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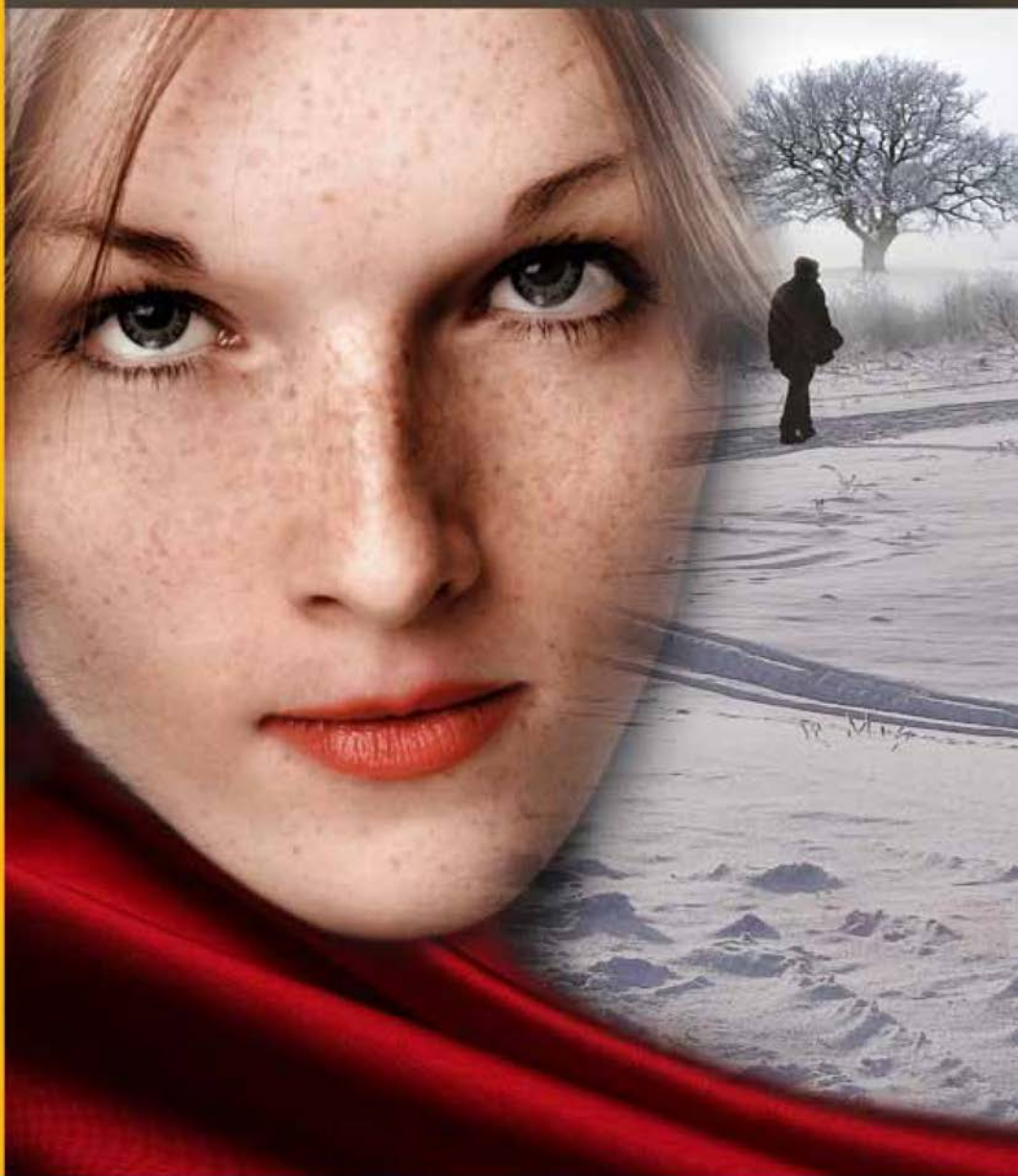
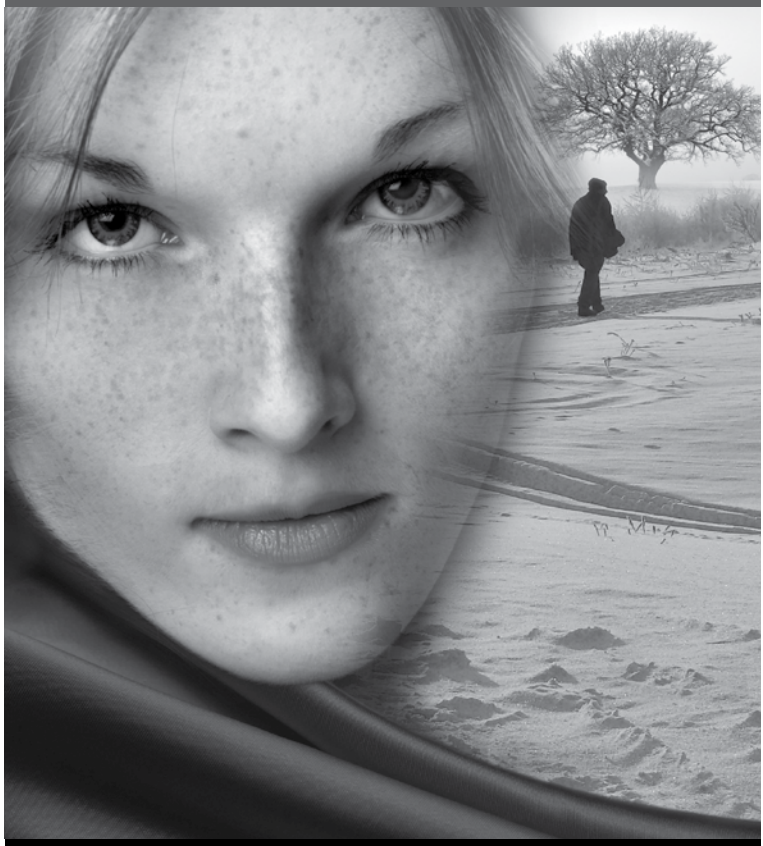
ETHAN FROME

by Edith Wharton



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

Ethan Frome



Edith Wharton

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Ethan Frome

Contents

Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Edith Wharton was born on January 24, 1862, into a wealthy family in New York City at a time when the social elite held the political and economic power in the city. The young Wharton had the good fortune to know some of the greatest American writers, including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Henry James, Sinclair Lewis, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Wharton began writing poetry in her teens, and her intelligence, her understanding of the workings of wealthy society, and her sense of humor all contributed to her success as a writer.

In 1897, Wharton's first non-fiction book, *The Decoration of Houses,* was published. Shortly afterwards, however, she suffered a nervous breakdown. Fortunately, her doctor suggested that as part of her recovery, she should begin writing fiction. In the 1890s, Wharton began contributing short stories to *Scribner's*, one of the most prestigious magazines of the time.

Later, after an affair and a divorce, she moved to Paris where she lived for the rest of her life. She loved being there among the writers and artists who challenged her intellectually, and she appreciated the higher status afforded women in France.

Wharton wrote her first novel, *The House of Mirth*, in 1905. During World War I, Wharton became a journalist for American newspapers. Although writing was the most important part of Wharton's life, the prolific author was active in many philanthropic endeavors as well, which earned her the French Legion of Honor. She raised funds and established the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee, which helped move more than 600 children away from the advancing German army.

Ethan Frome, published in 1911, was a departure from Wharton's previous tales of opulence and wealth, but it, too, attracted a large audience. In 1920, she won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence*. Three years later, she received an honorary doctorate from Yale University, making her the first woman to be so honored.

Edith Wharton died in 1937.

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

1. Is the conflict in *Ethan Frome* between morality and irresponsible actions, ethical and unprincipled behavior, or devotion and selfishness? Consider the following situations:

   - Ethan loves and desires Mattie, his idea of perfection, yet he stays with Zeena, whom he loathes. All the while he gives the appearance of being a loving and devoted husband.
   - Ethan could make a selfish decision for his own happiness and peace of mind, but is unable to because he feels the decision would hurt Zeena.
   - Ethan believes that society's restrictions and morality impose insurmountable barriers to block his happiness.
   - Is the desire to commit suicide immoral, or is it acceptable in certain intolerable situations?

2. Edith Wharton uses contrasts to illustrate the starkness of Ethan's world. Note the following in *Ethan Frome*:

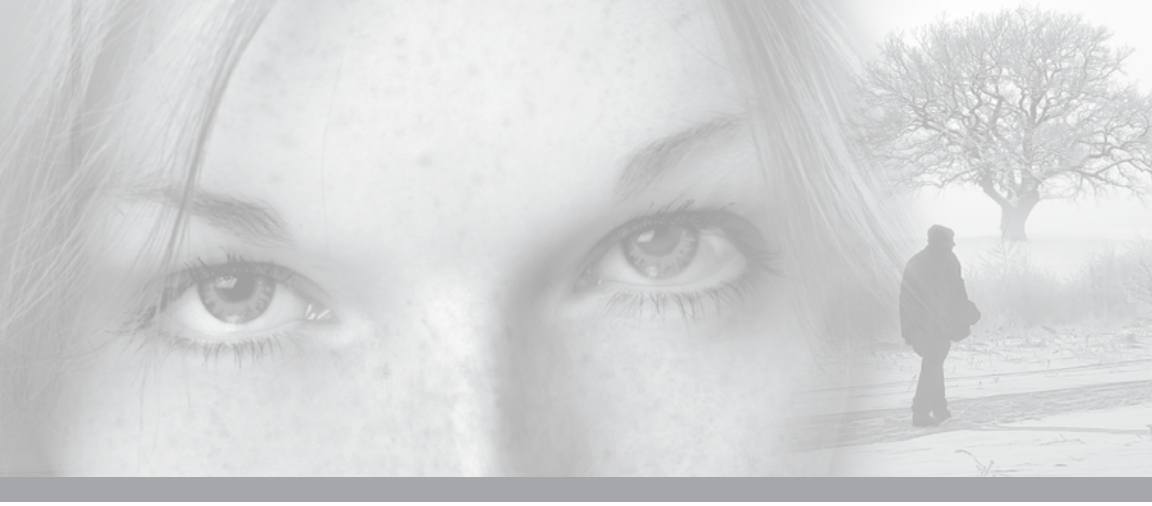
   - light and dark
   - sickness and health
   - cold and warmth
   - the graveyard and the summer scene at Shadow Pond
   - despair and hope
   - pessimism and optimism
   - illness and loneliness
   - winter and spring
   - the Varnum house and the Frome house
   - illusion and reality
   - social restrictions and fervent desire
   - conscience and impulse
   - courage and cowardice
   - escape and entrapment
   - physical strength and mental weakness

3. Symbols reflect the story's tone and Ethan's moods. They are also used in foreshadowing. Note the following symbols as they appear in the novel:

    - the cat
    - Zeena's pickle dish
    - the sled run
    - Mattie's scarlet ribbons and scarves
    - Ethan's private room
    - the actual town of Starkfield
    - the epitaph on the tombstone
    - Ethan's deformity
    - the weather

4. Is Zeena responsible for Ethan's sadness, or does the blame rest with Ethan himself?

5. Note how the disaster at the end causes a reversal of the characters' situations.



Ethan Frome

Ethan Frome

I HAD THE STORY, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story.

If you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, you know the post-office. If you know the post-office you must have seen Ethan† Frome drive up to it, drop the reins on his hollow-backed bay and drag himself across the brick pavement to the white colonnade; and you must have asked who he was.

It was there that, several years ago, I saw him for the first time; and the sight pulled me up sharp. Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man. It was not so much his great height that marked him, for the "natives" were easily singled out by their lank longitude from the stockier foreign breed: it was the careless powerful look he had, in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain. There was something bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was so stiffened and grizzled that I took him for an old man and was surprised to hear that he was not more than fifty-two. I had this from Harmon Gow, who had driven the stage from Bettsbridge to Starkfield in pre-trolley days and knew the chronicle of all the families on his line.

"He's looked that way ever since he had his smash-up; and that's twenty-four years ago come next February," Harmon threw out between reminiscent pauses.

The "smash-up" it was—I gathered from the same informant—which, besides drawing the red gash across Ethan Frome's forehead, had so

†Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

shortened and warped his right side that it cost him a visible effort to take the few steps from his buggy to the post-office window. He used to drive in from his farm every day at about noon, and as that was my own hour for fetching my mail I often passed him in the porch or stood beside him while we waited on the motions of the distributing hand behind the grating. I noticed that, though he came so punctually, he seldom received anything but a copy of the *Bettsbridge Eagle*, which he put without a glance into his sagging pocket. At intervals, however, the post-master would hand him an envelope addressed to Mrs. Zenobia†—or Mrs. Zeena-Frome, and usually bearing conspicuously in the upper left-hand corner the address of some manufacturer of patent medicine and the name of his specific. These documents my neighbour would also pocket without a glance, as if too much used to them to wonder at their number and variety, and would then turn away with a silent nod to the post-master.

Every one in Starkfield knew him and gave him a greeting tempered to his own grave mien; but his taciturnity was respected and it was only on rare occasions that one of the older men of the place detained him for a word. When this happened he would listen quietly, his blue eyes on the speaker's face, and answer in so low a tone that his words never reached me; then he would climb stiffly into his buggy, gather up the reins in his left hand and drive slowly away in the direction of his farm.

"It was a pretty bad smash-up?" I questioned Harmon, looking after Frome's retreating figure, and thinking how gallantly his lean brown head, with its shock of light hair, must have sat on his strong shoulders before they were bent out of shape.

"Wust kind," my informant assented. "More'n enough to kill most men. But the Fromes are tough. Ethan'll likely touch a hundred."

"Good God!" I exclaimed. At the moment Ethan Frome, after climbing to his seat, had leaned over to assure himself of the security of a wooden box—also with a druggist's label on it—which he had placed in the back of the buggy, and I saw his face as it probably looked when he thought himself alone. "*That* man touch a hundred? He looks as if he was dead and in hell now!"

Harmon drew a slab of tobacco from his pocket, cut off a wedge and pressed it into the leather pouch of his cheek. "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters. Most of the smart ones get away."

"Why didn't *he*?"

"Somebody had to stay and care for the folks. There warn't ever anybody but Ethan. Fust his father—then his mother—then his wife."

"And then the smash-up?"

Harmon chuckled sardonically. "That's so. He *had* to stay then."

"I see. And since then they've had to care for him?"

Harmon thoughtfully passed his tobacco to the other cheek. "Oh, as to that: I guess it's always Ethan done the caring."

Though Harmon Gow developed the tale as far as his mental and moral reach permitted there were perceptible gaps between his facts, and I had the sense that the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps. But one phrase stuck in my memory and served as the nucleus about which I grouped my subsequent inferences: "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters."

Before my own time there was up I had learned to know what that meant. Yet I had come in the degenerate day of trolley, bicycle and rural delivery, when communication was easy between the scattered mountain villages, and the bigger towns in the valleys, such as Bettsbridge and Shadd's Falls, had libraries, theatres and Y. M. C. A. halls to which the youth of the hills could descend for recreation. But when winter shut down on Starkfield and the village lay under a sheet of snow perpetually renewed from the pale skies, I began to see what life there—or rather its negation—must have been in Ethan Frome's young manhood.

I had been sent up by my employers on a job connected with the big power-house at Corbury Junction, and a long-drawn carpenters' strike had so delayed the work that I found myself anchored at Starkfield—the nearest habitable spot—for the best part of the winter. I chafed at first, and then, under the hypnotising effect of routine, gradually began to find a grim satisfaction in the life. During the early part of my stay I had been struck by the contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community. Day by day, after the December snows were over, a blazing blue sky poured down torrents of light and air on the white landscape, which gave them back in an intenser glitter. One would have supposed that such an atmosphere must quicken the emotions as well as the blood; but it seemed to produce no change except that of retarding still more the sluggish pulse of Starkfield. When I had been there a little longer, and had seen this phase of crystal clearness followed by long stretches of sunless cold; when the storms of February had pitched their white tents about the. devoted village and the wild cavalry of March winds had charged down to their support; I began to understand why Starkfield emerged from its six months' siege like a starved garrison capitulating without quarter. Twenty years earlier the means of resistance must have been far fewer, and the enemy in command of almost all the lines of access between the beleaguered villages; and, considering these things, I felt the sinister force of Harmon's phrase: "Most of the smart ones get away." But if that were the case, how could any combination of obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?

During my stay at Starkfield I lodged with a middle-aged widow

Glossary

Prologue

Ethan – The traditional meaning of this name is "firm and strong." These characteristics may or may not be representative of the character, depending on how he is viewed.

Zenobia – a possible reference to the queen of Palmyra, an ancient, militant kingdom near Damascus, Syria. Zenobia eventually ruled Egypt and declared herself queen, claiming to be a descendent of Cleopatra. The root "zeno" means "foreigner," another possible reason Wharton chose the name.

Carcel lamp – a French lamp in which oil is pumped to the wick by a clockwork mechanism

Chapter I

Orion – a constellation named after the hunter in Greek mythology

Mattie Silver – a possible reference to the valuable metal

Stamford – a city in Connecticut

Aldebaran – a double star in the constellation Taurus, one of the brightest in the sky.

Pleiades – a star cluster in the constellation Taurus; also called "the seven sisters"

Chapter II

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Chapter III

"**Curfew shall not ring to-night**" **–** a poem by Rose Hartwick Thorpe

"**The Lost Chord**" **–** a hymn

"**Carmen**" **–** an opera by Georges Bizet about a woman who tempted men, broke their hearts, destroyed lives, and never felt sympathy or compassion

Chapters IV – VIII

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Chapter IX

Sirius – one of the brightest stars in the night sky, part of the constellation Canis Major; also known as the DogStar

Vocabulary

Prologue

affected – pretended
aggrieved – troubled
anecdote – a short account of an interesting, amusing, or biographical event
assented – agreed
bay – a reddish-brown horse
beleaguered – worn out; exhausted
capitulating – surrendering
chafed – felt irritated or discontented
chronicle – a narrative or fictional account
colloquially – informally
consolatory – comforting
conspicuously – obviously
deciduous – shedding
ebb – a decline
exanimate – spiritless; lifeless
faculty – ability, power
fast – firmly; tightly
floundered – stumbled
forlorn – sad; depressed
gale – a very strong wind
garrison – troops stationed at a military post
habitable – capable of being lived in
incarnation – a living version
inferences – reaching conclusions from knowledge or evidence
inflection – the tone of voice
innocuous – harmless
insurmountable – incapable of being overcome
intercourse – contact; communication
melancholy – sad, depressing
mien – manner
obscurity – darkness
oracle – a person who gives wise or authoritative opinions; sage
patent medicine – a drug protected by a trademark
perceptible – obvious
poignant – deeply moving, touching
portico – a porch or covered walkway
pretence – a false claim or outward appearance
provocation – arousal, stimulation
queer – strange, weird
querulously – in an ill-tempered or whining way
rejoined – replied
reserve – restraint with words or actions
retarding – slowing
reticent – uncommunicative; reluctant to talk
runners – blades on a sled or sleigh
sardonically – scornfully, cynically
sentient – aware; perceptive of feelings
shock – a thick mass (as of hair)