

No Affection at First Sight

Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship, by Millicent Bell (Braziller. 384 pp. \$6.50), contains new information on the personal and literary relations between two major American novelists. Gay Wilson Allen is author of a biography of Walt Whitman and is currently writing a life of William James.

By GAY WILSON ALLEN

PERHAPS the most remarkable aspect of the close friendship between Edith Wharton and Henry James is that it ever came into being. In spite of the fact that they knew many of the same people in Newport, New York, and Paris, had the same American publisher (Scribners), and found Europe more congenial than their native country, they did not meet until 1887 or '88, and did not become friends until ten years later. At the first meeting a beaded pink dress was all Mrs. Wharton could offer to the notice of the famous author of *Daisy Miller* and *Portrait of a Lady*, and at the second meeting she tried a "beautiful new hat" with no more success.

Henry James at forty-five was not a man to be attracted by expensive dresses or showy hats, or by a woman twenty years younger than himself; his preference was for older women who did not endanger his celibate devotion to his art. It was not the florid, fashionable, wealthy, and much-traveled woman who finally caught his attention, but one of her novels, *The Valley of Decision*, a chronicle of life in eighteenth-century Italy. It was a subject which Mrs. Wharton knew thoroughly from close study and familiarity with the country. James's congratulatory letter astonished her and failed to win her immediate confidence. In sending it to her editorial adviser, W. C. Brownell, she declared, "Don't ask me what I think of *The Wings of the Dove*." She not only disliked James's recent novels, which were later to be hailed as those of his "major phase," but she also resented the almost universal opinion of critics that she was a disciple of his. By this time a strong reaction against James's recent fiction had set in in America, and his praise was not as flattering as it would have been earlier.

Nevertheless, Edith Wharton, who looked and acted like a duchess, and Henry James, portly and ambassadorial,

did become friends, and enjoyed a number of motor trips together in England and France in the Panhard which she transported, with her liveried chauffeur, back and forth across the Atlantic and the English Channel. In 1904 James visited the Whartons at their great estate in Lenox, Massachusetts, and motored with her in New England. Edward Wharton was a sportsman and playboy with little interest in his wife's intellectual life, and he had begun the series of nervous or mental breakdowns that made the marriage a burden to her. James now became her confidant, and Millicent Bell has revealed many details not hitherto published.

The torments Edith Wharton went through before her divorce in 1913 were suppressed by Percy Lubbock in his *Portrait*, as were her relations with Walter Berry, a distinguished international lawyer with whom she was in love during her husband's decline. James scholars have known that she lived with Berry in Paris before her divorce, and that they did not marry after she was free; but Miss Bell is the first to give a full account. Henry James's own role in Mrs. Wharton's life during these painful years was only that of a sympathetic spectator, and his consolation was characteristic of him: "Live it all through,

every inch of it—out of it something valuable will come—but live it ever so quietly . . ."

But Edith Wharton was not a Henry James heroine, and quiet renunciation was contrary to her character. Failure to take his advice, however, did not dampen either the friendship or his wit. As he grew more settled and she more restless, he called her "the whirling princess, the great and glorious pendulum, the gyrator, the devil-dancer . . . the angel of destruction . . ." He liked to pile metaphor on top of metaphor and stretch a joke to the breaking point. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish his wit from brutal frankness, but Mrs. Wharton did not seem to mind. Once she wrote a story in French and he congratulated her on having "picked up every old worn-out phrase that's been lying about the streets of Paris for the past twenty years . . ."

Millicent Bell has analyzed in great detail James's possible influence on Mrs. Wharton, but since she finds it, after all, negligible, this is the least valuable part of her book. More important is her contribution to Edith Wharton's biography, and this without access to the Wharton papers locked up in the Yale Library until 1968. But by great industry the author has found enough information in available letters—parts of James's letters deleted by Lubbock in his two-volume edition, unpublished James letters (he burned Mrs. Wharton's to him), and correspondence of friends of the two novelists—to provide intimate glimpses into the life of a writer who deserves not only a new, full-length biography, but also a literary "revival."



"No, thank you—I'm just memorizing authors and titles!"

A Season of Silence and Thirst



Pierre Gascar: "To write is . . . a desire for redemption."

Women and the Sun, by Pierre Gascar (Atlantic-Little, Brown. 255 pp. \$4.95), contains several examples of the French long short story by the author of the Goncourt Prize-winning "Beasts and Men." Henry Peyre is professor of French literature at Yale University.

By HENRI PEYRE

PIERRE GASCAR (whose real name is Pierre Fournier, but whose pen name may denote his Gascon origin) ranks among the most original talents of contemporary France and easily, along with Paul Morand and J. P. Sartre, among the best authors of *récits* and short stories since Maupassant. He has not yet received his full due in this country or in Britain, although two or three of his powerful stories of animals, in his Goncourt Prize volume *Beasts and Men*, are now required reading in many French classes in the United States, and his autobiographical novel *The Seed* was rated by many as close to Alain-Fournier's *The Wanderer* in dreamy poetry and closer still to Francis Carco's robust childhood memories.

Some French writers, who do not claim to load their fiction with metaphysical profundities, to explore tropisms and to juggle with time, or to invent a new geometric technique or to address their heroes and their readers in the vocative, remain obstinately on the fringe of the literature that becomes fashionable in this country. Julien Green and Jean Giono, among the men now in their six-

ties, have thus been obstinately underestimated; so have Emmanuel Robles and Pierre Gascar, the latter born in 1916, three years after Albert Camus. Of all the storytellers in France today, he may be said to be the closest approximation to Hemingway, with no trace of any American influence on him.

He has very sparingly offered revelations about himself, his metaphysics and his technique, and has shunned all publicity. But his novels have allowed readers to catch a glimpse of a melancholy childhood, spent in hardship and brooding solitude: his mother had died before he was ten and there was little affection spent on him. He refused to become a priest. As a teen-ager, he earned a meager subsistence working at all kinds of hard trades. World War II kept him in the army for eight years. A prisoner of war in East Germany, he was made to serve as the gravedigger for his camp; he became familiar with mental agony and death there, and he observed animals, horses especially, whose behavior and uncanny psychology he conjures up with a vividness unmatched since D. H. Lawrence. He has kept away from Existentialism and from the new, dehumanized or antihuman type of fiction. His few philosophical reflections, interspersed in his stories, are neither original nor pretentious. Yet he has a tormented soul and an exciting writer's conscience. Not long ago, in one of the very few interviews he has granted, he declared: "I work in insecurity. Literature to me is not just literature: it represents primarily a moral life, it stands for exigencies which I do not fulfill. . . . To write is a strange malady, a need to prove one's existence to oneself, . . . a self-punishment, a desire for redemption."

This volume of stories, every one of them haunting, is drawn from two French works: one, published in 1955, was entitled *Les Femmes* and contained three of the tales here translated; the other was *Soleils*, and four stories, all oppressed by an implacable Southern sun, are drawn from it. "The Women" is a humorously tragic depiction of Ukrainian women working, under German rule, in a workers' camp in East Germany during the war. One of them discovers that she has lice, to the dismay of the efficient German commander who has tried to raise these Slav prisoners to the hygienic level of the master race. The others beg the first "lousy" woman to give them one or two of the valuable vermin so as

to be relieved for a day or two of forced factory labor and of the threat of Allied bombers.

"The Forest-Fire," not the most striking in the collection, conveys the sense of aloneness and neurotic despair of a woman against whom the selfish, bourgeois guests of a holiday resort all turn with pharisaic scorn. "The Asylum" is far more effective as a graphic portrayal of a half-deranged inmate in an asylum for mildly insane women: pathetically, she deludes herself into hoping for a visit from her husband, who has abandoned her. The efficient impersonality with which nurses and doctors treat the patients makes the reader shudder.

"The Watershed" is even more powerful as an evocation of the aloneness of an American woman employed by an international health organization in the Philippines. The callousness of doctors and officials who deride her seriousness and her interest in the native women, whom she attempts to convert to birth control, is revolting. She becomes the mistress of an American businessman who has returned to the swampy jungle out of a guilt complex: he wants to revisit the scene where he threw up his arms and behaved as a coward during the Japanese occupation. Insidiously, in a fashion reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence's American women drawn to Indians and Mexicans, she yields to a strange fascination which some natives hold for her.

Gascar is at his best in "Cistern" and "Marble." The first is a ferocious picture of a remote and primitive village in southern Spain; the inhabitants live in caves which they have fitted out as rudimentary houses. The enemies are the sun and the perennial lack of water. A mechanic, a little more civilized than the rest, is punished by the community for having taunted them as if they were his inferiors: they leave him at the bottom of a dry well, where he may die from thirst. "Marble" is set among marble quarries in Italy. The sun-drenched landscape, the work of the masons, their gloomy silence and their few, coarse jokes, convey the atmosphere with force. A very young workman has won the impulsive love of "the Madonna," the mistress and model of a rich sculptor nearby, to whom the marble was sold so that he could chisel madonnas for churches. She dies, blown up in a dynamite explosion in the quarry, while attempting to join her lover after a misunderstanding that had parted them.

Five translators have rendered these poignant stories into vivid English. The concreteness of the imagery, the parsimony of language, the unremitting tension, and the avoidance of all rhetoric or sentimentality should fascinate and delight the readers of a genre, the long short story, today more remarkable than the novel in French literature.