

A close-up photograph of a woman wearing a white lace dress. Her face is partially visible, looking down. A hand is placed on her shoulder. The background is a warm, golden-yellow color.

'Beautiful...
imaginative
tour de force'

DAILY MAIL

The Age of Desire

JENNIE FIELDS

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ABOUT THE BOOK

He stands at the edge of the salon, and Edith has the uncomfortable feeling he's staring. There are ten roués like him in every café in Paris. But his sapphire eyes glimmer with a discernible intelligence. His coal black lashes are as long as a giraffe's. Men should not be allowed to have lashes so seductive...

While Edith Wharton writes of grand love affairs, her own marriage is more platonic than passionate. Her closest friendship is with her literary secretary, Anna Bahlmann.

However, when Edith meets dashing young journalist, Morton Fullerton, her life is at last opened to the world of sensual pleasures. But her love affair threatens everything certain in her life, including her abiding friendship with her secretary. As Edith's marriage crumbles and Anna's disapproval threatens to shatter their lifelong bond, both women must face the fragility at the heart of all friendships.

Set in the Gilded Age of Paris society, Jennie Field's sumptuous novel retells the true story of a scandal involving one of the greatest writers of the 20th Century.

Praise for Jennie Fields and *The Age of Desire*

‘A fascinating insight into the life of my favourite novelist. Fields brings a secret side of Wharton to life, and shows us a woman whose elegant façade concealed a turbulent sensuality’ Daisy Goodwin

‘One of the most memorable female characters in recent fiction’ *Entertainment Weekly*

‘A treat to read’ *Washington Post*

‘With astonishing tenderness and immediacy, *The Age of Desire* portrays the interwoven lives of Edith Wharton and Anna Bahlmann, her governess, secretary, and close friend. By focusing on these two women from vastly different backgrounds, Jennie Fields miraculously illuminates an entire era ... I was filled with regret that I’d finished reading so soon’ Lauren Belfer

‘[Fields’s] portrayal of Edith Wharton in love is imaginative and bold and offers a touching view of Wharton ...’ Irene Goldman-Price, editor of *My Dear Governess: The Letters of Edith Wharton to Anna Bahlmann*

‘Jennie Fields has created a page-turning period piece. Fields portrays a woman whose life was hardly innocence and mirth, but passionate, complex and more mysterious than one might ever imagine’ Mary Morris

The Age of Desire

JENNIE FIELDS



*In memory of my parents, Belle and Ira Fields,
who taught me the power of words, books and ideas*

ONE



WINTER 1907

HE STANDS AT the edge of the salon, and Edith has the uncomfortable feeling he's staring. A dark-haired man. Formal. Self-certain. There are ten roués like him in every café in Paris. But his sapphire eyes glimmer with a discernible intelligence. His coal black lashes are as long as a giraffe's. Men should not be allowed to have lashes so seductive. He leans on one leg, observing the room, calculating. How hard he seems to work at doing nothing!

Though Edith has been attending Comtesse Rosa de Fitz-James's Paris salons for just over a month, she already knows most everyone in attendance. The Abbé Mugnier, with his comical fountain of white hair and bawdy sense of humor. (*"And there she was, wearing nothing but ..."*) Playwright Paul Hervieu and poet Abel Bonnard arguing in the corner about what makes a human being beautiful. Russian ballet dancer Alexi Toplar with maestro Emmet de Carlo, who leans his head toward him too affectionately while Toplar's wife stands sulkily watching. And their hostess, Comtesse Rosa, enthroned by the fire, her crippled leg propped on an orange velvet hassock. They say the late Count beat her and broke her leg on purpose. The fact that

she is an Austrian Jewess did not stop the denizens of this bohemia from taking her long ago to their hearts. The French love nothing better than a female martyr.

Clotting together at the side of the room are the table-enders, hardly older than students, each waiting for a chance to say the witty thing that will make his mark. Ah, to be a young man, with the world laid before one! All a man needs is to be clever, and have some access to money, or a profession. When Edith was a girl, her only option was to marry Teddy Wharton. Now, she has managed to make a name for herself with her books. How gratifying that her most recent one has drawn such a reaction! No one paid the least attention to the others.

The nameless man glances up again through those absurd lashes and smiles vaguely as though he thinks he knows her. She refuses to walk over and speak to him and is relieved when Rosa beckons.

"Dear Edith, listen to that downpour." Rain sheets the windows and the weak fire barely alleviates the damp chill. Rosa leans in and drops her voice. "The Bourgets usually arrive with you. Aren't they coming?" Her eyebrows meet in the middle with disappointment. "And I've invited someone *very* special who's failed to arrive as well. It must be the weather!"

Edith pats Rosa's thin shoulder. "Well, I can't speak for your 'someone special' but the Bourgets always come." The Bourgets are Edith's closest friends in France—and the ones who introduced her to the Comtesse.

"But the Bourgets are usually first," Rosa says. "I'm worried."

Reaching for the fire poker, Edith begins to nudge the guttering flames. Before she knows what's happening, a man's hand wrests the metal spear from her grip. Turning, irritated, she sees that the poker thief is her roué. Leaning across her, he jabs at the fire so fiercely it coughs up a constellation of sparks.

"Dear Rosa, I can't remember the last time you weren't worried about something," he says in perfect French.

"Have you met Mr. Fullerton?" Rosa asks. She speaks his name tenderly, and with a French accent: Full-air-tawn. "Monsieur Morton Fullerton, Madame Edward Wharton. Edith."

The man turns to Edith, sets the poker back in its stand and—his eyes filling with light—takes her hand. "Edith Wharton? So that's who you are!" He pronounces "are" as "ah." His accent is as broad and Bostonian as Teddy's. He's an American! In that perfect French suit. She never dreamed. "I've just finished *The House of Mirth*! What an extraordinary book, Mrs. Wharton! The best I've read since ..." He shakes his head.

"Thank you." She hears a flutter in her voice. She still has not gotten used to the discomfort and thrill of hearing people she's never met say they've read *The House of Mirth*. As he lets go of her hand, she looks to see that her palm is sooty. Was it from the poker? He takes out a handkerchief, crisp white and embroidered, and gently wipes her fingers. She is astonished, as he seems to think it's his right to take her hands in his. "I have to ask ... did that lovely creature Lily Bart plan to ... did she mean to ... well, I nearly wept and it was quite a knock to my manhood." Wiping his own hands, then folding the handkerchief neatly inward, he tucks it in his pocket, leans over and, nearly touching his lips to her ear, says, "Did she mean to end it all?"

Edith lowers her voice too, as though they are sharing the darkest of secrets. "I only tell my closest friends."

"So hah! You don't know yourself?"

She looks him in the eye. "Well, I didn't say that."

"No, I believe you *don't know*. It would be very French of you not to know. To let your characters carry their secrets to their graves." He glances away, but she sees that

his mouth sucks on his mischievousness as one might savor a hard candy.

Edith smiles. "It looks to me as though you've managed to hold on to your manhood quite well, Mr. Fullerton. Only a man could look so pleased with himself."

His blue eyes flash and he laughs. She didn't expect he could laugh at himself.

"So," she says, crossing her arms, thinking that perhaps she will not dislike him after all. "What do you do?"

"I'm a journalist for the *Times* of London."

"An American at the *Times* of London?"

There is a sweet shyness when he nods. She did not expect that either.

"I'm impressed." She notes his lustrous aubergine cravat stuck through with a perfect pearl. His starched shirt with its separate *plastron*. She was so certain he was French!

"How long have you been in France?" she asks.

"Sixteen years ..."

"You've become a Frenchman, then?"

"Oh no. I'm an American through and through."

"Even after sixteen years? France doesn't feel like home?"

He shakes his head. "The French are a constant source of *surprise*, you see." He speaks the word with a French flair (soo-preeeez). "Of course, New England can be a bit of *soo-preeeez* as well. Going home feels like being dunked in ice water."

"Yes, I've had a similar experience," she says.

"We have a friend in common, you know."

"Do we?"

"A certain Mr. James."

Edith raises her brows. "You know Henry?"

"Intimately." He smiles a devilish smile. "He tells me that you are great friends, which impressed me. He is very choosy about his friends."

Henry James loves the company of stylish, attractive young men, whom he fawns over and to whom he imparts his wisdom. Edith isn't blind to this. She enjoys the company of Henry's fair friends as well. But there is a softness about the majority of Henry's male entourage. A sense that they'd be more comfortable staying home embroidering. Mr. Fullerton seems uniquely brazen and masculine.

"Mr. James is coming to visit me this month," Edith says. "We're going on a motor trip."

"So he wrote. He says motorcars have put the romance back into travel."

Edith smiles. Those were the exact words she'd written to Henry to entice him to come! So Henry's quoting Edith now!

She feels Mr. Fullerton appraising her, and it makes her self-conscious. While Edith Jones Wharton isn't young anymore, she's kept her youthful figure, her liveness. But lately, she's seen signs of growing older. Her neck has subtly smocked with age. She hides it with fashionable high collars, or lace jabots. The crescents beneath her eyes, from years of breathing problems and intermittent nausea, have grown hollow and her cheeks gaunt, making her hazel eyes look larger, sadder. Orphan eyes, she tells herself. She still has a pile of lush auburn hair. It's certainly more beautiful now than in her carrot-topped youth (the cause of much teasing from her brothers). But it has recently been reinforced with threads of silver.

"Listen," Mr. Fullerton says, his voice very intimate, his face very close to hers. "Mrs. Wharton ..." She feels a salty burn at the base of her throat as he touches her arm. "Do you think that we might ..."

"The Bourgets at last!" Rosa crows, breaking the spell. Edith looks up to see Paul and Minnie step into the room, the crowd scattering to make way for them. Minnie shakes out her damp skirts. Paul greets everyone with bright eyes.

"My dearest dear," Minnie says, coming directly toward Edith and, stepping in front of Fullerton, kissing her on both cheeks. "Sorry we're so late. Paul needed to *gather* himself." She rolls her eyes sweetly and squeezes Edith's hands.

"A man's toilette is so much more complicated than a woman's," Edith says with a wry smile, assuming she has an audience. "By the way, have you met Mr. Fullerton?" Edith turns, but he is already gone. How had he slipped away so quickly? What had he meant to say?

"Oh, I've met him many times. Perhaps *too* many." Minnie flashes an inscrutable smile. Edith is about to ask her what she meant when Rosa summons the guests with her chalk-squeak voice to join her in the dining room.

But before the party can move toward the elaborately set table, the drawing room doors fly open and a languid figure steps forth: a woman in a gossamer gown with parrot green feathers at the shoulders, dark, heavy hair piled on her head and eyes so large and fiery they could melt the room.

"Madame la Comtesse de Noailles," someone whispers. It's as though the heartbeat of the party stops for a lurching moment.

"Anna," Rosa beams with pleasure. "You've come."

Edith is stunned. All of Paris has whispered of Anna de Noailles, the young poetess whose daring, sensual poems have thrilled every true reader in France, whom painters are lining up to paint. She has never before come to Rosa's. In fact, she has her own selective salon that not one of Edith's friends has been invited to. Paul Bourget had shown Edith her most recent book of poetry with admiration and envy. The earthiness of the poems fascinated Edith and made her blush to her ears.

"Forgive me for being late," Comtesse de Noailles says, taking Rosa's arm and escorting her into the dining room. "It completely slipped my mind that tonight is Tuesday."

Edith sees that Fullerton, now on the other side of the room, is watching de Noailles with interest, but then his gaze shifts to Edith and he flashes her a sweet, bemused grin.

The dining room is hung with finely woven tapestries the color of spices and priceless, delightful paintings. A David of a languorous, round-faced woman lounges over the fireplace. Anna de Noailles, with her peach like breasts, could have modeled for it. How plain and unworthy de Noailles makes Edith feel!

In the tradition of fashionable French dinner parties, Rosa sits in the middle of one side of the table, where she is in contact with the most possible guests. In very purposeful order, the diners fan out from her nucleus, seated on a spectrum from most to least important according to ancient and inflexible French traditions. Anna de Noailles, a comtesse by marriage, a Romanian princess by birth, is placed beside Rosa. Edith finds herself somewhere in the middle with Fullerton just opposite. Napkins are unfolded onto laps. Wine is poured. Edith glances across at Fullerton, who is no longer watching Anna de Noailles like everyone else, but Edith. Every time she looks up, his eyes are fixed on her face. She is praying her face won't redden. How absurd for a woman over forty to blush!

Paul Hervieu says, "Did you read that Giosuè Carducci died?"

Abel Bonnard nods. "They gave him the Nobel Prize just in time."

Edith herself wrote a poem "in the manner of Giosuè Carducci" a few years earlier. She's sad to hear he's died.

"Why do they give Nobels only to dying old men?" one of the table-enders asks.

L'Abbé Mugnier sips his wine and sets his glass down with a smile. "It takes a lifetime to be worthy of such a prize, young man." He nods to himself, pleased he's answered the challenge so neatly.

Anna de Noailles's black eyes sparkle with mischief. "Since you are so wise, Monsieur Abbé, perhaps you can answer this question." She drops her voice so that everyone must lean forward. "Why do they never give the Nobel Prize to a woman?"

"Ah ..." The Abbé raises a finger. "You are mistaken, Comtesse. They gave the Nobel Peace Prize to a woman just the year before last. Can anyone remember her name?" There is an extended silence.

"Well, that makes the point!" Minnie says. "No one can recall her name."

"What do I care for the Peace Prize?" de Noailles says. "I ask you ..." She looks back and forth along the table so that each and every guest is graced by her gaze, then drops her voice to a near whisper. "Is there peace in the world? Not a shred. So why give a prize for something incomplete?" There is laughter all around. Even Edith can't help but smile. "It's the literature prize I'm speaking of. At least writers are required to finish *their* work."

"Are you planning to win someday, Comtesse?" Minnie Bourget says.

"And why not, Madame Bourget? Am I less worthy than dusty old Giosuè Carducci because I have bosoms? I predict a woman will win very soon."

Edith looks at Anna de Noailles and sees the world altering before her eyes. Her ease, her acceptance here are thrilling and disconcerting. She clearly wears no corset beneath the diaphanous gown. She is not afraid to show off those luminous bosoms to which she has called attention. Her glossy hair is dark and uncontrolled. Insubordinate hair, Edith thinks with amusement. Everything about de Noailles is made to seduce. There isn't a man at the table who isn't stirred by her. Even those who aren't the least interested in women. She can see it in their rosy cheeks and burning eyes, as though just glancing intoxicates.

Edith peers down at her own frilly bodice, heavy pearls, and layers of boning and muslin and silk and wool with new dissatisfaction. It seems more like upholstery than clothing. She is old-fashioned and less than beautiful. Proper and stiff. She cannot imagine having the physical self-confidence that de Noailles projects. And then there is this: Anna de Noailles is a woman who knows the pleasures of the body—something Edith, encased in her sexless, empty marriage will never know. Edith was raised to be a lady, not a woman.

“What I think,” Comtesse de Noailles says, “is that talent and gender are completely independent. You do not judge a racehorse by the barn it is housed in. You judge it by how swiftly and beautifully it runs, do you not? If exquisite talent is housed in a woman, do we dismiss it?”

Edith is struck by her words. Should she despise this woman for her defiance, or see her as Jeanne d’Arc, leading feminine legions to victory? Up until now suffragists have annoyed Edith. Man hating. Angry. Edith loves the company of men and is proud to have been included in their inner circles. Most women don’t deserve a place at the table, in her opinion. But de Noailles—she celebrates womanhood, creates her own intellectual circle and deigns to let men in! Edith is stunned when Morton Fullerton leans forward and gestures to Edith. “Mrs. Wharton here has proven that talent wins out, Comtesse,” he says. “All of New York is talking about her latest book. I’ve never heard a woman’s work so lauded. Some reviewers have called her the greatest living American writer.”

Edith feels the blood rising to her temples. “That’s very kind of you, Mr. Fullerton,” she says. “Far too kind.”

“What do you write, Mrs. Wharton?”

“Novels, short stories, some poetry.”

“Do you write as a woman, about women, for women?”

Edith wants the Comtesse to applaud her. And yet, she is a stickler for honesty. Has she ever written *for women*?

"I write about how in certain strata of American society, there are different rules for men and women. And different consequences. And there is nothing"—she struggles to find the perfect word in French—"just about it."

Edith feels surprisingly exposed. *The House of Mirth* said all this and more. But she has never openly spoken of it. And part of her—the part that is disdainful of sudden change—knows her book has pointed out the misfortune of women in this world, yet cannot envision a society without such poorly weighted rules. She questions her own words.

And yet de Noailles seems galvanized by them. "Bravo, my friend. I would very much like to read your book. Sadly, my English is like lace. There are holes in it. Has it been translated into French?"

"I'm hoping it will be soon."

"I'll read it the moment it comes out." Her smile is like morning sun.

Edith feels the magnificence of its heat and the shame that perhaps she does not deserve it.



When the dinner is over, topics volleyed and returned, and cigarettes and cigars smoked, Edith kisses Rosa good-bye, and then Anna de Noailles steps around Hervieu and the Abbé to take her hand.

"Madame Wharton, I wish to know you better. You will come have tea with me, won't you? Of everyone here, you are the fish I would like to catch." Edith breathes in the musky Oriental perfume which rises from the Comtesse's unearthly smooth skin.

"I'd be honored," Edith says.

And then Edith is ruffled by her very breeze as de Noailles flicks her wrap over her shoulders and glides out into the night. Edith looks around for Mr. Fullerton, to thank him for his kind words at dinner, but it's as though he

vanished into the cigar smoke at the end of the evening. She searches every open room until she's satisfied he's truly gone.

Paul and Minnie offer to walk Edith home since their flat is just around the corner on the Rue Barbet de Jouy. Minnie takes one arm, Paul the other. They walk hip to hip, as the sidewalk is narrow. It's late, the rain has stopped, and the air is now perfectly icy. The grand and glittering buildings seem to lean over the narrow street like a bower of trees. Oh, how Paris has thrilled Edith. Its beauty never fails to rouse her. And the company. What fine company she has found here!

"Well," Minnie says. "Anna de Noailles doesn't let another soul get a word in, does she?"

"Did you feel that?"

"Didn't you? She monopolized the entire conversation. You barely said a word, Edith. And that's not like you."

"I must admit, I was rapt. The things she said ... did you not feel she was ... stirring? Her point of view. I found it so modern. I fear I'm lagging behind in that thinking."

"It's all about *her*. She speaks only of herself. She sets herself up as a deity."

"And what do you think, Paul?" Edith asks.

"I'm a man. I am blinded by her. But of course, I can't hear a word she says."

Minnie shoves him with annoyance. "It was nice of Mr. Fullerton to speak of your book, though, I must say," Minnie adds turning to Edith.

"You said something earlier about Mr. Fullerton," Edith says. "Something not entirely flattering."

"I have nothing against him ... exactly," she says.

"Fullerton's a decent enough fellow," Paul says.

"But I don't care to know him better," Minnie says.

"Why?"

She shrugs. "One hears things."

"What sorts of things?"

"I don't repeat gossip." It was true: it was one of Minnie's most admirable and irritating traits. She too often hinted at hearsay she wouldn't clarify.

"Besides, even if he is handsome, I don't find him quite appealing."

"Minnie only has eyes for me," Paul says.

Edith squeezes her dapper friend's arm.

"As she should, Paul. As she should."

"While Paul only has eyes for Anna de Noailles," Minnie says with an exaggerated pout.

"Tell Minnie I'll wear a blindfold next time I see Madame la Comtesse."

"Please inform Paul that I will be the one that ties on the blindfold."

"And now," Edith says, reaching 58, rue de Varenne, "I have to appease Teddy, who is no doubt staring at the wall."

"Why don't you bring him next time?"

"Because he wouldn't comprehend a word that's spoken. He refuses to learn French. He can't even pronounce *merci* or *s'il vous plaît* properly!"

"Well, say hello for us," Minnie grips her husband's arm. "In English, of course." Edith can tell she is looking forward to being alone with Paul. Either to scold him or flirt with him. Minnie and Paul are a love match, something as foreign to Edith as French is to the man she married.



The ancient apartment that the Whartons are renting this winter belongs to their friend George Vanderbilt. Edith was enamored the moment she stepped in to visit George a few seasons ago. It boasts all the Faubourg's most ravishing touches: high ceilings, exquisite boiseries and elegant moldings. George's oriental vases and lush Aubusson carpets only make it more elegant.

Marthe, the young *bonne* they've hired locally, sleepily greets Edith at the door, pleased she's come at last. Edith hands over her furs and wraps. Mitou, one of the Pekinese, comes skidding up the hall with little yips of glee and jumps at Edith's skirts. Edith lifts him for a kiss. Jules the bearded collie follows, with a comic, lugubrious gait. He looks away as Edith squats down to pat his head, as though saying, "I didn't ask for this attention." They are her babies. Both so different. Both so lovable. When Edith looks into the eyes of her dogs, she feels an abiding love she feels for no one else—has never felt for anyone else. Sometimes she is sad to recognize this. Other times she knows she is blessed to at least have her pets.

"My angels," she says. "Are you glad Maman is home? Where's Nicette?" She glances about for the other Pekinese.

A whispery voice answers. "Nicette is with Mr. Wharton."

Edith stands to greet Anna Bahlmann with a smile. She never hears her secretary arriving. Dressed in gray wool as always, Anna is a little sparrow, and alights in a room as silently.

"A nice evening?" Anna asks. Her American accent has melted into a sort of elegance over the years, modeled perhaps on Edith's own. When Anna speaks, she is as quiet as a librarian. And as she ages, as her hair mottles from golden to silver, her voice grows softer and more airy.

"Oh, Tonni, it was wonderful. Anna de Noailles was at the salon tonight!" Edith says.

"Was she? Is she all they say she is?"

Edith has shown Anna Bahlmann some of de Noailles's poems and, as expected, they made Miss Bahlmann grow pale and tongue-tied. How different these two Annas are!

"She's even more extraordinary than I imagined," Edith tells Anna. "She rivets a room even when she whispers. Men can't stop looking at her. And ..." Edith pauses,

wondering how to explain. "I doubt she was wearing a single undergarment under her dress."

Her eyebrows raised, Anna says, "It's probably best if I don't hear more!"

Edith laughs and gives her a hug. Anna Bahlmann's sweet countenance and maidenly modesty are unchanged since the day over thirty years ago when she arrived on the Jones's doorstep with an armful of weighty leather books and a brown paper sack of taffy apples, ready to introduce ten-year-old Edith to German poetry. Tiny and slender, with dark golden hair, Anna sat on the sofa in Edith's nursery and brought out a glistening caramel apple on a stick. "Shall we start with one of these?" she asked, passing it to Edith. "In German this is called *ein Apfel*."

Just a few months later, she moved in with the Joneses to become Edith's "finishing" governess. She was barely taller than her charge. And though Mrs. Jones pronounced this tiny German American girl no match for her impossibly headstrong daughter, Anna has matched Edith infinitely well for years and years. Dear Tonni (the Rutherford boys next door, who employed her first, gave her the name, a childish twist on *tante*, or aunt) has slipped in and out of Edith's world, spending entire summers teaching other children, or seasons in Virginia visiting relatives while Edith's family toured abroad, or even a full year in Cuba with another family, but whatever paths they've taken, their lives have become inextricably tied. She is more than an aunt to Edith. A friend, a substitute mother, a conscience. When they're apart, there are always letters. Anna is the first to read Edith's written words and comment, the first to guess when she is happy or unwell. She accompanies the Whartons to dinners, to the theatre sometimes. She is even willing right now to sleep upstairs in a servant's room to be of service. Edith has promised she will find her a flat nearby, but hasn't had the time, and Anna hasn't

complained. There is probably no one who knows Edith better than Anna.

"Teddy's still up?" Edith asks, yawning.

"In the library." Anna colors and looks down at her hands. "He was agitated for a while after you left, Herz. I heard him speaking to himself. I don't like to say it ... but ... he isn't happy when you leave ..."

"He tries to start a fight with me every Tuesday evening. As though he can stop me from going to Rosa's! And he manages to be perfectly miserable the rest of the night. We've trained the dogs. How can we train Teddy to stop doing that?"

"He enjoys your company, Edith. He's sorry when you're not around."

From the moment she met him, Anna thought Teddy a fine match for Edith. "He's a good man," she told Edith. "Generous and kind. Even if he doesn't read literature, is that so important in a man? One can't expect men to appreciate what we appreciate." When it comes to men, Anna knows very little.

Leaving Anna in the foyer, Edith strides down the hall to the library. She was hoping Teddy would have gone to bed, but she finds him, as usual, in the tall leather chair he wed the day they moved into the apartment. Nicette is lounging contentedly in his lap. Teddy certainly doesn't look cheerful; he appears lost.

"Dear?" she says.

It's as though he's been on a long journey and has just now arrived back in the room. "Oh, Pussy. You're back."

Edith's mother's nickname for her feels as ridiculous and coquettish as a ruffled dress on a middle-aged woman. Unseemly. Still, Teddy can't outgrow calling her Pussy, and speaks of her to everyone as Puss. She's asked him not to, but to no avail.

He looks down at Nicette as though surprised she's there. Edith struggles as she observes him. In so many

ways, Teddy is like a child. He simply wants her attention, to hear that he matters. Surely she can find some patience in herself? She has never thought of herself as vindictive, but lately she has found that puzzle piece of her mother's snapping into place when she is near her husband. How her mother punished her father when he annoyed her or didn't give her what she wanted!

Edith knows Teddy dislikes Paris and misses The Mount, the house they've built in Lenox, Massachusetts, with its horses and pigs and chickens. He seems happiest where there's land and animals, and mud on his boots. And unlike Edith, he wouldn't even have minded spending the winter at their house on Park Avenue, where he could have at least found solace at his Knickerbocker Club just downtown.

"Are you all right?" she asks him.

"I'm fine." His receding hair is a faded gold, as is his thick, bristly mustache. His eyes are an empty sort of blue. A jolly man, she once thought him. A good enough sort of fellow. When he's in fine form, he can tell a rousing story. But on the table by the chair, there's the brandy—which always has a place on that table these days. It's changed him. Edith has noted his face has become coarser and more red lately, the heavy pouches beneath his eyes weightier; his hands have grown shaky. He's twelve years her senior and every year shows on his face. The brandy has done him no favors.

"Did the cook feed you?"

"I think she's attempting to poison us," he says. "I don't know what it was she gave me."

"Did you eat any of it?"

"Not much."

The cook, like the *bonne*, was hired locally, the recommendation of a friend of a friend, but so far she's been a disappointment. Shouldn't French food be delectable, delicate, digestible?

"Well, she's not the best *cuisinière* we've had," Edith says, sighing. Still, Edith doesn't think Teddy's trouble is the dinner. She can't help feeling the burden of his melancholia more and more. A dark sail coming closer and closer to shore. It's even harder to bear because she herself has lately been so happy. But after what Teddy's father did to himself, well, she knows she has to watch him. She hates the thought that maybe she shouldn't have insisted they spend the winter in Paris.

"HJ's coming next week," she says in her most cheerful voice. "And we're going on that motor trip. You'll enjoy that."

Teddy always perks up when they travel. When the Whartons experience new things together, they feel harmony, become suddenly suited to each other. Teddy's a "game" man. He likes new things, new places, and lights up when Edith is delighted. But after a trip, the dullness separates them once more and they simply tolerate each other.

"Henry's such an old lady," Teddy declared after their last trip together. And Edith recognizes that Teddy and Henry haven't a single thing in common except perhaps an interest in whatever touring cars the Whartons employ.

"I walked down to the water today," Teddy says, dreamily.

When she looks at him, her heart prickles as limbs sometimes do when too much has weighed on them for too long.

"Well, that's good. At least you got out," she says.

"Do you think, Puss, we might take a boat ride down the Seine sometime? There are those big public boats. It might be nice."

"Those boats are so vulgar, though." Edith is surprised to hear these words coming from her mouth. She had intended to be gentle with him. "Isn't it too early in the

season? I mean, dear, wouldn't it be cold?" How hard she tries to soften her tone.

He closes his eyes sadly. "I suppose you're right."

Yet she feels regretful. She could have been kinder, could have imagined how sparkling Paris would look from the water. Dusk. The fairy-tale turnings of the Beaux Arts buildings. Mansard roofs, glass doors reflecting the plashing of river water, graceful vinelike balconies. Why has she lost all patience with him? She struggles harder and harder to find it.

"I'm getting ready for bed," she says.

He sits there, watching her, not moving. "Go on then." She sees something in his eyes that throws her.

"Are you all right?" she asks again.

"Don't fuss," he says. "You know I don't like it when you fuss."

TWO



EDITH JONES MARRIED Teddy Wharton for all the wrong reasons. She was spending the summer in Bar Harbor the year she turned twenty-one, getting over an unhappy, mistaken engagement to Harry Stevens. And she was “seeing” Walter Berry, a lawyer. Walter seemed like Edith’s mirror image: sprung from the same New York society, having spent much of his childhood in Europe. All through the cool blueberry-graced summer of 1883, she and Walter walked side by side, poetry books in hand. They paddled in canoes. They sat on the Jones’s rented porch overlooking the ocean and talked and talked.

Unfortunately, even their most placid discussions turned into shouting matches. Once he took her out in a canoe, and they argued so vociferously that a flock of birds rose from the water, spattering silver drops on them, so they had to laugh at themselves. But soon enough, they were at it again.

The reason Edith didn’t fall in love with Walter then, and she’s somewhat ashamed of this now: he intimidated her. He was so bright, so sharp, he made her feel small. He challenged her too well. He made her see herself as less than the person she wanted to be.

She couldn’t help wishing for someone like her father instead, someone kindly and unchallenging who thought

she made the world spin. Walter would never think this. He would make her feel too often like a fool. And then, Walter didn't really declare himself. Maybe it was because back then he was a penniless lawyer. And proud. Not the sort of man who would take money or rely on his bride's.

Teddy Wharton, her brother Harry's friend, was also in Bar Harbor that summer. She had known him for a good decade since she was just a little girl tagging along. He was older, in his thirties, an easygoing fellow with golden hair and a mischievous smile. He often led Bar Harbor's young elite on adventures: the scavenger hunt everyone talked about for the rest of the summer, the cake-eating contest on the Van Degan's whitewashed veranda. She was just Harry's little sister. She didn't expect him to pay any attention to her. In fact, she was not the sort of girl who participated in his variety of escapades. But he looked charming and funny in his straw boater. He smelled good, like cinnamon and lime (cologne, she suspected). And she did enjoy the times he insisted she join them in their mad schemes. He told her once when she arrived on her brother Harry's arm to a shoreside dinner at Eleanor Allen's house that she looked "somewhere beyond beautiful" in her kelly green dress. She could feel his sincerity, his admiration. It was as palpable as the spicy scent that rose from his skin whenever she came near.

She was not used to people telling her she was beautiful. Her mother made a point of saying she was a disappointment, in need of constant improvement. The night of the dinner at Eleanor Allen's, Edith looked in the mirror as she removed her pearls, and—staring as dispassionately as she could at her too square, too masculine jaw, her heavy brow, her thin lips—she felt blessed that Teddy Wharton could see beauty in her.

When, at the end of the summer, Walter Berry went back to Washington to pursue his law, Teddy Wharton came to New York and started paying attention to Edith. She

thought him kindly, and being older, he gave her a sense of safety, ease. That winter, he escorted her to the Patriarch's Ball at Delmonico's, where he proved himself a fine dancer. He told her that her tiny waist was perfect in her lavender taffeta as he held his hands around it, his large fingers nearly meeting, his eyes lit with pleasure.

Months later, when they became engaged, word came to Edith that Walter Berry was "heartsick" and literally got right into bed with the flu and would not get out for a week. Eventually, she received a letter from him in a thick cream envelope: "I wish you all the best, my dearest dear. Teddy is a fine fellow, and I know he will treat you handsomely. Yrs. W." The letter made Edith furious, somehow. Even in his magnanimous note, he was attempting to get the upper hand. Calling her his dearest dear! The nerve. She would never win when it came to Walter Berry!



And then there was the business of being married. Her mother felt it was her duty—no, her *right*—to choose where and when the wedding would take place, what the guests were to eat, and how Edith herself should dress. Edith let her. There was no winning over Lucretia. She was even more formidable than Walter Berry!

Three days before the wedding, as the dressmaker placed the finishing touches on a high-collared elaborately pleated gown, as the cooks gathered provisions for Lobster Newburg and Cherries Jubilee, as the diamond tiara that Lucretia had worn for her own wedding already sat aglint on Edith's dressing table, Edith simply needed to speak to her mother.

"I wouldn't go in there right now," Anna Bahlmann said, standing by the door of Lucretia's boudoir. "I believe she would not be good company."

"But I *have* to see her, Tonni."

"You know as well as I do, Edith, that one must pick one's times with your mother."

Anna often gave sage advice when it came to Lucretia's unpredictability. But Edith couldn't heed her today. She was about to vow to love, honor and obey Teddy Wharton and she had no idea what that meant. She knew *something* would take place in the marriage bed, but what? She had asked her mother vaguely in the past and had been told it was unseemly to bring up the topic. Now it was imperative.

Edith stepped quietly past Anna and knocked on the mahogany door.

"Come in if you must," Lucretia said. She was sitting ruler-straight at her silk-skirted dressing table, pinning up her graying hair. Lucretia had a maid, but she always took her hair down as soon as the maid left the room and redid it.

"Mama. Do you have a moment to speak with me?" The pounding of Edith's own heart deafened her.

Lucretia spun around and her slate eyes flashed with annoyance. "You can see I'm dressing to go out."

"It's important."

"And what's your idea of important?" Lucretia asked. Her voice sounded to Edith like the snap of dried twigs in a frosty forest.

"The wedding. I need to know ... what's expected of me. ..."

"What's expected of you?"

"I need to know ..."

"You're expected to keep your head high and say as little as possible. Your role as bride will say enough. Chatty brides are intolerable."

"I mean after the wedding. I mean ... on my wedding night. I need to know ... what will ... happen to me!"

"I never heard such a ridiculous question!" The icy shatter of her words fell as she turned her back on her daughter and continued stuffing pins into her silver hair.

"But I don't know what will happen, Mama. I'm afraid!"

Her mother made a noise that could have been a sigh, except it came from the vicinity of her nose and sounded irritated and damning. She did not speak for a long while, and Edith had to stand and listen to the pump of blood in her ears. "You've seen enough pictures and statues in your life, Puss. Haven't you noticed that men are—made differently from women?"

"Yes." Of course she'd noticed. She'd stared at Michelangelo's *David* when she was twelve. She'd seen paintings of naked men. And she had brothers who didn't always lock the bathroom door, much to her mortification and their amusement. But what did it mean? So what if they were made differently?

"Well, then," Lucretia said, as though that settled everything.

Edith was speechless. She fished hard for a question that would not make her a fool. "But ..."

"For heaven's sake, don't ask me any more silly questions, Edith. You can't possibly be as stupid as you pretend! I never had to tell the boys a thing. Hand me that hat." Edith lifted a beautiful black hat off the hat stand, fluffing the osprey feathers before she passed it to her mother. "And now leave me alone," Lucretia said, pinning the hat to her just refined hair. "You're tiring me out."



The wedding reception was held at the house on Twenty-fifth Street. Through it all, Edith felt as though there were a pane of glass between her and the festivities. She did not take well to champagne, or to any wine for that matter. And her discomfort was heightened because the maid had winched in her corset even more firmly than usual to make her look sylphlike in her gown. She could barely take a breath. By the second hour of the reception, Teddy was not