived young Lansing's case to be exactly the opposite: he was as poor as he could be, and as companionable as it was possible to imagine. She therefore decided to see as much of him as her hurried and entangled life permitted; and this, thanks to a series of adroit adjustments, turned out to be a good deal. They met frequently all the rest of that winter; so frequently that Mrs. Fred Gillow one day abruptly and sharply gave Susy to understand that she was "making herself ridiculous."

"Ah—" said Susy with a long breath, looking her friend and patroness straight in the painted eyes.

"Yes," cried Ursula Gillow in a sob, "before you interfered Nick liked me awfully... and, of course, I don't want to reproach you... but when I think...."

Susy made no answer. How could she, when she thought? The dress she had on had been given her by Ursula; Ursula's motor had carried her to the feast from which they were both returning. She counted on spending the following August with the Gillows at Newport... and the only alternative was to go to California with the Bockheimers, whom she had hitherto refused even to dine with.

"Of course, what you fancy is perfect nonsense, Ursula; and as to my interfering—" Susy hesitated, and then murmured: "But if it will make you any happier I'll arrange to see him less often...." She sounded the lowest depths of subservience in returning Ursula's tearful kiss....

Susy Branch had a masculine respect for her word; and the next day she put on her most becoming hat and sought out young Mr. Lansing in his lodgings. She was determined

to keep her promise to Ursula; but she meant to look her best when she did it.

She knew at what time the young man was likely to be found, for he was doing a dreary job on a popular encyclopedia (V to X), and had told her what hours were dedicated to the hateful task. "Oh, if only it were a novel!" she thought as she mounted his dingy stairs; but immediately reflected that, if it were the kind that she could bear to read, it probably wouldn't bring him in much more than his encyclopedia. Miss Branch had her standards in literature....

The apartment to which Mr. Lansing admitted her was a good deal cleaner, but hardly less dingy, than his staircase. Susy, knowing him to be addicted to Oriental archaeology, had pictured him in a bare room adorned by a single Chinese bronze of flawless shape, or by some precious fragment of Asiatic pottery. But such redeeming features were conspicuously absent, and no attempt had been made to disguise the decent indigence of the bed-sitting-room.

Lansing welcomed his visitor with every sign of pleasure, and with apparent indifference as to what she thought of his furniture. He seemed to be conscious only of his luck in seeing her on a day when they had not expected to meet. This made Susy all the sorrier to execute her promise, and the gladder that she had put on her prettiest hat; and for a moment or two, she looked at him in silence from under its conniving brim.

Warm as their mutual liking was, Lansing had never said a word of love to her; but this was no deterrent to his visitor, whose habit it was to speak her meaning clearly, when there were no reasons, worldly or pecuniary, for its concealment. After a moment, therefore, she told him why

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