

The Comrade

Edith Wharton

Table of Contents

<u>The Comrade</u>	1
<u>Edith Wharton</u>	2

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WILD winged thing, O brought I know not whence
To beat your life out in my life's low cage;
You strange familiar, nearer than my flesh
Yet distant as a star, that were at first
A child with me a child, yet elfin-far,
And visibly of some unearthly breed;
Mirthfullest mate of all my mortal games,
Yet shedding on them some evasive gleam
Of Latmian loneliness — O seven then
Expert to lift the latch of our low door
And profit by the hours when, dusked about
By human misintelligence, our first
Weak fledgling flights were safest essayed;
Divine accomplice of those perilous-sweet
Low moth-flights of the unadventured soul
Above the world's dim garden! — now we sit,
After what stretch of years, what stretch of wings,
In the same cage together — still as near
And still as strange!

Only I know at last
That we are fellows till the last night falls,
And that I shall not miss your comrade hands
Till they have closed my lids, and by them set
A taper that — who knows! — may yet shine through.

Sister, my comrade, I have ached for you,
Sometimes, to see you curb your pace to mine,
And bow your Maenad crest to the dull forms
Of human usage; I have loosed your hand
And whispered: 'Go! Since I am tethered here;
And you have turned, and breathing for reply,
'I too am pinioned, as you too are free,'
Have caught me to such undreamed distances
As the last planets see, when they look forth
To the sentinel pacings of the outmost stars —
Nor these alone,
Comrade, my sister, were your gifts. More oft
Has your impalpable wing-brush bared for me
The heart of wonder in familiar things,
Unroofed dull rooms, and hung above my head
The cloudy glimpses of a vernal moon,
Or all the autumn heaven ripe with stars.

The Comrade

And you have made a secret pact with Sleep,
And when she comes not, or her feet delay,
Toiled in low meadows of gray asphodel
Under a pale sky where no shadows fall,
Then, hooded like her, to my side you steal,
And the night grows like a great rumouring sea,
And you a boat, and I your passenger,
And the tide lifts us with an indrawn breath
Out, out upon the murmurs and the scents,
Through spray of splintered star-beams, or white rage
Of desperate moon-drawn waters — on and on
To some blue ocean immarcescible
That ever like a slow-slung mirror rocks
The balanced breasts of sea-birds motionless.

Yet other nights, my sister, you have been
The storm, and I the leaf that fled on it
Terrifically down voids that never knew
The pity of creation — or have felt
The immitigable anguish of a soul
Left last in a long-ruined world alone;
And then your touch has drawn me back to earth,
As in the night, upon an unknown road,
A scent of lilac breathing from the hedge
Bespeaks the hidden farm, the bedded cows,
And safety, and the sense of human kind . . .

And I have climbed with you by hidden ways
To meet the dews of morning, and have seen
The shy gods like retreating shadows fade,
Or on the thymy reaches have surprised
Old Chiron sleeping, and have waked him not . . .

Yet farther have I fared with you, and known
Love and his sacred tremors, and the rites
Of his most inward temple; and beyond
His temple lights, have seen the long gray waste
Where lonely thoughts, like creatures of the night,
Listen and wander where a city stood.
And creeping down by waterless defiles
Under an iron midnight, have I kept
My vigil in the waste till dawn began
To move among the ruins, and I saw
A sapling rooted in a fissured plinth,
And a wren's nest in the thunder-threatening hand
Of some old god of granite in the dust . . .