

In Search of Henry James at Rye

S I M O N F L E E T

ON THE SQUAREST of red-brick Georgian houses at Rye, Sussex, England, there is a plaque at which tourists gaze. The inscription reads: "Henry James, author, lived here (1897-1915)."

Only a short drive from the white cliffs of Dover, Rye is reminiscent of a little hill town in Tuscany. It stands on an isolated conical rock on the flat green face of Romney Marsh, crowned by the church tower which boasts a clock presented by Queen Elizabeth I. It is a picturesque conglomeration of narrow cobbled streets overhung by tightly packed houses of every architectural style—Tudor black and white, clap-board, pink brick and stone, many with rounded corners, some no larger than a two-storied hut. Everywhere there is a smell of salt-spray and roses. Henry James first saw Rye when he was fifty. He had bicycled from nearby Brede Place where he was staying with Stephen Crane, author of *The Red Badge of Courage*. James was irresistibly charmed by the old-worldness, the fishermen mending their nets in the streets, the quiet. "Russet Rye" he called it.

At first, James lived in a rented cottage called Point Hill, exploring the town with the enthusiasm of a teenager. Then, one summer's day in 1897, he heard that Lamb House, the squarest of red brick

houses, where once the mayors of Rye had lived, was to let. He rented it, and subsequently bought it. "It is a real little bijou of a house," wrote Henry's brother William James, the distinguished philosopher.

The house stands on an L-shaped bend of a sloping cobbled street which wanders upward toward the old church and downward past postern doors and low beams to a street of shops. From one of these, a flat pediment above the shop window projects forward over the pavement, and from it hang (from large hooks) joints of mutton and beef. Here, Mr. Thake, who supplied the house, has his butcher's shop. He wears a leather apron molded to his body. "If you want to know about Mr. James, you should ask his man Noakes. He's living in the district. He can tell you more than I can."

Further along the street at the ironmongers, Mr. Ketts, of rather vinegary aspect, says "a very civil gentleman; I used to see him about. How did he look? I should say ordinary." This is not at all how Ford Maddox Heuffer, who lived at nearby Winchelsea, described him: "tight check trousers, waistcoat of violet, coat with short tails like a cock sparrow, cravat in a splendid flowery bow." A get-up which made a little boy of four shout out,

"Oh Mama dear! Isn't he an elegant fowl?" Theodora Bosanquet thought he looked like an eminent cardinal in mufti or a Roman senator amusing himself playing the part of a Sussex squire. Mr. Ketts the ironmonger adds, "He was a quiet gentleman who kept himself to himself." But Mr. Tripp the chandler contradicts Mr. Ketts. "He went around the town talking to everyone, full of beans and benevolence; you couldn't help liking him. His cordiality made him welcome everywhere." Mr. Tripp, lean, with the look of a philosopher, buried like a cauliflower in a multiplicity of coats (the topmost of which had two large springs of rosemary in the buttonhole), beamed with indwelling delight at the mention of Henry James. "In my youth I was a racing cyclist," he declares. "One day I was sweating up Winchelsea Hill and at the top found Mr. James, who called out, 'Stop, think what you are doing to your heart.' Like all geniuses he had his specially absurd side. You see that crooked chimney there. It was condemned to be demolished. Mr. James bought the whole cottage to save the picturesque chimney. He was a sensitive, generous man. I remember on two occasions going to his house for subscriptions, one for sports day, the other for the football club. He gave handsomely each time. When giving for the sports day he asked me if I were cycling and when I told him I was he said he would come and watch me. And he did, and he saw me win three first prizes, even though they used to handicap me dreadfully. I can visualize him now, standing with his arms folded, his cloak flapping like wings in the breeze."

In the pitch gloom of the Estate Agent's linen-fold panelled office the daylight outside appeared to be generated by a thousand suns. The Agent, Mr. Stokes, a little meager man whose head seemed to have shrunken away like a dry filbert in

its shell, remembers passing Mr. James's lively and corpulent bulk in the marshes leaning against a fence gesticulating, his lips moving as if trying to work out the dialogue for a novel; and remembers that he looked just like the painting that Sargent did. But this is opposed by Mr. Tute, the removal man: "He was not nearly as pompous as he was painted by Sargent." Each contemporary citizen, it seems, saw him differently. To each he was another person. Mr. Tute continued, "We used to move him. I have a letter from him somewhere thanking us for being efficient. And he enclosed a Pound postal order for my men whom he had missed seeing when they had finished a job." Mr. Tute himself has a squire's face taken from a row of old family portraits with which the grander Marsh houses around Rye are stocked. He tells us that his daughter used to have a dress made from Henry James's cloak, and that she has a signed copy of *The Golden Bowl*, which she found on a rubbish heap. Mr. Tute watched the author standing quite still in the High Street one day making notes for as long as ten minutes; he then proceeded on his way with immense confidence, looking as though he had just put the secret of the universe into his pocket.

Mr. Gunnerey, the town's historian, sees Henry James as a mere seventeen years of Rye's pageant of eight hundred years of history; and small stuff compared to Queen Elizabeth I, to the dramatist John Fletcher, to the smuggler Dr. Syn, and to the pirate Isaac Todhunter. This is largely because Henry James was not born in Rye, an all important factor with true Ryers. Mr. Gunnerey says, "He first spoke to me in the street passing the time of day; he was a reliable man, humorous and serene. I did not go to his house very much but he used to lend me his books, which I used to read of course.

I found I would read them page by page and at the end of each page I discovered it necessary to halt and consider what I had just read. He went into things in his writing. He would have a chap standing in a doorway, you could read five pages and the man would still be in the doorway. It fascinated me how he altered succeeding editions. I remember in the first issue of *The Four Meetings* he wrote, 'I thought her a charming specimen of a type' which he subsequently revised to 'I thought her a touching specimen of a type with which I had had other and perhaps less charming associations.' I think his *Sense of the Past* is his best book. He used to have a beard when he first came and then he was sometimes mistaken for a sea captain. My boy thought he should have worn earrings. Later he shaved the beard off which made him look much better. He thought my boy had a fine head. He was very fond of children. He kissed my two, I believe it was in the grocer's shop. They were both kissed by Ellen Terry too."

Miss Struve, the local poetess, agrees that he paid great attention to children and that they were fond of him. But Miss Tutton, the haberdasher, who was eight years old when she met him, thinks he "was a fussy precise man, so quick in his movements that he used to frighten me. I had no idea he was distinguished." If there was a circus visiting the town Mr. James always gave his houseboy half a crown to go see it and pronounced the coin with a slow deliberate sonority "half . . . a . . . crown." Another child's impression comes from Mr. Venables, the tight-skinned, fat antique dealer whose broad full face is curiously patched with red, as if the blood had been forced by good feeding into every vein of the skin. "When I was a lad I used to see him often walking about with a plaid shawl over his shoul-

ders. One day I ran into the Post Office and Mr. James was there, he was going to be attended to when suddenly he turned round and said: 'Aren't you young Venables? Please go before me, you are in a hurry and I have all the time in the world.'"

"He once spoke to a porter on Rye Station in such long and complicated sentences that the man couldn't understand him. In this connection J. M. Barrie the playwright once wrote that it was worth losing a train, and sometimes you had to, when he was seeing you off and rummaging for the right word." All this from Mrs. Windridge, an aging, leisured resident with a sharp beak of a nose which might have been handed down generation to generation from the Gothic Age. "To listen to him talk was a delight, but at the same time it was sometimes bothersome waiting while he paused searching for the right adjective or noun or while he thought out a sentence before he said it. For instance my husband and I were planning our garden in terraces when one summer's afternoon (incidentally, his favorite two words in the English language were summer's afternoon), Mr. James asked us what the plans were. I replied that we were thinking of a pergola. To which he replied (I wonder if I can remember it), something to this effect: 'Pergola! I have the very deepest interest in your project. I dare say it has glimmered upon you the absolute desirability, in the not too distant future, of putting your proposed pergola, or at any rate as much of it as possible, under the aesthetic protection, not of any obvious plant having stems generally prickly, in other words a rose, but instead to plant as some enlightened people do, and others never do, a vine.' We followed his advice; and he was right. I remember how pleased he was when a daffodil was named after him.

There was somewhere in him a latent horticulturist."

"Yes, he was interested in gardening, that's quite true," affirms Mrs. Keyes, with a smile from a face which could not smile. She is a tolerable specimen of an English country lady—tweedy, stout shoes, and a string of pearls—who moved to Rye at the turn of the century and has been there since. She continues, "When in 1916 his mulberry tree was blown down he minded a great deal. There was a small shoot left and he ordered that everything should be done to encourage its growth. But there's no sign of it now; nor of the lovely line of sibilant poplars he planted along the west wall of his garden; they were a glory of Rye, and were thoughtlessly cut down a few years ago; I can't imagine what the National Trust were thinking of. The house now belongs to the National Trust, you know; given and endowed by the James family in about 1950. It's open to the public only for short periods, on only thirty-five days in the year. I don't think that's enough. And even then you're only shown one small room which used to be the telephone room and is now described as The Henry James Museum. But to get back to the man, he was excited I remember with the flowering wisteria that grew so strongly up the iron staircase leading to the garden room. When I passed there the other day I noticed a few shoots of it still struggling to live, though the staircase it ramped over has gone; the whole garden room was bombed in Hitler's war. I wish we could go back to the days when Mr. James lived here, or rather forward to more days like them. Immediately before the Kaiser's war, I remember going to a tea party in the garden room where he generally used to write. He said he never would have imagined a few years ago that he would be taking up the cudgels even ever so lightly on behalf of unfortunate little Belgium. On that same

occasion he offered to lend me his house while he was away in London, which I accepted because my own lease was up. Nothing could keep him away from London for the war. He wanted to be in the hub. It was the war that made him take out British Nationality; and on the day his naturalization papers came through he characteristically stood outside Buckingham Palace, raised his hat and cried "My King." Of course he was rather a card. He did not mix much with the local inhabitants [here Mrs. Windridge contradicts Mr. Tripp, the chandler], but saw quite a lot of people who like himself had come to live in or near Rye."

Returning to Miss Struve, the local poetess who has told us that the author was fond of children: "Henry James," she says, as if with regret for the irrevocable dead, "yes, I was lucky enough to be born in time to meet him. We had a house near Rye then, and he came to see my father from time to time. I can see him now standing talking to us, with his dachshund round his shoulders like a fur wrap, a calm sweet tractable dog it was. He was saying to my father you must chew. It was a fad of his at the time. He insisted that every disorder could be cured by chewing. He gave my father a book about it, *The New Glutton and Epicure* by Fletcher, and he wrote in it 'From Henry James begging Mr. Struve to try the same cure.' Sometimes we would meet him on his favorite walk which was up Rye Hill, along to Leasham and down through the fields again to Rye. He would stop and deliver an enormous sentence about an adored footpath, or a hawthorne hedge embedded in banks of primrose, or about the trees having been planted with a regularity that suggested conservative principles. He was extremely difficult to follow. I found the best thing to do was to try at all costs to keep the main thread, because if you an-

swered nothing, as I did once or twice, he was apt to turn to you with 'Um, what do you think?' Rather terrifying, wasn't it. Sometimes he had his secretary with him, trying to keep up with him, and taking down notes as he walked."

"Mr. James never walked in front of a lady even out walking; never dictated out of school, so to speak. I'm sure I should have been dismissed on the spot had I presumed to take notes," erupts Miss Weld, now Mrs. Kingdon, his secretary from 1902 to 1905, who has a house not far from Rye. "I took down *The Wings of a Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and I have a copy of *The Golden Bowl* signed by Mr. James which says 'To Miss Weld from her collaborator.' He told me that *The Wings of a Dove* came easiest." Miss Weld came by the job in this way. She had been to a secretarial college and then had been in Berlin for three months to polish up her language; the first week she was back from Germany the head of the college called her into the office and said, "Mr. Henry James wants a lady secretary and we think you are most suited for the job."

She had read but one of his books before this time, *What Maisie Knew*, and she says she never discovered what she knew. She went by train to Rye for a luncheon and interview with Henry James. He met her at the station and they walked up to Lamb House. They went into the garden room to interview each other; she remembers that they were both so nervous that they both did nothing but shake. Henry James explained that it was his brother's wife who had suggested that he should have a lady secretary (a thing unheard of at that date). He then went on to say that he liked to dictate straight to the typewriter eliminating shorthand, but that he wanted to be able to feel that she did not exist when he was busy, and that if he paused he did not want to feel that he was

keeping her waiting. The former secretary, a man, had smoked during these pauses; the question now arose what would she do during the pauses (women did not smoke at that date). Miss Weld suggested that she might crochet or knit . . . and this was agreed on.

They had luncheon. Henry James, Miss Weld, and Mr. and Mrs. William James. The question arose about what Miss Weld should wear for work and it was decided that the clothes that the secretarial college suggested would be satisfactory. These consisted of a dark coat and skirt and a sailor hat. After luncheon Mrs. W. James took Miss Weld about the town in search of rooms; these were found. Then Henry James took Miss Weld for a walk around the boat yard; he loved talking to the boat-builders who told him how the wood was seasoned and about other matters in their trade.

He was so delightful that Miss Weld felt she would have done anything for him. With this feeling she returned to London. After she had gone she was described by an errand boy as "the little lady wot came from the big white door of Lamb House." The job started two weeks later. She remembers how considerate James was. How during the first day's work he noticed her need for a footstool and got one for her; how he discovered her fancy for flowers and afterwards each morning put a small bunch which he had picked by the typewriter. As she combed her memory, the author seemed to appear before her, reflected clearly in a marsh stream, as if by magic. "I had not been working for him long when one of the Rye ladies called. When she left Mr. James thanked her for coming to see him and then she replied, 'Not at all, we just wanted to make sure that Miss Weld was respectable.'"

One day, walking down the steep hill of

Mermaid Street, Miss Weld and Mr. James passed a short-haired girl wearing a stiff collar and tie. "That young girl is the epitome of everything that a woman should not look like," he cried. "Glory in your femininity, Miss Weld." Poor Miss Weld was painfully conscious that her sailor hat was rather like the one the girl was wearing. Directly they parted she went and bought a hat with mignonette on it. Next day, when she sported it, he didn't say a word, but did however smile his approval. Miss Weld tells us that Henry James always treated women with reverence, and that nothing distressed him more than a woman trying to look like a man. Once when his niece arrived to stay, bringing with her some hockey sticks, Mr. James was horrified. "He said to me: 'Miss Weld take her out this afternoon and teach her something feminine.' We went boating. He had, to the feminine mind, a rather delightful idea inherited from his father, that women were made, or should be made, of finer clay than men. Did not Adam prove this in Genesis—trying to cast all the blame on Eve? It was because of his decided views about femininity and its glory that a suffragette slashed his portrait by Sargent in the National Portrait Gallery. After I'd been working with him for some time, he kindly lent a friend of mine, Miss Lane, a room so that she could instruct me in the art of bookbinding. She was a pupil of Sangorski and Sutcliffe. We bound several books for him and he used proudly to bring his friends to see us at work. He dictated beautifully. He had a melodious voice and in some way he seemed to be able to tell if I was falling behind. Type-writing for him was exactly like accompanying a singer on the piano."

She greatly enjoyed taking down his long leisurely sentences. They seemed to spread out across the page like a beautiful

and rambling architecture of this medieval town, to give to his work a lonely individuality and a particular place in literature. She continues, "I believe that Edmund Gosse acted as Mr. James's literary agent but I am not certain about it. I remember Mr. Gosse staying at Lamb House and one morning Mr. James stopped dictating, stuck his head out of the window to speak to him in the garden; Mr. James enquired if Gosse was all right and happy and if he had all the books he wanted. Gosse replied in the affirmative, adding 'Go back to your sibyl.'

"His work hours nine-thirty to twelve-thirty each day were sacred; only some peculiar emergency, such as Lady Maude Warrender coming to luncheon, would deter him. It was clearly understood in his house that interruptions were to be avoided. One morning there came a knock at the door just as he was dictating a somewhat involved sentence with its punctuation, when raising his voice to a loud pitch half a second too soon, he shouted 'Dash, come in.' There stood his faithful manservant, Burgess Noakes, positively shaking with alarm. Never had he heard his master speak like that before, he was always so scrupulously polite. 'Sorry Sir, telegram sir. Mrs. Paddington [the housekeeper] thought you ought to see it.' Mr. James took the telegram and read out, 'Lady Maude Warrender asks if I can give her luncheon. She thinks of buying Leasham—what a good thing that would be for Rye. I must see Mrs. Paddington at once. Miss Weld, will you see to the flowers?' So work was set aside for that day. Lady Maude came, was conquered by the charm of Rye with its muddle of red roofs, and became one of its patrons."

Miss Weld remembers once when James was ill and had to remain in bed, she turned up at nine-thirty as usual. James was in a state, not with the illness, but

with the fact that he felt too ill to write. He asked her to return at eleven to see if he would be well enough by then; and when he was not he asked her to come at frequent intervals during the day in case he should recover quickly and could begin to dictate. "He was always tortured by his work. I fancy he was sort of amazed that his talent was not much more recognized. I think he was disappointed his books were not best sellers, though *Daisy Miller* nearly was.

"His daily routine was as follows: after working all morning, he would read in the afternoon, then after tea go for a walk, and then in the evenings he'd make notes on the next day's work, planning an outline. He seldom scrapped a day's work. In the summer we worked in the garden room, which was long, oblong, and light; in the winter we worked in the warmer, small panelled room upstairs; and in winters the walks were in the afternoon. He liked company on his walks. His favorite walk was the road to Winchelsea [Miss Struve, the local poetess, said it was up Rye Hill], but unfortunately his literary flatterer Ford Maddox Heuffer who lived at Winchelsea used to waylay him, and this annoyed Mr. James. Once we actually jumped a dike to avoid meeting Heuffer who was looking out for us." In view of this it is revealing to read how Heuffer, in one of his books, alleges that he was such a great friend of James. Miss Weld adds, "Once Mr. Heuffer had written to ask to come and see Mr. James, who had replied: 'I shall be very glad to see you and talk with you, and I am not insensible to the compliment of your wish. I am at home in a free condition more nearly at 2:30 to 3:30 o'clock, than at most other hours, but should be glad to hear from you when you will come. If Monday at 2:30 would suit you, let us take that occasion. I go out later (for exercise) and don't get in very

early. Believe me, yours very truly, Henry James.' " But Mr. Heuffer was immune to rebuffs and in his *Critical Studies* he says "Henry James is the greatest of living writers and in consequence the greatest of living men."

Miss Alice Skinner, his parlormaid, lives along the coast at Hastings. "I was always very happy with Mr. James, but it was a long time ago. I've had an illness and forgotten a lot. He was very particular about his appearance and about having the house 'just right.' He had some lovely furniture and it was kept beautifully. I didn't read what he wrote. He liked fish best, particularly soles. Sometimes at lunch when he had no guests he would walk about the house eating as if he didn't want to sit down. When he was working he became absent-minded. One day a friend of his called at lunch time and I knew that Mr. James hadn't ordered luncheon for two. I went to Mr. James and told him. 'Oh Alice,' he cried out, 'oh dear, oh dear, what have I got to do?' You had to help him out a bit and we soon got luncheon for two. The cook told me that one day in the High Street she made a bee-line for him to tell him that she'd had the rest of the lamb made into rissoles, but she could tell as she went towards him that he hadn't the faintest idea who she was, and that he was obviously racking his brain to place her; and that only after she'd spoken to him did recognition appear." Alice Skinner, a tall thin lady with high cheek bones, sallow complexion, and lovely long silky gray hair, has an air of grace and shining smiling eyes. "He was, what shall I say, he was quite all right, but at times—well, when he was on a book you'd hardly dare speak to him. He was normally very pleasant but he got irritable when people worried him and he wanted to write; when you lived in the same house with him you got used to it; his work was the one thing

he lived for. Sometimes people called when he was like this, and I didn't dare tell him, and I sent them away. When interrupted during his work he would shout. We had a lot of visitors. Americans who he did not know coming to get his autograph. And then other authors used to come for criticism of their books. H. G. Wells was one. After dinner they'd read out loud to him. They say he was a very good critic. All of us who stayed with him for any length of time felt we belonged. I know the housekeeper, Mrs. Paddington, felt this—she wasn't quite as severe as she looked, though she gave that impression. Once when some people called and Mr. James was away I heard her saying to them: 'I've sent him away for my spring cleaning, and I'll not have him back till it's done.'

Henry James's man, Burgess Noakes, is a bright, ruddy little man with twinkling blue eyes and features like those of a Staffordshire china "Mr. Punch." After working for James as a houseboy, he became butler. Mr. Noakes immediately apologizes for being in his gardening attire; before he will sit down to talk about the master he goes and changes into a neatly cut, dark-blue jacket and trousers. One feels a reflection of the dignity and considered manners of his former employer. On the wall of his sitting room there is an original drawing of James by Sargent, which is the gift of the author's nephew. "I was with Mr. James for fifteen years. He was very careful with his books. No one was allowed to touch them—only himself and I. We used to dust them together and never with anything but a silk handkerchief. There were bookcases in every room—

and he knew exactly where each volume was placed—could go to it straight away. I never used to talk very much and one day he said to me: 'Why are you so damnablely dumb?' He had beautiful clothes from the best tailors, jackets made in London, the trousers in Rye [these were the days when the two didn't match] and the trousers were held up by an old belt from the American Civil war; his cuff-links were miniature cannons. He liked to see other people well dressed too. He liked good food and always had the best, sometimes especial delicacies were ordered from London but always through the local shops. I remember when Mr. Fletcher, the diet man, came to luncheon, with his Fletcherizing diet, he and Mr. James sat munching each bit of beef sixty times."

"I was with him when he died. His mind was on writing all the time and I sat there taking down what he was dictating; I've no idea what he said now. I don't think he died of angina pectoris—it was pneumonia I fancy. He'd had a stroke too." After James's death Burgess Noakes went to work for the James family in America. Then he returned to England and kept greyhounds; in the last war he had a trawler in Rye bay; now he has a small-holding at Peasmarsh, near Rye. Mrs. Noakes came into the sitting room. We were introduced and it was explained to her that we were talking about Henry James. She immediately blurted out, "He was an imposing grand old fellow, I used to see him in the street, a heavy shabby old man he seemed to me, walking along briskly as if kicking the world out of his path as he went."