

From "An Elder America"

By Carl Van Doren

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We can no more do without some notion or other of an age more golden than our own than we can do without bread. There must be, we assure ourselves, a more delectable day yet to come, or there must have been one once. The evidence of prophecy, however, is stronger than that of history, which, somehow, fails to find the perfect age. Mrs. Wharton has never ranged herself with the prophets, contented, apparently, with being the most intellectual of our novelists and surveying with level, satirical eyes the very visible world. By the "Age of Innocence" she means the seventies in New York during the past century; and the innocence she finds there is "the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience." To the hotter attacks which angrier critics have recently been making upon that age she does not lend herself. Her language is cool and suave. And yet the effect of her picture is an unsparing accusation of that genteel decade when the van der Luydens of Skuytercliff were the ultimate arbiters of "form" in Manhattan, and "form" was occupation and religion for the little aristocracy which still held its tight fortress in the shaggy city so soon about to overwhelm it. The imminence of the rising tide is never quite indicated. How could it be, when the characters of the action themselves do not see it, bound up as they are with walking their wintry paths and hugging their iron taboos? Newland Archer suspects a change, but that is because he is a victim of the tribal order which sentences him to a life without passion, without expression, without satisfaction. The Countess Olenska suspects it, but she too is a victim, too fine for the rougher give-and-take of her husband's careless European society and yet not conventional enough for the dull routine which in her native New York covers the fineness to which also she is native. The peculiar tragedy of their sacrifice is that it is for the sake of a person, Archer's wife, who is virtuous because she is incapable of temptation, competent because she is incapable of any deep perturbation, and willing to suit herself to the least decorum of their world because she is incapable of understanding that there is anywhere anything larger or freer. The unimaginative not only miss the flower of life themselves but they shut others from it as well.