

Edith Wharton

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark, sequined dress, stands on a beach looking out at the ocean. The sky is overcast and grey. The text 'Human Nature' is overlaid in a large, white, cursive font.

*Human
Nature*

Edith Wharton

Human Nature



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HER SON

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I

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I did not recognise Mrs. Stephen Glenn when I first saw her on the deck of the *Scythian*.

The voyage was more than half over, and we were counting on Cherbourg within forty-eight hours, when she appeared on deck and sat down beside me. She was as handsome as ever, and not a day older looking than when we had last met—toward the end of the war, in 1917 it must have been, not long before her only son, the aviator, was killed. Yet now, five years later, I was looking at her as if she were a stranger. Why? Not, certainly, because of her white hair. She had had the American woman's frequent luck of acquiring it while the face beneath was still fresh, and a dozen years earlier, when we used to meet at dinners, at the Opera, that silver diadem already crowned her. Now, looking more closely, I saw that the face beneath was still untouched; what then had so altered her? Perhaps it was the faint line of anxiety between her dark strongly-drawn eyebrows; or the setting of the eyes themselves, those sombre starlit eyes which seemed to have sunk deeper into their lids, and showed like glimpses of night through the arch of a cavern. But what a gloomy image to apply to eyes as tender as Catherine Glenn's! Yet it was immediately suggested by the look of the lady in deep mourning who had settled herself beside me, and now turned to say: "So you don't know me, Mr. Norcutt—Catherine Glenn?"

The fact was flagrant. I acknowledged it, and added: "But why didn't I? I can't imagine. Do you mind my saying that I

believe it's because you're even more beautiful now than when I last saw you?"

She replied with perfect simplicity: "No; I don't mind—because I ought to be; that is, if there's any meaning in anything."

"Any meaning—?"

She seemed to hesitate; she had never been a woman who found words easily. "Any meaning in life. You see, since we've met I've lost everything: my son, my husband." She bent her head slightly, as though the words she pronounced were holy. Then she added, with the air of striving for more scrupulous accuracy: "Or, at least, almost everything."

The "almost" puzzled me. Mrs. Glenn, as far as I knew, had had no child but the son she had lost in the war; and the old uncle who had brought her up had died years earlier. I wondered if, in thus qualifying her loneliness, she alluded to the consolations of religion.

I murmured that I knew of her double mourning; and she surprised me still farther by saying: "Yes; I saw you at my husband's funeral. I've always wanted to thank you for being there."

"But of course I was there."

She continued: "I noticed all of Stephen's friends who came. I was very grateful to them, and especially to the younger ones." (This was meant for me.) "You see," she added, "a funeral is—is a very great comfort."

Again I looked my surprise.

"My son—my son Philip—" (why should she think it necessary to mention his name, since he was her only child?)—"my son Philip's funeral took place just where his

aeroplane fell. A little village in the Somme; his father and I went there immediately after the Armistice. One of our army chaplains read the service. The people from the village were there—they were so kind to us. But there was no one else—no personal friends; at that time only the nearest relations could get passes. Our boy would have wished it ... he would have wanted to stay where he fell. But it's not the same as feeling one's friends about one, as I did at my husband's funeral."

While she spoke she kept her eyes intently, almost embarrassingly, on mine. It had never occurred to me that Mrs. Stephen Glenn was the kind of woman who would attach any particular importance to the list of names at her husband's funeral. She had always seemed aloof and abstracted, shut off from the world behind the high walls of a happy domesticity. But on adding this new indication of character to the fragments of information I had gathered concerning her first appearance in New York, and to the vague impression she used to produce on me when we met, I began to see that lists of names were probably just what she would care about. And then I asked myself what I really knew of her. Very little, I perceived; but no doubt just as much as she wished me to. For, as I sat there, listening to her voice, and catching unguarded glimpses of her crape-shadowed profile, I began to suspect that what had seemed in her a rather dull simplicity might be the vigilance of a secretive person; or perhaps of a person who had a secret. There is a world of difference between them, for the secretive person is seldom interesting and seldom has a

secret; but I felt inclined—though nothing I knew of her justified it—to put her in the other class.

I began to think over the years of our intermittent acquaintance—it had never been more, for I had never known the Glenns well. She had appeared in New York when I was a very young man, in the 'nineties, as a beautiful girl—from Kentucky or Alabama—a niece of old Colonel Reamer's. Left an orphan, and penniless, when she was still almost a child, she had been passed about from one reluctant relation to another, and had finally (the legend ran) gone on the stage, and followed a strolling company across the continent. The manager had deserted his troupe in some far-off state, and Colonel Reamer, fatuous, impecunious, and no doubt perplexed as to how to deal with the situation, had yet faced it manfully, and shaking off his bachelor selfishness had taken the girl into his house. Such a past, though it looks dove-coloured now, seemed hectic in the 'nineties, and gave a touch of romance and mystery to the beautiful Catherine Reamer, who appeared so aloof and distinguished, yet had been snatched out of such promiscuities and perils.

Colonel Reamer was a ridiculous old man: everything about him was ridiculous—his "toupee" (probably the last in existence), his vague military title, his anecdotes about southern chivalry, and duels between other gentlemen with military titles and civilian pursuits, and all the obsolete swagger of a character dropped out of Martin Chuzzlewit. He was the notorious bore of New York; tolerated only because he was old Mrs. So-and-so's second cousin, because he was poor, because he was kindly—and because, out of his

poverty, he had managed, with a smile and a gay gesture, to shelter and clothe his starving niece. Old Reamer, I recalled, had always had a passion for lists of names; for seeing his own appear in the "society column" of the morning papers, for giving you those of the people he had dined with, or been unable to dine with because already bespoken by others even more important. The young people called him "Old Previous-Engagement," because he was so anxious to have you know that, if you hadn't met him at some particular party, it was because he had been previously engaged at another.

Perhaps, I thought, it was from her uncle that Mrs. Glenn had learned to attach such importance to names, to lists of names, to the presence of certain people on certain occasions, to a social suitability which could give a consecration even to death. The profile at my side, so marble-pure, so marble-sad, did not suggest such preoccupations; neither did the deep entreating gaze she bent on me; yet many details fitted into the theory.

Her very marriage to Stephen Glenn seemed to confirm it. I thought back, and began to reconstruct Stephen Glenn. He was considerably older than myself, and had been a familiar figure in my earliest New York; a man who was a permanent ornament to society, who looked precisely as he ought, spoke, behaved, received his friends, filled his space on the social stage, exactly as his world expected him to. While he was still a young man, old ladies in perplexity over some social problem (there were many in those draconian days) would consult Stephen Glenn as if he had been one of the Ancients of the community. Yet there was nothing

precociously old or dry about him. He was one of the handsomest men of his day, a good shot, a leader of cotillions. He practised at the bar, and became a member of a reputed legal firm chiefly occupied with the management of old ponderous New York estates. In process of time the old ladies who had consulted him about social questions began to ask his advice about investments; and on this point he was considered equally reliable. Only one cloud shadowed his early life. He had married a distant cousin, an effaced sort of woman who bore him no children, and presently (on that account, it was said) fell into suicidal melancholia; so that for a good many years Stephen Glenn's handsome and once hospitable house must have been a grim place to go home to. But at last she died, and after a decent interval the widower married Miss Reamer. No one was greatly surprised. It had been observed that the handsome Stephen Glenn and the beautiful Catherine Reamer were drawn to each other; and though the old ladies thought he might have done better, some of the more caustic remarked that he could hardly have done differently, after having made Colonel Reamer's niece so "conspicuous." The attentions of a married man, especially of one unhappily married, and virtually separated from his wife, were regarded in those days as likely to endanger a young lady's future. Catherine Reamer, however, rose above these hints as she had above the perils of her theatrical venture. One had only to look at her to see that, in that smooth marble surface, there was no crack in which detraction could take root.

Stephen Glenn's house was opened again, and the couple began to entertain in a quiet way. It was thought natural that Glenn should want to put a little life into the house which had so long been a sort of tomb; but though the Glenn dinners were as good as the most carefully chosen food and wine could make them, neither of the pair had the gifts which make hospitality a success, and by the time I knew them, the younger set had come to regard dining with them as somewhat of a bore. Stephen Glenn was still handsome, his wife still beautiful, perhaps more beautiful than ever; but the apathy of prosperity seemed to have settled down on them, and they wore their beauty and affability like expensive clothes put on for the occasion. There was something static, unchanging in their appearance, as there was in their affability, their conversation, the *menus* of their carefully-planned dinners, the studied arrangement of the drawing-room furniture. They had a little boy, born after a year of marriage, and they were devoted parents, given to lengthy anecdotes about their son's doings and sayings; but one could not imagine their tumbling about with him on the nursery floor. Some one said they must go to bed with their crowns on, like the kings and queens on packs of cards; and gradually, from being thought distinguished and impressive, they came to be regarded as wooden, pompous and slightly absurd. But the old ladies still spoke of Stephen Glenn as a man who had done his family credit, and his wife began to acquire his figure-head attributes, and to be consulted, as he was, about the minuter social problems. And all the while

—I thought as I looked back—there seemed to have been no one in their lives with whom they were really intimate....

Then, of a sudden, they again became interesting. It was when their only son was killed, attacked alone in mid-sky by a German air squadron. Young Phil Glenn was the first American aviator to fall; and when the news came people saw that the Mr. and Mrs. Glenn they had known was a mere *façade*, and that behind it were a passionate father and mother, crushed, rebellious, agonizing, but determined to face their loss dauntlessly, though they should die of it.

Stephen Glenn did die of it, barely two years later. The doctors ascribed his death to a specific disease; but everybody who knew him knew better. “It was the loss of the boy,” they said; and added: “It’s terrible to have only one child.”

Since her husband’s funeral I had not seen Mrs. Glenn; I had completely ceased to think of her. And now, on my way to take up a post at the American Consulate in Paris, I found myself sitting beside her and remembering these things. “Poor creatures—it’s as if two marble busts had been knocked off their pedestals and smashed,” I thought, recalling the faces of husband and wife after the boy’s death; “and she’s been smashed twice, poor woman.... Yet she says it has made her more beautiful....” Again I lost myself in conjecture.



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I was told that a lady in deep mourning wanted to see me on urgent business, and I looked out of my private den at the Paris Consulate into the room hung with maps and Presidents, where visitors were sifted out before being passed on to the Vice-Consul or the Chief.

The lady was Mrs. Stephen Glenn.

Six or seven months had passed since our meeting on the *Scythian*, and I had again forgotten her very existence. She was not a person who stuck in one's mind; and once more I wondered why, for in her statuesque weeds she looked nobler, more striking than ever. She glanced at the people awaiting their turn under the maps and the Presidents, and asked in a low tone if she could see me privately.

I was free at the moment, and I led her into my office and banished the typist.

Mrs. Glenn seemed disturbed by the signs of activity about me. "I'm afraid we shall be interrupted. I wanted to speak to you alone," she said.

I assured her we were not likely to be disturbed if she could put what she had to say in a few words—

"Ah, but that's just what I can't do. What I have to say can't be put in a few words." She fixed her splendid nocturnal eyes on me, and I read in them a distress so deep that I dared not suggest postponement.

I said I would do all I could to prevent our being interrupted, and in reply she just sat silent, and looked at

me, as if after all she had nothing farther to communicate. The telephone clicked, and I rang for my secretary to take the message; then one of the clerks came in with papers for my signature. I said: "I'd better sign and get it over," and she sat motionless, her head slightly bent, as if secretly relieved by the delay. The clerk went off, I shut the door again, and when we were alone she lifted her head and spoke. "Mr. Norcutt," she asked, "have you ever had a child?"

I replied with a smile that I was not married. She murmured: "I'm sorry—excuse me," and looked down again at her black-gloved hands, which were clasped about a black bag richly embroidered with dull jet. Everything about her was as finished, as costly, as studied, as if she were a young beauty going forth in her joy; yet she looked like a heart-broken woman.

She began again: "My reason for coming is that I've promised to help a friend, a poor woman who's lost all trace of her son—her only surviving son—and is hunting for him." She paused, though my expectant silence seemed to encourage her to continue. "It's a very sad case: I must try to explain. Long ago, as a girl, my friend fell in love with a married man—a man unhappily married." She moistened her lips, which had become parched and colourless. "You mustn't judge them too severely... He had great nobility of character—the highest standards—but the situation was too cruel. His wife was insane; at that time there was no legal release in such cases. If you were married to a lunatic only death could free you. It was a most unhappy affair—the poor girl pitied her friend profoundly. Their little boy ..."

Suddenly she stood up with a proud and noble movement and leaned to me across the desk. "I am that woman," she said.

She straightened herself and stood there, trembling, erect, like a swathed figure of woe on an illustrious grave. I thought: "What this inexpressive woman was meant to express is grief—" and marvelled at the wastefulness of Nature. But suddenly she dropped back into her chair, bowed her face against the desk, and burst into sobs. Her sobs were not violent; they were soft, low, almost rhythmical, with lengthening intervals between, like the last drops of rain after a long down-pour; and I said to myself: "She's cried so much that this must be the very end."

She opened the jet bag, took out a delicate handkerchief, and dried her eyes. Then she turned to me again. "It's the first time I've ever spoken of this ... to any human being except one."

I laid my hand on hers. "It was no use—my pretending," she went on, as if appealing to me for justification.

"Is it ever? And why should you, with an old friend?" I rejoined, attempting to comfort her.

"Ah, but I've had to—for so many years; to be silent has become my second nature." She paused, and then continued in a softer tone: "My baby was so beautiful ... do you know, Mr. Norcutt, I'm sure I should know him anywhere.... Just two years and one month older than my second boy, Philip ... the one you knew." Again she hesitated, and then, in a warmer burst of confidence, and scarcely above a whisper: "We christened the eldest Stephen. We knew it was dangerous: it might give a clue—"

but I felt I must give him his father's name, the name I loved best.... It was all I could keep of my baby. And Stephen understood; he consented...."

I sat and stared at her. What! This child of hers that she was telling me of was the child of Stephen Glenn? The two had had a child two years before the birth of their lawful son Philip? And consequently nearly a year before their marriage? I listened in a stupor, trying to reconstruct in my mind the image of a new, of another, Stephen Glenn, of the suffering reckless man behind the varnished image familiar to me. Now and then I murmured: "Yes ... yes ..." just to help her to go on.

"Of course it was impossible to keep the baby with me. Think—at my uncle's! My poor uncle ... he would have died of it...."

"And so you died instead?"

I had found the right word; her eyes filled again, and she stretched her hands to mine. "Ah, you've understood! Thank you. Yes; I died." She added: "Even when Philip was born I didn't come to life again—not wholly. Because there was always Stevie ... part of me belonged to Stevie forever."

"But when you and Glenn were able to marry, why—?"

She hung her head, and the blood rose to her worn temples. "Ah, why? ... Listen; you mustn't blame my husband. Try to remember what life was thirty years ago in New York. He had his professional standing to consider. A woman with a shadow on her was damned.... I couldn't discredit Stephen. ... We knew *positively* that our baby was in the best of hands...."

"You never saw him again?"

She shook her head. “It was part of the agreement—with the persons who took him. They wanted to imagine he was their own. We knew we were fortunate ... to find such a safe home, so entirely beyond suspicion ... we had to accept the conditions.” She looked up with a faint flicker of reassurance in her eyes. “In a way it no longer makes any difference to me—the interval. It seems like yesterday. I know he’s been well cared for, and I should recognise him anywhere. No child ever had such eyes....” She fumbled in her bag, drew out a small morocco case, opened it, and showed me the miniature of a baby a few months old. “I managed, with the greatest difficulty, to get a photograph of him—and this was done from it. Beautiful? Yes. I shall be able to identify him anywhere.... It’s only twenty-seven years....”



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Our talk was prolonged, the next day, at the quiet hotel where Mrs. Glenn was staying; but it led—it could lead—to nothing definite.

The unhappy woman could only repeat and amplify the strange confession stammered out at the Consulate. As soon as her child was born it had been entrusted with the utmost secrecy to a rich childless couple, who at once adopted it, and disappeared forever. Disappeared, that is, in the sense that (as I guessed) Stephen Glenn was as determined as they were that the child's parents should never hear of them again. Poor Catherine had been very ill at her baby's birth. Tortured by the need of concealment, of taking up her usual life at her uncle's as quickly as possible, of explaining her brief absence in such a way as to avert suspicion, she had lived in a blur of fear and suffering, and by the time she was herself again the child was gone, and the adoption irrevocable. Thereafter, I gathered, Glenn made it clear that he wished to avoid the subject, and she learned very little about the couple who had taken her child except that they were of good standing, and came from somewhere in Pennsylvania. They had gone to Europe almost immediately, it appeared, and no more was heard of them. Mrs. Glenn understood that Mr. Brown (their name was Brown) was a painter, and that they went first to Italy, then to Spain—unless it was the other way round. Stephen Glenn, it seemed, had heard of them through an old governess of his sister's, a family confidante, who was the

sole recipient of poor Catherine's secret. Soon afterward the governess died, and with her disappeared the last trace of the mysterious couple; for it was not going to be easy to wander about Europe looking for a Mr. and Mrs. Brown who had gone to Italy or Spain with a baby twenty-seven years ago. But that was what Mrs. Glenn meant to do. She had a fair amount of money, she was desperately lonely, she had no aim or interest or occupation or duty—except to find the child she had lost.

What she wanted was some sort of official recommendation to our consuls in Italy and Spain, accompanied by a private letter hinting at the nature of her errand. I took these papers to her and when I did so I tried to point out the difficulties and risks of her quest, and suggested that she ought to be accompanied by some one who could advise her—hadn't she a man of business, or a relation, a cousin, a nephew? No, she said; there was no one; but for that matter she needed no one. If necessary she could apply to the police, or employ private detectives; and any American consul to whom she appealed would know how to advise her. "In any case," she added, "I couldn't be mistaken—I should always recognise him. He was the very image of his father. And if there were any possibility of my being in doubt, I have the miniature, and photographs of his father as a young man."

She drew out the little morocco case and offered it again for my contemplation. The vague presentment of a child a few months old—and by its help she expected to identify a man of nearly thirty!

Apparently she had no clue beyond the fact that, all those years ago, the adoptive parents were rumoured to have sojourned in Europe. She was starting for Italy because she thought she remembered that they were said to have gone there first—in itself a curious argument. Wherever there was an American consul she meant to apply to him. First at Genoa; then Milan; then Florence, Rome and Naples. In one or the other of these cities she would surely discover some one who could remember the passage there of an American couple named Brown with the most beautiful baby boy in the world. Even the long arm of coincidence could not have scattered so widely over southern Europe American couples of the name of Brown, with a matchlessly beautiful baby called Stephen.

Mrs. Glenn set forth in a mood of almost mystical exaltation. She promised that I should hear from her as soon as she had anything definite to communicate: “which means that you *will* hear—and soon!” she concluded with a happy laugh. But six months passed without my receiving any direct news, though I was kept on her track by a succession of letters addressed to my chief by various consuls who wrote to say that a Mrs. Stephen Glenn had called with a letter of recommendation, but that unluckily it had been impossible to give her any assistance “as she had absolutely no data to go upon.” Alas poor lady—

And then, one day, about eight months after her departure, there was a telegram. “Found my boy. Unspeakably happy. Long to see you.” It was signed Catherine Glenn, and dated from a mountain-cure in Switzerland.

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That summer, when the time came for my vacation, it was raining in Paris even harder than it had rained all the preceding winter, and I decided to make a dash for the sun.

I had read in the papers that the French Riviera was suffering from a six months' drought; and though I didn't half believe it, I took the next train for the south. I got out at Les Calanques, a small bathing-place between Marseilles and Toulon, where there was a fairish hotel, and pine-woods to walk in, and there, that very day, I saw seated on the beach the majestic figure of Mrs. Stephen Glenn. The first thing that struck me was that she had at last discarded her weeds. She wore a thin white dress, and a wide-brimmed hat of russet straw shaded the fine oval of her face. She saw me at once, and springing up advanced across the beach with a light step. The sun, striking on her hat brim, cast a warm shadow on her face; and in that semi-shade it glowed with recovered youth. "Dear Mr. Norcutt! How wonderful! Is it really you? I've been meaning to write for weeks; but I think happiness has made me lazy—and my days are so full," she declared with a joyous smile.

I looked at her with increased admiration. At the Consulate, I remembered, I had said to myself that grief was what Nature had meant her features to express; but that was only because I had never seen her happy. No; even when her husband and her son Philip were alive, and the circle of her well-being seemed unbroken, I had never seen her look as she looked now. And I understood that, during all