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LETTERS FROM EDITH WHARTON
TO VERNON LEE

By HILDA M. FIFE

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EDITH WHARTON and her husband customarily spent their winters in Italy or other southern European lands. Always interested in gardens and in architecture, Mrs. Wharton was enthusiastically familiar with Vernon Lee's *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), *Belcaro* (1881), and *Euphorion* (1884). In 1892 she was given a letter of introduction to Miss Paget by a mutual friend, the French poet, critic, and novelist Paul Bourget. Although Vernon Lee was at this time seeing few people because of the serious illness of her brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, she invited Mrs. Wharton to call if she "chanced to be the Edith Wharton who had written a certain sonnet . . . in *Scribner's Magazine*" which had appealed to her brother. The three became good friends, and when in the winter of 1903 Edith Wharton was commissioned by the *Century Magazine* to write the text for a series of Maxfield Parrish pictures of Italian villas, Vernon Lee assisted her greatly by directing her to less well known villas and by introducing her to their owners and to other authorities. The *Century* articles were later published in a book, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, 1904, which Mrs. Wharton says in her autobiography "became . . . a working manual for architectural students and landscape gardeners" and "still [1934] has a steady sale." In *A Backward Glance*, her autobiography, Edith Wharton comments in some detail upon her friendship with Vernon Lee and Eugene Lee-Hamilton and expresses her gratitude for Vernon Lee's help at this time.

The first of Mrs. Wharton's letters was written at the close of her 1903 period of residence at Florence:

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Hotel Cavour, Milan Italy.

April 7-[1903]

Dear Miss Paget

My great regret in leaving Florence was that I had seen so little of you. I wanted so much to have at least one more talk with you. Next year I hope I may come back with more leisure, and perhaps before that you may come to America.

You say that you have given up the idea for the present; but in the hope that you may turn to it again later, I will tell you what I learned from my friend, Professor Norton's daughter. She writes me that it is customary for the Faculties of the various colleges to invite people to give lectures, and she thought that you might be probably [would] be invited by Radcliffe or Barnard, if they knew of your visit. She says, however, that in giving a lecture or course of lectures before one of our girls' colleges, or one of the Universities, you would probably be asked to deal with a more concrete subject than, say, Life and Art. In other words, a lecture or lectures on a special period of Italian history or art would be more desirable than a discussion of aesthetics. She speaks from long experience of University life, and I fancy her opinion would be confirmed by any one else of like affiliations. She adds that, from the financial standpoint, the lecture to a general audience, which you dislike, would of course be more successful. Such lectures, I am sure, could be arranged for and carried out successfully in New York and Boston, and perhaps Washington; but your books on Italian art and life are so much appreciated in America that if you dealt with that subject there w[oul]d be far more certainty of popularity.

Whenever you feel disposed to take up the matter again, write me and I will do all I can to make satisfactory arrangements for you, in one line or the other, or in both; and if you should come to America this summer or autumn, I need not say how much we should enjoy a visit

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from you. We could show you some corners of old New England, and some of the most charming woodland scenery I know of anywhere; and the pleasure of welcoming you would be great.¹

If you are not weary of this long letter I should like to go on to talk about your play;² but you can let my remarks wait till you have an unemployed hour. You said you wished my impression of it—but was it from the standpoint of the stage or of the “closet”? On the former I should hardly be an authority; so I prefer to write of the play as a reader, rather than as a spectator.—It is exquisite, and so completely the kind of fanciful poetical thing that I long to see done, that I have only one objection to make to it: namely, its greater fitness for narrative than for dramatic treatment. Certainly the idea is dramatic; but even for a play read in the closet it seems to me to lack movement and clash of emotions. In short, whatever is faulty in it seems to me faulty only from the dramatic point-of-view; whatever is most exquisite, would increase in value were the form narrative. I have always thought, for instance, that no one has your gift of suggesting in a few touches an Italian landscape or picture; and the little stage directions at the head of each act are so beautiful that one feels they ought to be, not the mere illuminated border of the page, but its central subject. All your little touches of description, of characterization, of local colour in the good sense, would gain immensely, would find their true place, in a story, whereas they are effaced, in the play, by the need of stage-fore-shortening, and compression, and by the fact that the reader, inevitably, from force of association, is on the alert for effects of another sort.—I feel a kind of shyness in saying this, because I have done so little

¹ In 1907 and again in 1908 Sarah Orne Jewett also urged Vernon Lee to come to New England. See COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY, August, 1952, letters 44 and 45.

² *Ariadne in Mantua*: a romance in five acts which had just been published at Oxford.

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to prove my fitness to express an opinion on your work, and because my very great and increasing admiration for what you have done makes any kind of criticism, even of this one little thing, seem like an impertinence. But you asked me to tell you, and I was too sincerely interested to give a superficial answer. The whole little romance lives in my memory like a more delicate, a paler, Pinturricchio; and I should be sorry indeed not to see more use made of Hyppolita, who seems to me a most original creation. I wish you would put it all into a story—a long short story, full of such curious colour and detail as you alone could give, and give one of our magazines a chance to publish it.

I have no space left to tell you of the Brenta, which I saw and photographed, in its whole length, nor of Countess Papafava's kindness and good advice about villas. Here Donna Giulia Bassi is arranging "combinazioni" with infinite amiability, and all this, too, I owe indirectly to you.

Don't think of answering this, but remember that when I can be of use to you, a line to

THE MOUNT,
LENOX, MASSACHUSETTS,

will always find me.

Gratefully yours
E. WHARTON

In 1907 Violet Paget's half-brother died, and when the news reached Mrs. Wharton in America she wrote the second of the two letters which are now in the Vernon Lee files in the Colby College Library:

THE MOUNT, LENOX, MASS.

Dear Miss Paget,

Oct. 5th [1907]

I read last week of your brother's death, and I can't tell you how I grieve for you. I have always thought of him as so miraculously given back to life that illness could not touch him again for years to come; and this news has

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brought back, or at least given a keen edge to, so many pleasant memories of our first meetings in Florence, and of the delightful days he spent with us when he was in America.

I have written a little article on his poems, which are far too little known here, and I will send you a copy as soon as it is published.³

Thank you for correcting my mistake about the sum needed for the Villa Borghese.⁴ It *was* my mistake, I find, due partly to a slight illegibility in your letter, but much more to the fact that my eyes are not very strong. Please forgive the tiresome consequences!

I drew a long breath when I found how little money was needed, for I really despaired of raising more than a small fraction of that appalling 50,000 f[ranc]s!

I have not allowed my "rich friend" to give the whole 1000 she originally offered, and I shall not give as much myself, as there are so many other demands, and so many people are ready to subscribe where only a small amount is needed. I have written to all the papers, and have already nearly 2000 fcs., and shall have no difficulty in doubling that amount, I think. I have had many small contributions, some from small out-of-the-way towns, with such touching notes. I enclose one which you will like, I know.—Don't return it.

It will be a real pleasure to write an article on your delightful—if I were not torn with contending sympathies, I should say most delightful of books;⁵ at any rate, the one

³ Edith Wharton's article on Eugene Lee-Hamilton's poems appeared in the November, 1907, issue of *The Bookman*. That her enthusiasm for his poetry was shared by others at the time is indicated by the printing or reprinting of his poetry in various periodicals between 1907 and 1910 and by five-page critical essays on his work, especially his sonnets, in *The Living Age* and *The Nation* in 1908.

⁴ Mrs. Wharton, as one interested in preserving Italian villas and as a socially prominent American, had evidently been asked to sponsor a request for financial assistance for some project connected with the Villa Borghese. In 1902 this famous property with its surroundings had been purchased from the Borghese family by the Italian government, given to Rome as a public park, and renamed Villa Comunale Umberto Primo.

⁵ *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880).

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specially dear to me as opening my eyes to that dear despised foolish and brilliant 18th century in Italy, which no one saw till you told us to look. Do send me a copy, and of the other book also, of which I have not heard.⁶—I don't send you my "opuses," as they are novels nowadays, and I know novels bore you. They do me too—I mean the new ones, and my own among them.

Dear Miss Paget, I must end as I began, with a word of very deep, very real sympathy.

Yours sincerely

EDITH WHARTON

P.S.

Would you kindly tell Mrs. Scott that I have her letter and her photos of the Villa Capponi, and that I will speak of it if the occasion arises—though this year no one is buying anything chez nous! We are all trying to sell instead.⁷

I send the message through you because I can't remember just how she should be addressed!



AN ARNOLD-FORMAN-WISE ITEM

with a letter from "Tom Wise"

ON June 12, 1840, a seventeen-year-old schoolboy at Rugby recited with great "roll and vigour" (as one of his listeners reported) a poem entitled *Alaric at Rome* which had just been awarded the annual Poetry Prize at the famous school. A Rugby firm, Combe & Crossley, shortly printed, anonymously, a few copies of the prize poem,

⁶ This "other book" may have been *The Spirit of Rome*, which had recently (1906) been published by John Lane.

⁷ Mrs. Wharton was not in the market for a villa of her own, it would seem, although it was about this time that she and her husband gave up their New York quarters and went to Paris to live. The financial depression in America from the spring to the end of 1907 perhaps accounts for her comment in the postscript.