

EDITH WHARTON'S RUSKIN

Peter Faulkner

Among the lesser known writings by the American novelist Edith Wharton is *False Dawn*, one of four novellas she published together as *Old New York* in 1924. Subtitled *The 'Forties*, the novella deals with the aesthetic tastes of high society in the 1840s.

The story centres on Mr. Halston Raycie and his son, who live in the affluent comfort of a country house on the height above the Sound, not far from his townhouse on Canal Street in New York City. Mr. Raycie is an impressive man; the sight of him was “never unpleasant, because his whole vast bubbling surface was of such a clean and hearty pink, and the exuding moisture so perceptibly flavoured with expensive eau de Cologne and the best French soap” (319). He “thought well of most things related to himself by ties of blood or interest.” These include his wife, his two daughters, Sarah Anne and Mary Adeline, and in particular his son Lewis – although a friend remarked that the young Lewis was not “exactly the kind of craft Halston would have turned out if he'd had the designing of his son and heir” (318). Lewis is fond of the good-natured Beatrice Kent (nick-named “Treeshy”). As the story begins, the twenty-one-year-old Lewis is about to start on a Grand Tour of Europe. He intends on his return to assert himself as a man and to marry Treeshy. His father's friends are offering advice about avoiding gamblers and not letting himself get involved with women. Mr. Raycie then gives his guests a splendid dinner, described with relish: “Lewis could never afterward fit into this intricate pattern [of display:] the ‘side-dishes’ of devilled turkey-legs and creamed chicken hash, the sliced cucumbers and tomatoes, the heavy silver jugs of butter-coloured cream, the floating-island, ‘slips’ and lemon jellies that were somehow interwoven with the solider elements of the design” (323-24).

The following morning Lewis says a fond farewell to Treeshy. He knows that he must have a final interview with his father, whose passion for founding a Family sets “an inordinate value on the boy (a quite different thing, Lewis