The Fulness Of Life

Edith Wharton

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I.

For hours she had lain in a kind of gentle torpor, not unlike that sweet lassitude which masters one in the hush of a midsummer noon, when the heat seems to have silenced the very birds and insects, and, lying sunk in the tasselled meadow-grasses, one looks up through a level roofing of maple-leaves at the vast shadowless, and unsuggestive blue. Now and then, at ever-lengthening intervals, a flash of pain darted through her, like the ripple of sheet-lightning across such a midsummer sky; but it was too transitory to shake her stupor, that calm, delicious, bottomless stupor into which she felt herself sinking more and more deeply, without a disturbing impulse of resistance, an effort of reattachment to the vanishing edges of consciousness.

The resistance, the effort, had known their hour of violence; but now they were at an end. Through her mind, long harried by grotesque visions, fragmentary images of the life that she was leaving, tormenting lines of verse, obstinate presentments of pictures once beheld, indistinct impressions of rivers, towers, and cupolas, gathered in the length of journeys half forgotten—through her mind there now only moved a few primal sensations of colorless well-being; a vague satisfaction in the thought that she had swallowed her noxious last draught of medicine... and that she should never again hear the creaking of her husband's boots—those horrible boots—and that no one would come to bother her about the next day's dinner... or the butcher's book....

At last even these dim sensations spent themselves in the thickening obscurity which enveloped her; a dusk now filled with pale geometric roses, circling softly, interminably before her, now darkened to a uniform blue-blackness, the hue of a summer night without stars. And into this darkness she felt herself sinking, sinking, with the gentle sense of security of one upheld from beneath. Like a tepid tide it rose around her, gliding ever higher and higher, folding in its velvety embrace her relaxed and tired body, now submerging her breast and shoulders, now creeping gradually, with soft inexorableness, over her throat to her chin, to her ears, to her mouth.... Ah, now it was rising too high; the impulse to struggle was renewed;... her mouth was full;... she was choking.... Help!

“It is all over,” said the nurse, drawing down the eyelids with official composure.

The clock struck three. They remembered it afterward. Someone opened the window and let in a blast of that strange, neutral air which walks the earth between darkness and dawn; someone else led the husband into another room. He walked vaguely, like a blind man, on his creaking boots.

II.

She stood, as it seemed, on a threshold, yet no tangible gateway was in front of her. Only a wide vista of light, mild yet penetrating as the gathered glimmer of innumerable stars, expanded gradually before her eyes, in blissful contrast to the cavernous darkness from which she had of late emerged.

She stepped forward, not frightened, but hesitating, and as her eyes began to grow more familiar with the melting depths of light about her, she distinguished the outlines of a landscape, at first swimming in the opaline uncertainty of Shelley’s vaporous creations, then gradually resolved into distincter shape—the vast unrolling of a sunlit plain, aerial forms of mountains, and presently the silver crescent of a river in the valley, and a blue stencilling of trees along its curve—something suggestive in its ineffable hue of an azure background of Leonardo’s, strange, enchanting, mysterious, leading on the eye and the imagination into regions of fabulous delight. As she gazed, her heart beat with a soft and rapturous surprise; so exquisite a promise she read in the summons of that hyaline distance.

“And so death is not the end after all,” in sheer gladness she heard herself exclaiming aloud. “I always knew that it couldn’t be. I believed in Darwin, of course. I do still; but then Darwin himself said that he wasn’t sure about the soul—at least, I think he did—and Wallace was a spiritualist; and then there was St. George Mivart—”

Her gaze lost itself in the ethereal remoteness of the mountains.

“How beautiful! How satisfying!” she murmured. “Perhaps now I shall really know what it is to live.”

As she spoke she felt a sudden thickening of her heart-beats, and looking up she was aware that before her stood the Spirit of Life.

“Have you never really known what it is to live?” the Spirit of Life asked her.

“I have never known,” she replied, “that fulness of life which we all feel ourselves capable of knowing; though my life has not been without scattered hints of it, like the scent of earth which comes to one sometimes far out at sea.”

“And what do you call the fulness of life?” the Spirit asked again.

“Oh, I can’t tell you, if you don’t know,” she said, almost reproachfully. “Many words are supposed to define it—love and sympathy are those in commonest use, but I am not even sure that they are the right ones, and so few people really know what they mean.”

“You were married,” said the Spirit, “yet you did not find the fulness of life in your marriage?”

“Oh, dear, no,” she replied, with an indulgent scorn, “my marriage was a very incomplete affair.”

“And yet you were fond of your husband?”

“You have hit upon the exact word; I was fond of him, yes, just as I was fond of my grandmother, and the house that I was born in, and my old nurse. Oh, I was fond of him, and we were counted a very happy couple. But I have sometimes thought that a woman’s nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing-room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting-room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.”

“And your husband,” asked the Spirit, after a pause, “never got beyond the family sitting-room?”

“Never,” she returned, impatiently; “and the worst of it was that he was quite content to remain there. He thought it perfectly beautiful, and sometimes, when he was admiring its commonplace furniture, insignificant as the chairs and tables of a hotel parlor, I felt like crying out to him: ‘Fool, will you never guess that close at hand are rooms full of treasures and wonders, such as the eye of man hath not seen, rooms that no step has crossed, but that might be yours to live in, could you but find the handle of the door?’”

“Then,” the Spirit continued, “those moments of which you lately spoke, which seemed to come to you like scattered hints of the fulness of life, were not shared with your husband?”

“Oh, no—never. He was different. His boots creaked, and he always slammed the door when he went out, and he never read anything but railway novels and the sporting advertisements in the papers—and—and, in short, we never understood each other in the least.”

“To what influence, then, did you owe those exquisite sensations?”

“I can hardly tell. Sometimes to the perfume of a flower; sometimes to a verse of Dante or of Shakespeare; sometimes to a picture or a sunset, or to one of those calm days at sea, when one seems to be lying in the hollow of a blue pearl; sometimes, but rarely, to a word spoken by someone who chanced to give utterance, at the right moment, to what I felt but could not express.”

“Someone whom you loved?” asked the Spirit.

“I never loved anyone, in that way,” she said, rather sadly, “nor was I thinking of any one person when I spoke, but of two or three who, by touching for an instant upon a certain chord of my being, had called forth a single note of that strange melody which seemed sleeping in my soul. It has seldom happened, however, that I have owed such feelings to people; and no one ever gave me a moment of such happiness as it was my lot to feel one evening in the Church of Or San Michele, in Florence.”

“Tell me about it,” said the Spirit.

“It was near sunset on a rainy spring afternoon in Easter week. The clouds had vanished, dispersed by a sudden wind, and as we entered the church the fiery panes of the high windows shone out like lamps through the dusk. A priest was at the high altar, his white cope a livid spot in the incense-laden obscurity, the light of the candles flickering up and down like fireflies about his head; a few people knelt near by. We stole behind them and sat down on a bench close to the tabernacle of Orcagna.

“Strange to say, though Florence was not new to me, I had never been in the church before; and in that magical light I saw for the first time the inlaid steps, the fluted columns, the sculptured bas-reliefs and canopy of the marvellous shrine. The marble, worn and mellowed by the subtle hand of time, took on an unspeakable rosy hue, suggestive in some remote way of the honey-colored columns of the Parthenon, but

more mystic, more complex, a color not born of the sun's inveterate kiss, but made up of cryptal twilight, and the flame of candles upon martyrs' tombs, and gleams of sunset through symbolic panes of chrysoprase and ruby; such a light as illumines the missals in the library of Siena, or burns like a hidden fire through the Madonna of Gian Bellini in the Church of the Redeemer, at Venice; the light of the Middle Ages, richer, more solemn, more significant than the limpid sunshine of Greece.

"The church was silent, but for the wail of the priest and the occasional scraping of a chair against the floor, and as I sat there, bathed in that light, absorbed in rapt contemplation of the marble miracle which rose before me, cunningly wrought as a casket of ivory and enriched with jewel-like incrustations and tarnished gleams of gold, I felt myself borne onward along a mighty current, whose source seemed to be in the very beginning of things, and whose tremendous waters gathered as they went all the mingled streams of human passion and endeavor. Life in all its varied manifestations of beauty and strangeness seemed weaving a rhythmical dance around me as I moved, and wherever the spirit of man had passed I knew that my foot had once been familiar.

"As I gazed the mediaeval bosses of the tabernacle of Orcagna seemed to melt and flow into their primal forms so that the folded lotus of the Nile and the Greek acanthus were braided with the runic knots and fish-tailed monsters of the North, and all the plastic terror and beauty born of man's hand from the Ganges to the Baltic quivered and mingled in Orcagna's apotheosis of Mary. And so the river bore me on, past the alien face of antique civilizations and the familiar wonders of Greece, till I swam upon the fiercely rushing tide of the Middle Ages, with its swirling eddies of passion, its heaven-reflecting pools of poetry and art; I heard the rhythmic blow of the craftsmen's hammers in the goldsmiths' workshops and on the walls of churches, the party-cries of armed factions in the narrow streets, the organ-roll of Dante's verse, the crackle of the fagots around Arnold of Brescia, the twitter of the swallows to which St. Francis preached, the laughter of the ladies listening on the hillside to the quips of the Decameron, while plague-struck Florence howled beneath them—all this and much more I heard, joined in strange unison with voices earlier and more remote, fierce, passionate, or tender, yet subdued to such awful harmony that I thought of the song that the morning stars sang together and felt as though it were sounding in my ears. My heart beat to suffocation, the tears burned my lids, the joy, the mystery of it seemed too intolerable to be borne. I could not understand even then the words of the song; but I knew that if there had been someone at my side who could have heard it with me, we might have found the key to it together.

“I turned to my husband, who was sitting beside me in an attitude of patient dejection, gazing into the bottom of his hat; but at that moment he rose, and stretching his stiffened legs, said, mildly: ‘Hadn’t we better be going? There doesn’t seem to be much to see here, and you know the table d’hote dinner is at half-past six o’clock.”

Her recital ended, there was an interval of silence; then the Spirit of Life said: “There is a compensation in store for such needs as you have expressed.”

“Oh, then you *do* understand?” she exclaimed. “Tell me what compensation, I entreat you!”

“It is ordained,” the Spirit answered, “that every soul which seeks in vain on earth for a kindred soul to whom it can lay bare its inmost being shall find that soul here and be united to it for eternity.”

A glad cry broke from her lips. “Ah, shall I find him at last?” she cried, exultant.

“He is here,” said the Spirit of Life.

She looked up and saw that a man stood near whose soul (for in that unwonted light she seemed to see his soul more clearly than his face) drew her toward him with an invincible force.

“Are you really he?” she murmured.

“I am he,” he answered.

She laid her hand in his and drew him toward the parapet which overhung the valley.

“Shall we go down together,” she asked him, “into that marvellous country; shall we see it together, as if with the self-same eyes, and tell each other in the same words all that we think and feel?”

“So,” he replied, “have I hoped and dreamed.”

“What?” she asked, with rising joy. “Then you, too, have looked for me?”

“All my life.”

“How wonderful! And did you never, never find anyone in the other world who understood you?”

“Not wholly—not as you and I understand each other.”

“Then you feel it, too? Oh, I am happy,” she sighed.

They stood, hand in hand, looking down over the parapet upon the shimmering landscape which stretched forth beneath them into sapphirine space, and the Spirit of Life, who kept watch near the threshold, heard now and then a floating fragment of their talk blown backward like the stray swallows which the wind sometimes separates from their migratory tribe.

“Did you never feel at sunset—”

“Ah, yes; but I never heard anyone else say so. Did you?”

“Do you remember that line in the third canto of the ‘Inferno?’”

“Ah, that line—my favorite always. Is it possible—”

“You know the stooping Victory in the frieze of the Nike Apteros?”

“You mean the one who is tying her sandal? Then you have noticed, too, that all Botticelli and Mantegna are dormant in those flying folds of her drapery?”

“After a storm in autumn have you never seen—”

“Yes, it is curious how certain flowers suggest certain painters—the perfume of the incarnation, Leonardo; that of the rose, Titian; the tuberose, Crivelli—”

“I never supposed that anyone else had noticed it.”

“Have you never thought—”

“Oh, yes, often and often; but I never dreamed that anyone else had.”

“But surely you must have felt—”

“Oh, yes, yes; and you, too—”

“How beautiful! How strange—”

Their voices rose and fell, like the murmur of two fountains answering each other across a garden full of flowers. At length, with a certain tender impatience, he turned to her and said: “Love, why should we linger here? All eternity lies before us. Let us go down into that beautiful country together and make a home for ourselves on some blue hill above the shining river.”

As he spoke, the hand she had forgotten in his was suddenly withdrawn, and he felt that a cloud was passing over the radiance of her soul.

“A home,” she repeated, slowly, “a home for you and me to live in for all eternity?”

“Why not, love? Am I not the soul that yours has sought?”

“Y-yes—yes, I know—but, don’t you see, home would not be like home to me, unless—”

“Unless?” he wonderingly repeated.

She did not answer, but she thought to herself, with an impulse of whimsical inconsistency, “Unless you slammed the door and wore creaking boots.”

But he had recovered his hold upon her hand, and by imperceptible degrees was leading her toward the shining steps which descended to the valley.

“Come, O my soul’s soul,” he passionately implored; “why delay a moment? Surely you feel, as I do, that eternity itself is too short to hold such bliss as ours. It seems to me that I can see our home already. Have I not always seem it in my dreams? It is white, love, is it not, with polished columns, and a sculptured cornice against the blue? Groves of laurel and oleander and thickets of roses surround it; but from the terrace where we walk at sunset, the eye looks out over woodlands and cool meadows where, deep-bowered under ancient boughs, a stream goes delicately toward the river. Indoors our favorite pictures hang upon the walls and the rooms are lined with books. Think, dear, at last we shall have time to read them all. With which shall we begin? Come, help me to choose. Shall it be ‘Faust’ or the ‘Vita Nuova,’ the ‘Tempest’ or ‘Les Caprices de Marianne,’ or the thirty-first canto of the ‘Paradise,’ or ‘Epipsychidion’ or ‘Lycidas’? Tell me, dear, which one?”

As he spoke he saw the answer trembling joyously upon her lips; but it died in the ensuing silence, and she stood motionless, resisting the persuasion of his hand.

“What is it?” he entreated.

“Wait a moment,” she said, with a strange hesitation in her voice. “Tell me first, are you quite sure of yourself? Is there no one on earth whom you sometimes remember?”

“Not since I have seen you,” he replied; for, being a man, he had indeed forgotten.

Still she stood motionless, and he saw that the shadow deepened on her soul.

“Surely, love,” he rebuked her, “it was not that which troubled you? For my part I have walked through Lethe. The past has melted like a cloud before the moon. I never lived until I saw you.”

She made no answer to his pleadings, but at length, rousing herself with a visible effort, she turned away from him and moved toward the Spirit of Life, who still stood near the threshold.

“I want to ask you a question,” she said, in a troubled voice.

“Ask,” said the Spirit.

“A little while ago,” she began, slowly, “you told me that every soul which has not found a kindred soul on earth is destined to find one here.”

“And have you not found one?” asked the Spirit.

“Yes; but will it be so with my husband’s soul also?”

“No,” answered the Spirit of Life, “for your husband imagined that he had found his soul’s mate on earth in you; and for such delusions eternity itself contains no cure.”

She gave a little cry. Was it of disappointment or triumph?

“Then—then what will happen to him when he comes here?”

“That I cannot tell you. Some field of activity and happiness he will doubtless find, in due measure to his capacity for being active and happy.”

She interrupted, almost angrily: “He will never be happy without me.”

“Do not be too sure of that,” said the Spirit.

She took no notice of this, and the Spirit continued: “He will not understand you here any better than he did on earth.”

“No matter,” she said; “I shall be the only sufferer, for he always thought that he understood me.”

“His boots will creak just as much as ever—”

“No matter.”

“And he will slam the door—”

“Very likely.”

“And continue to read railway novels—”

She interposed, impatiently: “Many men do worse than that.”

“But you said just now,” said the Spirit, “that you did not love him.”

“True,” she answered, simply; “but don’t you understand that I shouldn’t feel at home without him? It is all very well for a week or two—but for eternity! After all, I never minded the creaking of his boots, except when my head ached, and I don’t suppose it will ache *here*; and he was always so sorry when he had slammed the door, only he never *could* remember not to. Besides, no one else would know how to look after him, he is so helpless. His inkstand would never be filled, and he would always be out of stamps and visiting-cards. He would never remember to have his umbrella re-covered, or to ask the price of anything before he bought it. Why, he wouldn’t even know what novels to read. I always had to choose the kind he liked, with a murder or a forgery and a successful detective.”

She turned abruptly to her kindred soul, who stood listening with a mien of wonder and dismay.

“Don’t you see,” she said, “that I can’t possibly go with you?”

“But what do you intend to do?” asked the Spirit of Life.

“What do I intend to do?” she returned, indignantly. “Why, I mean to wait for my husband, of course. If he had come here first *he* would have waited for me for years and years; and it would break his heart not to find me here when he comes.” She pointed with a contemptuous gesture to the magic vision of hill and vale sloping away to the translucent mountains. “He wouldn’t give a fig for all that,” she said, “if he didn’t find me here.”

“But consider,” warned the Spirit, “that you are now choosing for eternity. It is a solemn moment.”

“Choosing!” she said, with a half-sad smile. “Do you still keep up here that old fiction about choosing? I should have thought that *you* knew better than that. How can I help myself? He will expect to find me here when he comes, and he would never believe you if you told him that I had gone away with someone else—never, never.”

“So be it,” said the Spirit. “Here, as on earth, each one must decide for himself.”

She turned to her kindred soul and looked at him gently, almost wistfully. “I am sorry,” she said. “I should have liked to talk with you again; but you will understand, I know, and I dare say you will find someone else a great deal cleverer—”

And without pausing to hear his answer she waved him a swift farewell and turned back toward the threshold.

“Will my husband come soon?” she asked the Spirit of Life.

“That you are not destined to know,” the Spirit replied.

“No matter,” she said, cheerfully; “I have all eternity to wait in.”

And still seated alone on the threshold, she listens for the creaking of his boots.

Story Notes:

Edith Wharton’s “The Fullness of Life” is a poignant and introspective exploration of the human soul’s longing for true understanding and companionship. The story uses the framework of an afterlife encounter to probe the nature of fulfillment, love, and self-realization.

Wharton’s prose is lyrical and evocative, immersing the reader in the protagonist’s emotional and sensory experiences. The opening passages, describing the gentle torpor of death and the transition to a luminous afterlife, are rich in metaphor and atmosphere, setting a contemplative tone.

Central to the story is the protagonist’s realization that her earthly marriage, though outwardly happy, never touched the deepest chambers of her soul. Wharton employs the metaphor of a house full of rooms to illustrate the complexity of inner life and the rarity of true connection. The dialogue with the Spirit of Life and the kindred soul she meets in the afterlife raises profound questions about the nature of love and the possibility of perfect understanding.

Yet, the story’s resolution is both ironic and deeply human. Despite being offered eternal companionship with a soul who truly understands her, the protagonist chooses to wait for her husband, recognizing that her sense of “home” is inextricably tied to the familiar imperfections of her earthly life. This choice underscores Wharton’s nuanced view of love—not as idealized fulfillment, but as a blend of longing, compromise, and attachment to the ordinary.

Overall, “The Fullness of Life” is a subtle meditation on the limits of human connection and the enduring power of habit and affection. Wharton’s style, marked by psychological insight and poetic imagery, invites readers to reflect on their own definitions of happiness and completeness.