

‘The Field of Honour’

An unknown First World War story by Edith Wharton

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Writing from Paris to her American editor Charles Scribner in New York in late June 1915, Edith Wharton confessed:

Some months ago I told you that you could count on the completion of my novel by the spring of 1916; but I thought then that the war would be over by August. Now we are looking forward to a winter campaign and the whole situation is so overwhelming and unescapable that I feel less and less able to turn my mind from it. May I suggest, during the next six months, giving you instead four or five short stories, not precisely war stories, but on subjects suggested by the war? So many extraordinary and dramatic situations are springing out of the huge conflict that the temptation to use a few of them is irresistible. I have three in mind already and shall get to work on them as soon as I can finish my articles.

The celebrated American author had been based in Paris since 1907, and in the first eleven months of the war had established several war charities, which would later gain her numerous military honours. The unfinished novel would eventually become *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), and the articles, Wharton’s war reportage from the front line, were appearing in *Scribner’s Magazine* and the *Saturday Evening Post* and would be published in November 1915 as *Fighting France*. After being what she termed “pen-tied” during the first few months of the war, Wharton had clearly begun to see its literary potential. The previous month she had submitted her war story “Coming Home” to Scribner’s for publication at Christmas 1915, and would go on to produce a fund-raising anthology, *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), the novels *The Marne* (1918) and *A Son at the Front* (1923), and a number of poems, newspaper articles and talks. However, it was only as the war was drawing to a close that she would write some of her proposed “not precisely war stories”, namely “The Refugees” (published in January 1919 in the *Saturday Evening Post*) and “Writing a War Story” (published in the *Woman’s Home Companion* in September 1919).

Among the Wharton papers at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, I came across another of them. Despite the story’s war-related title – “The Field of Honour” – the unpublished, nine-page work has never been noticed before. Six of the pages are in typescript, with annotations in pencil and black ink; the seventh is composed of six paper sections (two in typescript and the rest in manuscript) stuck together as one sheet – Wharton’s version of cut and paste. The eighth and ninth pages are made up of fragments, with earlier drafts of them on the versos. The two fragments on the ninth page belong to two separate stories: the first is a manuscript version of a section from “The Field of Honour”; the second, an unmarked fragment from “The Refugees”, suggesting that the stories were composed at roughly the same time (mid to late 1918). This is supported by the fact that both concern the disconcerting transforma-

tion of women in wartime. Although unfinished, “The Field of Honour” provides some fascinating insights into Wharton’s literary preoccupations as the war ended, particularly her feelings about women war workers and the relationship between America and France, and helps us understand further Wharton as a war writer.

The story begins, “It is over a year since the war began”, making the present sometime between September and December 1915. The plot concerns four key characters: the unnamed, ungendered (probably female) narrator, an American presumably living in Paris; the American woman Rose Belknap and her French Catholic nobleman husband, “Tom”, the Marquis de la Varède, who have been (unhappily) married for several years; and Tom’s male French friend, whom the narrator speaks to in the final scene. The narrator tells us

front”. The friend tells her, “it’s not so much a question of how fit a man is to go, but of how determined he is to go”. The draft ends with the friend’s negative comments on Tom and Rose’s marriage.

The characterization promotes the story’s moral ambiguity. The narrator and Rose have evidently had a close relationship in the past: “I knew more about her than anyone”, she says. But the narrator’s dislike, even hatred, of Rose is obvious. Rose, representing America, is presented as crass and excessive in her tastes, with her vulgarity and shallowness emphasized. Wharton’s characterization of Tom is slightly more equivocal: “good-looking, tired, disillusioned, without a conviction, and crammed full of prejudices”, but with potential. Whereas Tom’s character is based on inherited tradition and stability, “certain ancient and intrinsic facts”, Rose is associated with transient spaces of monied modernity and consumption: her convictions picked up “at the dressmaker’s, the

in the war. In “The Refugees”, for example, we meet the “refugee-raiders”, society women who compete for Belgian refugees; and when we encounter a different Mrs Belknap in *The Marne*, we hear that “[she] donned a nurse’s garb, poured tea once or twice at a fashionable hospital, and, on the strength of this effort, obtained permission to carry supplies (in her own motor) to the devastated regions”.

Where this story differs from Wharton’s other war fiction – and what makes it particularly interesting – is its depiction of a common wartime fear: that women were profiting socially, professionally, even sexually from the wartime economy that privileged their lives over male lives. The narrator’s discovery that Rose’s blooming is a direct result of her freedom from her husband provokes a violent impulse: “Now I knew why she looked so pretty. I felt at that moment as if she were a venomous insect that one ought to smash under one’s heel”. A similar trope is used in Kipling’s disturbing revenge story “Mary Postgate” (1915), in which the protagonist allows an injured German pilot to die in her garden, having witnessed a child being killed by the bomb he has dropped. Her quasi-orgasmic reaction as the pilot dies – an “increasing rapture laid hold of her” – followed by “a luxurious hot bath” means that she comes down to tea looking “all relaxed” and “quite handsome!” Although Kipling’s story makes the link between the death of the man and the transformation of the woman more explicit, both stories use the beautification of women as a means of demonstrating contemporary concerns about the increasing potency of women in wartime.

The final scene provides a commentary on Tom and Rose’s marriage, and, by extension, the relationship between France and America. This depiction of an unhappy marriage between an American woman and a Frenchman, which plays an interesting variation on the theme of American innocence corrupted by the Old World so familiar in the work of Wharton’s close friend Henry James, was written during a period when Wharton was thinking about the French-American relationship more broadly: she was publishing the essays that would become *French Ways and Their Meaning*, which attempted to explain France – always favourably portrayed – to an American readership, and she was writing *The Age of Innocence*, a novel about New York and Paris. Her gladness at America’s entry into the war in April 1917 may by this point have been tempered by anxiety on behalf of her adopted country. Perhaps, too, the story reflects Wharton’s increasing estrangement from her home country; she would tell the Editor of the *American Magazine* in 1920, “I no longer understand the new American”.

One wonders why Wharton chose not to finish and publish this story. She clearly spent time on it: having had the story typed, she then added revisions on two occasions, in both black ink and pencil. However, in her correspondence with her main outlets for publication in this



Edith Wharton and Walter Berry at the Front

that since the war began, “some life-histories have got themselves written” (which might remind us of the opening of “Coming Home”: “The young men of our American Relief Corps are beginning to come back from the front with stories”). The “life-histories” in “The Field of Honour” are presented in three scenes. The narrator recounts a dinner a week before the war with Rose and some of Tom’s friends, and we learn that Rose’s marriage “had been a mistake”. Two or three months later, the narrator meets Rose in the street in Paris and notices “that she had never looked so pretty”. Rose explains to the shocked narrator that Tom (who has an unspecified addiction) has gone to the front and, it is implied, to his death. A few days later, the narrator meets a friend of Tom’s and asks “how it was possible that a man in La Varède’s condition could have been sent to the

manicure’s, the clairvoyant’s, in the Sunday newspapers and the ‘all-story’ magazines . . . in tea-rooms and hotel lounges, and on the decks of steamers”.

The most interesting aspect of the story is its commentary on the politics of women’s war work. Free indirect narration is employed to satirize Rose’s nursing as one of “Les Consolatrices” (“It was awfully interesting and touching”), and this satire extends to Rose’s design of a “more becoming” version of the Red Cross uniform, which she is unfortunately forbidden to wear. Rose’s diction shows that her version of the war has come out of propaganda and popular representations, rather than real war work. Wharton, an extremely hard-working relief worker, observed with contempt the volunteer (particularly American) women workers who were only superficially interested

period – the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Scribner's Magazine* or *Woman's Home Companion* – there is no mention of the story. Perhaps it was difficult to place a war story after the war had ended and public interest had waned: a telegram in late December, 1918 noted that “POST TAKES REFUGEES FOR FIFTEEN HUNDRED BUT DECLINES VICTORY ARTI-

CLES”. Perhaps Wharton considered her harsh portrayal of volunteer women war workers too vitriolic, or abandoned the story in favour of writing what she knew would be a longer and more successful work, *The Age of Innocence*. Much of Wharton's wartime writing has been dismissed by even her most steadfast admirers as propagandistic or sentimental, but more

recently a critical reassessment has begun. Although those writings might lack the ambition or the polish of masterpieces such as *The House of Mirth* or *The Age of Innocence*, they are far more sophisticated than has previously been assumed. This unfinished story offers us a fascinating insight into just one of the creative possibilities the First World War posed for one

of America's great novelists.

Printed below is a “clean” version of the text: Wharton's substitutions for words or phrases that are scored through have been made; ellipses and spellings have been standardized; and ampersands in the handwritten part of the text have been changed to “and”.

It is over a year since the war began; and in that year some life-histories have got themselves written.

Rose de la Varède's, for instance. Would you ever have thought her capable of a life-history? Poor goose – not in a century, I should have said! And she had crowded one, after all, into twelve months. The awful hand that has inverted the world's hour-glass has sent her little grain of sand whirling through it with the rest

I had seen her, as it happened, about a week before the war, just as Paris was reluctantly dropping the curtain on its last “season”. We had dined together, with other like-minded idiots, in a leafy restaurant of the Bois de Boulogne; one of those secluded nooks where one has to fight for a table, to fight for a waiter, to fight for one's food; and where it's no use fighting for one's purse when the bill comes round. The others were the usual lot of plethoric asses and cackling clothes'-pegs; but Rose – well, Rose had, that evening as never before, the aggravating unpardonable look of being worth more than the people she was with, and of not knowing it. Poor Rose: I never pitied her more for that cursed gift of looking “interesting” when I knew and she knew, and every fool there knew, that she wasn't! I remember watching her after dinner, through the flowers and the cigarette-smoke, and wondering what was the use of having eyes like mountain-pools when all they had ever reflected was Fifth Avenue and the rue de la Paix?

I don't know why she made me angrier than usual that evening, unless it was because one of the diners happened to ask where La Varède was: a thing not usually done in his wife's presence. “Where's old Tom to-night?” some officious young ass called out, wanting to show he was “in it”, and knew La Varède's nick-name (I'll swear he never called him by it). Rose smiled serenely at the question.

“Tom? With his friends, I suppose. He'll be so pleased to hear you missed him.”

Yes, I hated that smile and that “his friends”, and the vulgar smirk of complicity that went round the table . . . You'll wonder what I was doing there, if I felt so righteous and denunciatory. Well: I was there partly because of Rose, who had invited me (I forget who was giving the dinner: in that set the person who pays so seldom invites), and partly because – look here, do you dine only with people you esteem? I tried it once, conscientiously, for a season; but the soup was always cold, and there was generally a sweet-bread vol-au-vent; so after a fair trial I gave it up. I daresay you have too.

All the same, I hated Rose when she smiled in that way at the mention of La Varède's name. The marriage had been a mistake – agreed; I'd known her as Rose Belknap of New York and Rome and St Moritz, and I knew more about her than anyone. But then I had known La Varède before his marriage

too. A queer stick he was – good-looking, tired, disillusioned, without a conviction, and crammed full of prejudices. What could a poor little artless American girl do with a man like that? (It was one of her favourite arguments afterward.) Well – I persisted in thinking that some artless American girls could have done a great deal. For it so happened that the Marquis de la Varède's prejudices were worth a good deal more than his wife's convictions. They were based on certain ancient and intrinsic facts for which a good many generations had fought and by which a good many more had lived. And hers? Good heavens! They had been picked up anywhere – at the dressmaker's, the manicure's, the clairvoyant's, in the Sunday newspapers and the “all-story” magazines (she could never get to the end of a book), in tea-rooms and hotel lounges, and on the decks of steamers. And filtered through her vanity they represented merely a mass of heterogeneous reasons for believing that Rose Belknap was entitled to the first place everywhere, and that any one else who attempted to assert a like claim, or in any way thwarted her inalienable right to boundless freedom and total irresponsibility, did it of malice prepense, and simply in order to be “hateful”.

You will ask, perhaps, why I am insisting on a case so usual and so uninteresting, and how out of such material I could dream of any one's extracting a possibility of wedded happiness. I can only answer that Rose was all that, but not merely that. And it was the same with La Varède. He was a gambler, a dawdler, a purposeless disenchanted diner-out; he was all that, but he was more than that. And when I met the two, a year or so after their marriage, my first feeling was that it was a failure, and my second that it need not have been if both had not remained stupidly unconscious of some latent quality in themselves and in each other.

I confess that the theory did not seem to hold with regard to Rose. As time went on I reluctantly decided that her eyes had fooled me, and that all she was capable of caring for was noise and expensive hilarity. Figuratively as well as literally, she had to have the band banging while she ate. And she seemed to take a perverse pleasure in not trying to see what I saw in her husband.

“You say he's so clever; and you're supposed to know. But look at his companions, my dear. Yes! Look at mine, you'll answer; but when did I ever set up to be clever?”

“That's the trouble,” I used to fling back irritably. “For God's sake do pretend. Gradually it might become a habit, and you'd open your eyes to a good many things you're blind to now.”

She opened them wide to fix her look straight on me as she answered gravely: “I'm not blind to the life Tom leads – as you seem to be. I know things enough, in all conscience!”

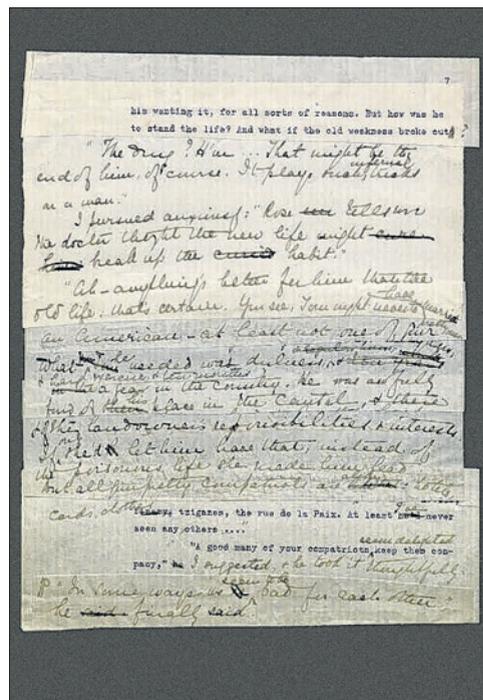
“You don't know the right ones, the ones that matter. It's not the life he leads that counts; it's the life he was meant to lead.”

“With some other woman, then? But how about the life I was meant to lead with some other man? And is it my fault if his religion prevents our divorcing?”

“It's rather fine, isn't it – since you say he's as unhappy as you – that a religion he doesn't practise still seems to him worth sacrificing his happiness to?”

“Oh, I know – ancestor worship, and all the rest! But how about my happiness?” she retorted; and I turned the conversation to the Russian ballet. . . .

After that last dinner on the eve of the war I did not see her again for two or three months. Then one day we met in the street, in Paris; and my first thought was that she had never looked so pretty, my next that in the universal gloom she was radiant.



A page from the typescript of “The Field of Honour”

Yes, she said, she'd been away, at a hospital in Brittany (they were all at hospitals in those first months), but her doctor had forbidden her to stay – the work was too exhausting – and so she had come back to Paris, and joined a group of friends who visited the wounded: “Les Consolatrices” they were called. It was awfully interesting and touching: she sat with the poor fellows, and took them fruit and flowers, and read aloud to them. (They had my sympathy; I'd heard her read aloud.) She did it every day, regularly, she went on with emphasis, as if suspecting me of incredulity; I must come and see her some day in her dress. She had devised something like the Red Cross uniform, only pearl grey, and more becoming: she thought one ought to look one's best when one went on an errand of mercy. But the idiotic authorities wouldn't let her wear it in the street.

“And Tom?”

“Oh, Tom – didn't you know? He's gone.”

“Gone – where?”

She reddened at my stupidity. “Why – to the front.”

“The front – ?” I suppose I gaped at her, for she rejoined: “Of course. Didn't you know he was contre-reformé? He left a week ago. . . .” Oh, the irresistible relief in her voice! Now I knew why she looked so pretty. I felt at that moment as if she were a venomous insect that one ought to smash under one's heel. Freedom from Tom! That was the only thing the war meant to her. . . .

We continued to look at each other without speaking. Each knew what the other was thinking of. Tom – Tom at the front! She began, as if dreading my next question: “You know he's been better lately – much better. He moved heaven and earth to be sent: he wanted it. And the doctor thinks it may cure him.”

She rattled it off as if to get rid of the subject; and I saw she wanted to get rid of me too. No doubt she was hurrying to the hospital to don her becoming dress and shed her consolations on the wounded. She held out her hand and we parted.

A day or two later I met an old friend of La Varède's: one of the few people to whom I could unburden my mind about him. I asked how it was possible that a man in La Varède's condition could have been sent to the front, and the friend shrugged his shoulders. “At bottom, you see, it's not so much a question of how fit a man is to go, but of how determined he is to go. If they really want it they can always manage it in the end. And Tom wanted it tremendously.”

Yes, I could imagine his wanting it, for all sorts of reasons. But how was he to stand the life? And what if the old weakness broke out?

“The drug? H'm. . . . That might be the end of him, of course. It plays such infernal tricks on a man.”

I pursued anxiously: “Rose tells me the doctor thought the new life might heal up the habit.”

“Ah – anything's better for him than the old life: that's certain. You see, Tom ought never to have married an American – at least not one of your pretty ones. What he needed was dullness, and hard exercise, and ten months a year in the Country. He was awfully fond of his place in the Cantal, and of the landowner's responsibilities and interests. If only she'd let him have that, instead of the poisonous life she made him lead. But all your pretty compatriots are alike: hotels, cards, clothes, tziganes, the rue de la Paix. At least I've never seen any others. . . .”

“A good many of your compatriots seem delighted to keep them company,” I suggested, and he took it thoughtfully.

“In some ways we seem to be bad for each other,” he finally said.

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