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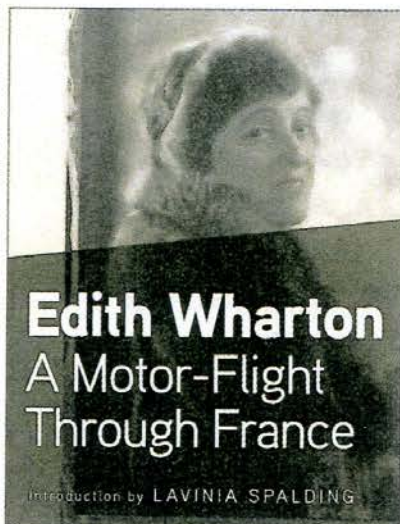
LOST AND FOUND

# SMALL COMFORTS




ON EDITH WHARTON'S

## A Motor-Flight Through France

MARCIA DESANCTIS

At 9:00 PM on Easter Sunday, 2014, I parked my rented Citroën in front of the Hôtel Continental in Pau, France. It was odd to imagine my family together back home in Connecticut tucking right about then into a roast leg of lamb. I was given a circular room in the corner bay, with three floor-to-ceiling windows opening onto the main street. The '70s orange carpet was splotched from decades of spilled mystery liquids, but the room's Belle Époque bones were elegant and strong. Someone had set a chocolate bunny wrapped in foil upon my pillow. That, plus a box of minibar peanuts and a bottle of Kronenbourg 1664, was my Easter dinner.

The main street was spooky from disuse, either because it was late on a holiday evening or because it was Pau. There is not much to see in this provincial city on the northern edge of the Pyrénées unless you follow the Tour de France or are a fan of Henry IV, who was born in the castle in town and was, in fact, an excellent king. Also, it is not far from Lourdes, so the faithful tend to overnight here, sometimes

in the afterglow of miracles. In 1907, Edith Wharton visited both places during one of her crisscrossings of France, documented in a series of dispatches for the *Atlantic* and later published, along with stories from two other automobile trips, in *A Motor-Flight Through France*. During this particular trip, her husband, Teddy, had the flu; their traveling companion was Henry James; and, in Paris, she had been introduced to Morton Fullerton, with whom she would shortly begin a passionate love affair, but never in this memoir does she give that, or much else, away.

Wharton—or, more accurately, Wharton's book—is why I was there, heeding my margin-note exhortations. "Do this!" I had written and circled twice while reading about her voyage to Pau, the place she called "that astonishing balcony hung above the great amphitheatre of south-western France."

Edith Wharton is a touchstone, a high priestess, an object of obsession and sometimes envy, not least due to the fact that she was wealthy enough never to be bothered with rinsing so much as a teacup while she churned out masterpiece after masterpiece. At one time, I feared her for the dark sorrow she portrays in *Ethan Frome*. In New England, they teach this book in high school, and after that, no one much cares for sledding. Later, I worshipped her for the soaring complexities of *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*. But it is in *A Motor-Flight Through France* that she appears to my contemporary eye as most rare and enlightening. Is it possible to express sentiment without sentimentality, emotion without excess, and to reveal something without stripping yourself bare? Yes, and Wharton mastered it. Simply stated, this book that helped define the travel-writing genre during one of its golden ages now defies it. Today, it is refreshing and unusual to read a memoir that is about buildings and sky rather than love and loss.

The book was brought to me by a friend who was writing the introduction for a reissue of *Motor-Flight* at the same time that I was engrossed in a lengthy assignment in France. At first, I found it cold, detached, a dull compendium of places ticked off an itinerary. Almost no relating of meals indulged in across the four corners of France, no marital discord, no drunken benders with Henry James—in fact, little hint of much alcohol at all. This book was absolutely no fun. But when I returned to it in the course of my research, I felt its subtler shades of brilliance. Thus discovered, Wharton became my guide in two ways, first and most obviously as my chaperone through France. She's led me past the dormant volcanoes of the Auvergne, the "lonely tossing expanses of summit and ridge and chasm that suggest the mysterious undulations of some uninhabited planet," as well as the country's waterways and châteaux, through the doors of many churches that, due to her rapturous storytelling, cease to blend into a single stone-cold edifice. Instead, they emerge as individualized triumphs of quirk and composition—"the finest thing about it is the Cardinal Uncle's nose," she writes

about the cathedral in Rouen, followed by a discourse on how a man's greatness used to be embodied in that one stately feature—and as almost-human keepers of stories. "To have seen so much and now to stand so far apart from life!" she writes of Vézelay, a vault containing a thousand years of memories.

Secondly and more subtly, Wharton became my guide through the sheer freshness of the book's old-fashioned execution. *A Motor-Flight Through France* is a travel book that carries the reader on a literal journey rather than a journey of self, with an awakening that is visual, cultural, and utterly immersive but not overtly spiritual—free at least of the risk of vanity with which that word has come to be imbued. It folds the contents of Wharton's brain (an archival knowledge of history, art, and letters) into the childlike purity of her discoveries—of landscape, of architecture, and, heaven help us, of place. "One's first feeling is that nothing else matches it—that no work of man, no accumulated appeal of history, can contend a moment against this joy of the eye so prodigally poured out," she writes while whizzing along the Mediterranean coast, with its "Virgilian breadth of composition," between Toulon and Saint Tropez.

Wharton did not set out from Paris in her (chauffeur-driven) automobile three times in 1906 and 1907 to find her self, and if she did, she had the *bon goût* to keep that quiet. Instead, she hit the dusty road in search of France, adventure for the sake of adventure, through towns that she had seen before only through the windows of train compartments. She was a born itinerant, raised at least in part in villas and grand hotels around Europe with her restless American parents, but always carted about the Continent by railway. Two threads of Wharton's life—intellect and exploration—were joined on her many grand tours through Italy, Morocco, England, and France, where she lived permanently after her divorce.

"The motor-car has restored the romance of travel," she writes in the first line of *Motor-Flight*, and we share the novelty, her "delight of taking a town unawares," at the same pace—both desultory and brisk—that she does. "The unseen villages have been given back to us!" she writes. We are right there with her, fueled by her passion, propelled by her language, and enticed as she is by what awaits across the valley. We trace the lines of her voyage, but they do not lead us much closer to Wharton.

A woman of legendary privacy, she would not have it otherwise. She was, perhaps, too much of an aristocrat (and a Victorian) for the confessional. Yet the book is full of emotion, even empathy. "Each, in its few inches of marble, and in the confinement of his cramped little niche, typifies a special aspect of the sense of mortality—above all of its loneliness, the way it must be borne without help," she writes from Dijon upon seeing the *The Mourners*, the tomb sculptures of John the Fearless, a Duke of Burgundy.

As a writer who travels, I seek, unlike Wharton, what is expected of me in a

travel essay: the sort of epiphany brought on by the act of geographical displacement. The narrative arc, the human reveal, the *story*—these are crucial elements in tales told from far, far away. Mercifully, I guess, my own midlife state of bewilderment has been long and generous, a source of mysteries whose solutions are clearest when I'm somewhere I can't readily be found. My travels to France, Rwanda, Haiti, and Russia, among other places, have become journeys of perspective out of which I aim to mollify personal chaos. But when a trip yields no self-referential fruit, I can be lost. Once, in an off-the-beaten-track place in Peru, when words of descriptive detail were painting rainbows in my brain, I pitched a story to an editor back home. "It needs an emotional crossroads to make it work," she replied.

Consider Edith Wharton. In 1907, when she embarked on her second motor flight, she was forty-five years old. She was surely in the throes of midlife; God knows what her hormones were up to. She was childless, her husband was chronically ill, and she had already begun her written correspondence with Morton Fullerton. Her heart must have been racing, but we are left in the dark.

She keeps her distance from us and even from herself, writing throughout of "we" rather than "I," as she imparts her meditations about place after place like a jeweler stringing rubies on a necklace. Wharton's expertise on all things French gave her a head start as she set off and still she allows herself to surrender, delightfully, to France and its textures, colors, and light. The book doesn't come with an exegesis on the meaning of life, but its art is defined by the other message it imparts. Know yourself, the book seems to tell me. But know something else, too. This is wisdom I plan to slip into my carry-on the next time I take flight.