Edith Wharton

SUMMER. By Edith Wharton. (D. Appleton & Co.; $1.50.)

Within the memory of a not very aged reader of American fiction there have been a few wonderful moments, moments when one has realized, perhaps without clear, critical consciousness, that something important has happened. Such unforgettable moments are one's first reading of "Roderick Hudson," and "A Modern Instance," and "Huckleberry Finn," and "A New England Nun," and "The Red Badge of Courage," and "Sister Carrie" (the promise of that book has not been fulfilled), and two books by Mrs. Wharton, "The Greater Inclination" and "The Touchstone." In those days, the end of the Nineties, most of the established literature of the world was still unexplored, and a new arrival from New York had to compete with the world's inexhaustible masterpieces and also with contemporaneous English fiction, especially the two gods of the undergraduate, Stevenson and Kipling. Mrs. Wharton dawned upon our ignorant but eager appreciation, a little bewildering to our immaturity because she was so mature and sophisticated. Henry James and Meredith had educated us to read her intelligently (though we had only begun to read them), and if our admiration was boyish it was genuine. I remember distinctly the emotions of surprise and delight at the appearance of a new writer, an American writer, whose first work showed the competence and finish of a practiced hand.

Then followed, at intervals sufficiently long to indicate careful workmanship, now a novel, now a collection of short stories, all of unvarying excellence. But there was another sense in which the work was unvarying, another interpretation of the moderate rate of production. Though the plots were ingenious, original, not cast in one mold, the kind of life so acutely and deeply studied was a limited, even thin, upper layer of society. Was her material restricted? She saw far, she penetrated to the bottom of a soul, but could she see broadly? Was her knowledge of life at once cosmopolitan and class-provincial, like the outlook of Henry James? One of her contemporaries, Mrs. Atherton, I think, was reported to have expressed, apropos of "The House of Mirth," a somewhat envious fear lest Mrs. Wharton's vein should be exhausted, and to have suggested that her success was due, if not to her snobbery, to the snobbery of a public that liked to read about the high life. I doubt if snobbery can find an ounce of nourishment in the gray pathos of the story of Lily Bart. And as for her creator, a woman who is born to the social purple and to the intellectual purple, whose attitude toward her own class is tragic and ironic, who treats with a fine disdain just those qualities and privileges of the upper ten which the next four or five tens admire and emulate, is the shrewdest possible foe of snobbery. The powerful final answer to these questions was that amazing masterpiece, "Ethan Frome." And the answer is reiterated by "Summer."

Before "Ethan Frome" New England fiction was virginal. The stork preceded the doctor, but nothing preceded the stork. A doubtful exception is "The Scarlet Letter," in which the sorrow of illicit love is covered by a romantic veil. The exquisite stories of Miss Jewett and Miss Wilkins give delicate expression to as much as the shy New England characters would have wished to tell of themselves. These stories show the grace of narrow lives, the charm and humor

that can flourish amid rural poverty. By not making the deeper passions articulate the authors are precisely true to New England character. There are two kinds of suppression; one is the suppression of life by the author's ignorance or reticence; the other is the suppression of feeling by life itself. Passion beats against obdurate facts and falls broken and bleeding. This contest must be studied objectively, for the characters do not understand what is happening to them. The author understands, and sitting omniscient and Olympian at the right-hand side of Fate, contemplates their lives; at the same time he enters into each life with immense tenderness. This is the greatest achievement of that kind of imagination which creates fiction. The combined power of impartial contemplation and sympathy makes the genius of Thomas Hardy and it makes the genius of Mrs. Wharton as it is found in "Ethan Frome" and "Summer." For she cannot play with these people, as she plays with her people in New York society, shooting her own ironic shafts at them or analyzing them in terms of their own sophisticated talk. Her New England people are elemental, victims of circumstance (so also, of course, was Lily Bart), and they must be left for the irony of life to deal with. At the same time there is no cold detachment. A woman who had been reared on a bleak New England farm could not have a more intimate comprehension than has Mrs. Wharton of its pitiful details and lonely aspirations. And the New England woman's knowledge would not be so wise or so wide, for it would not include so much of the rest of life as to give by comparison a full realization of bitterness and frustration.

For the tragedy of "Ethan Frome" and of "Summer" is not a shattered love affair. That experience is so common that everybody has known a case or two among his own friends. The tragedy is the defeat, the spiritual death, of natures that have not merely capacity for strong sexual passion but the capacity, which passion indicates, to grow and make something out of better circumstances than chance happens to permit.

The saddest thing in New England, and no doubt in some other parts of the world, is the contrast between the spendor of the landscape and the aridity of some of the life that mocks its loveliness. A distinguished painter who knows the New England scenery but not the New England people told me that he admired "Ethan Frome," but he could not believe that such people lived—they would all be dead by murder or suicide. Well, the only answer is that though murder and suicide are not unknown in rustic New England, Judge Brack was on the whole right: "people don't do such things." They live along, like Ethan Frome and his two women, after an abortive attempt at murder and suicide; or like the girl in "Summer," after the wreck of passion, they drop into a life of more or less comfortable resignation. For her, at the end of summer, there is an autumn of peace. The story, in its beautiful natural setting, is mellower and gentler than "Ethan Frome," which might have been called "Winter."

In her feeling for nature Mrs. Wharton is a poet. My friend the painter tells me not to mix up the arts, and says that words cannot describe. Perhaps they cannot, but they do. I could prove it by many quotations from "Summer," but it is better for you to read the book and see whether I am wrong in regarding it as a marvel of composition. The descriptions have the same continuity with the narrative that trees have with the road they shelter. Mrs. Wharton is at once direct and subtle. She unfolds with perfect lucidity the complexities of human nature. Her sentences are so beautifully sequential that sometimes a passage seems to straighten out, tense and flexible, like a taut wire; and the vibration is the sound of life.

JOHN MACY.