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THE EUROPEANS

by HENRY JAMES

CHAPTER I

A narrow grave-yard in the heart of a bustling, indifferent city, seen from the windows of a gloomy-looking inn, is at no time an object of enlivening suggestion; and the spectacle is not at its best when the mouldy tombstones and funereal umbrage have received the ineffectual refreshment of a dull, moist snow-fall. If, while the air is thickened by this frosty drizzle, the calendar should happen to indicate that the blessed vernal season is already six weeks old, it will be admitted that no depressing influence is absent from the scene. This fact was keenly felt on a certain 12th of May, upwards of thirty years since, by a lady who stood looking out of one of the windows of the best hotel in the ancient city of Boston. She had stood there for half an hour--stood there, that is, at intervals; for from time to time she turned back into

the room and measured its length with a restless step.

In the chimney-place was a red-hot fire which emitted
a small blue flame; and in front of the fire, at a table,
sat a young man who was busily plying a pencil.

He had a number of sheets of paper cut into small equal squares,
and he was apparently covering them with pictorial designs--
strange-looking figures. He worked rapidly and attentively,
sometimes threw back his head and held out his drawing at
arm's-length, and kept up a soft, gay-sounding humming and whistling.

The lady brushed past him in her walk; her much-trimmed skirts
were voluminous. She never dropped her eyes upon his work;
she only turned them, occasionally, as she passed, to a mirror
suspended above the toilet-table on the other side of the room.

Here she paused a moment, gave a pinch to her waist with her
two hands, or raised these members--they were very plump and pretty--
to the multifold braids of her hair, with a movement half caressing,
half corrective. An attentive observer might have fancied
that during these periods of desultory self-inspection her face
forgot its melancholy; but as soon as she neared the window again
it began to proclaim that she was a very ill-pleased woman.

And indeed, in what met her eyes there was little to be
pleased with. The window-panes were battered by the sleet;
the head-stones in the grave-yard beneath seemed to be

holding themselves askance to keep it out of their faces.

A tall iron railing protected them from the street, and on the other side of the railing an assemblage of Bostonians were trampling about in the liquid snow. Many of them were looking up and down; they appeared to be waiting for something.

From time to time a strange vehicle drew near to the place where they stood,--such a vehicle as the lady at the window, in spite of a considerable acquaintance with human inventions, had never seen before: a huge, low omnibus, painted in brilliant colors, and decorated apparently with jangling bells, attached to a species of groove in the pavement, through which it was dragged, with a great deal of rumbling, bouncing and scratching, by a couple of remarkably small horses.

When it reached a certain point the people in front of the grave-yard, of whom much the greater number were women, carrying satchels and parcels, projected themselves upon it in a compact body--a movement suggesting the scramble for places in a life-boat at sea--and were engulfed in its large interior.

Then the life-boat--or the life-car, as the lady at the window of the hotel vaguely designated it--went bumping and jingling away upon its invisible wheels, with the helmsman (the man at the wheel) guiding its course incongruously from the prow.

This phenomenon was repeated every three minutes, and the

supply of eagerly-moving women in cloaks, bearing reticules

and bundles, renewed itself in the most liberal manner.

On the other side of the grave-yard was a row of small red

brick houses, showing a series of homely, domestic-looking backs;

at the end opposite the hotel a tall wooden church-spire,

painted white, rose high into the vagueness of the snow-flakes.

The lady at the window looked at it for some time; for reasons

of her own she thought it the ugliest thing she had ever seen.

She hated it, she despised it; it threw her into a state of

irritation that was quite out of proportion to any sensible motive.

She had never known herself to care so much about church-spires.

She was not pretty; but even when it expressed perplexed

irritation her face was most interesting and agreeable.

Neither was she in her first youth; yet, though slender,

with a great deal of extremely well-fashioned roundness of contour--

a suggestion both of maturity and flexibility--she carried

her three and thirty years as a light-wristed Hebe might have

carried a brimming wine-cup. Her complexion was fatigued,

as the French say; her mouth was large, her lips too full,

her teeth uneven, her chin rather commonly modeled; she had

a thick nose, and when she smiled--she was constantly smiling--

the lines beside it rose too high, toward her eyes.

But these eyes were charming: gray in color, brilliant,
quickly glancing, gently resting, full of intelligence.

Her forehead was very low--it was her only handsome feature;
and she had a great abundance of crisp dark hair, finely frizzled,
which was always braided in a manner that suggested some
Southern or Eastern, some remotely foreign, woman. She had
a large collection of ear-rings, and wore them in alternation;
and they seemed to give a point to her Oriental or exotic aspect.

A compliment had once been paid her, which, being repeated to her,
gave her greater pleasure than anything she had ever heard.

"A pretty woman?" some one had said. "Why, her features
are very bad." "I don't know about her features," a very
discerning observer had answered; "but she carries her head
like a pretty woman." You may imagine whether, after this,
she carried her head less becomingly.

She turned away from the window at last, pressing her hands to her eyes.

"It 's too horrible!" she exclaimed. "I shall go back--I shall go back!"

And she flung herself into a chair before the fire.

"Wait a little, dear child," said the young man softly,
sketching away at his little scraps of paper.

The lady put out her foot; it was very small, and there was an immense rosette on her slipper. She fixed her eyes for a while on this ornament, and then she looked at the glowing bed of anthracite coal in the grate.

"Did you ever see anything so hideous as that fire?" she demanded.

"Did you ever see anything so--so affreux as--as everything?"

She spoke English with perfect purity; but she brought out this French epithet in a manner that indicated that she was accustomed to using French epithets.

"I think the fire is very pretty," said the young man, glancing at it a moment. "Those little blue tongues, dancing on top of the crimson embers, are extremely picturesque. They are like a fire in an alchemist's laboratory."

"You are too good-natured, my dear," his companion declared.

The young man held out one of his drawings, with his head on one side. His tongue was gently moving along his under-lip. "Good-natured--yes. Too good-natured--no."

"You are irritating," said the lady, looking at her slipper.

He began to retouch his sketch. "I think you mean simply

that you are irritated."

"Ah, for that, yes!" said his companion, with a little bitter laugh.

"It 's the darkest day of my life--and you know what that means."

"Wait till to-morrow," rejoined the young man.

"Yes, we have made a great mistake. If there is any doubt about it to-day, there certainly will be none to-morrow. Ce sera clair, au moins!"

The young man was silent a few moments, driving his pencil.

Then at last, "There are no such things as mistakes," he affirmed.

"Very true--for those who are not clever enough to perceive them.

Not to recognize one's mistakes--that would be happiness in life,"

the lady went on, still looking at her pretty foot.

"My dearest sister," said the young man, always intent upon his drawing,

"it 's the first time you have told me I am not clever."

"Well, by your own theory I can't call it a mistake,"

answered his sister, pertinently enough.

The young man gave a clear, fresh laugh. "You, at least, are clever enough, dearest sister," he said.

"I was not so when I proposed this."

"Was it you who proposed it?" asked her brother.

She turned her head and gave him a little stare.

"Do you desire the credit of it?"

"If you like, I will take the blame," he said, looking up with a smile.

"Yes," she rejoined in a moment, "you make no difference in these things.

You have no sense of property."

The young man gave his joyous laugh again. "If that means I have no property, you are right!"

"Don't joke about your poverty," said his sister.

"That is quite as vulgar as to boast about it."

"My poverty! I have just finished a drawing that will bring me fifty francs!"

"Voyons," said the lady, putting out her hand.

He added a touch or two, and then gave her his sketch.

She looked at it, but she went on with her idea of a moment before.

"If a woman were to ask you to marry her you would say,

'Certainly, my dear, with pleasure!' And you would marry her

and be ridiculously happy. Then at the end of three months you

would say to her, 'You know that blissful day when I begged

you to be mine!' "

The young man had risen from the table, stretching his arms a little;

he walked to the window. "That is a description of a charming nature,"

he said.

"Oh, yes, you have a charming nature; I regard that as our capital.

If I had not been convinced of that I should never have taken the risk

of bringing you to this dreadful country."

"This comical country, this delightful country!" exclaimed the young man,

and he broke into the most animated laughter.

"Is it those women scrambling into the omnibus?" asked his companion.

"What do you suppose is the attraction?"

"I suppose there is a very good-looking man inside,"

said the young man.

"In each of them? They come along in hundreds, and the men in this country don't seem at all handsome. As for the women-- I have never seen so many at once since I left the convent."

"The women are very pretty," her brother declared, "and the whole affair is very amusing. I must make a sketch of it."

And he came back to the table quickly, and picked up his utensils-- a small sketching-board, a sheet of paper, and three or four crayons.

He took his place at the window with these things, and stood there glancing out, plying his pencil with an air of easy skill.

While he worked he wore a brilliant smile. Brilliant is indeed the word at this moment for his strongly-lighted face. He was eight and twenty years old; he had a short, slight, well-made figure.

Though he bore a noticeable resemblance to his sister, he was a better favored person: fair-haired, clear-faced, witty-looking, with a delicate finish of feature and an expression at once urbane and not at all serious, a warm blue eye, an eyebrow finely drawn and excessively arched--an eyebrow which, if ladies wrote

sonnets to those of their lovers, might have been made the subject of such a piece of verse--and a light moustache that flourished upwards as if blown that way by the breath of a constant smile. There was something in his physiognomy at once benevolent and picturesque. But, as I have hinted, it was not at all serious. The young man's face was, in this respect, singular; it was not at all serious, and yet it inspired the liveliest confidence.

"Be sure you put in plenty of snow," said his sister.

"Bonte divine, what a climate!"

"I shall leave the sketch all white, and I shall put in the little figures in black," the young man answered, laughing. "And I shall call it--what is that line in Keats?--Mid-May's Eldest Child!"

"I don't remember," said the lady, "that mamma ever told me it was like this."

"Mamma never told you anything disagreeable. And it 's not like this--every day. You will see that to-morrow we shall have a splendid day."

"Qu'en savez-vous? To-morrow I shall go away."

"Where shall you go?"

"Anywhere away from here. Back to Silberstadt.

I shall write to the Reigning Prince."

The young man turned a little and looked at her, with his crayon poised.

"My dear Eugenia," he murmured, "were you so happy at sea?"

Eugenia got up; she still held in her hand the drawing her

brother had given her. It was a bold, expressive sketch

of a group of miserable people on the deck of a steamer,

clinging together and clutching at each other, while the vessel

lurched downward, at a terrific angle, into the hollow of a wave.

It was extremely clever, and full of a sort of tragi-comical power.

Eugenia dropped her eyes upon it and made a sad grimace.

"How can you draw such odious scenes?" she asked. "I should

like to throw it into the fire!" And she tossed the paper away.

Her brother watched, quietly, to see where it went.

It fluttered down to the floor, where he let it lie.

She came toward the window, pinching in her waist.

"Why don't you reproach me--abuse me?" she asked.

"I think I should feel better then. Why don't you tell me

that you hate me for bringing you here?"

"Because you would not believe it. I adore you, dear sister!

I am delighted to be here, and I am charmed with the prospect."

"I don't know what had taken possession of me. I had lost my head,"

Eugenia went on.

The young man, on his side, went on plying his pencil.

"It is evidently a most curious and interesting country.

Here we are, and I mean to enjoy it."

His companion turned away with an impatient step, but presently came back.

"High spirits are doubtless an excellent thing," she said; "but you give one too much of them, and I can't see that they have done you any good."

The young man stared, with lifted eyebrows, smiling; he tapped his handsome nose with his pencil. "They have made me happy!"

"That was the least they could do; they have made you nothing else.

You have gone through life thanking fortune for such very small favors that she has never put herself to any trouble for you."

"She must have put herself to a little, I think, to present

me with so admirable a sister."

"Be serious, Felix. You forget that I am your elder."

"With a sister, then, so elderly!" rejoined Felix, laughing.

"I hoped we had left seriousness in Europe."

"I fancy you will find it here. Remember that you are nearly thirty years old, and that you are nothing but an obscure Bohemian-- a penniless correspondent of an illustrated newspaper."

"Obscure as much as you please, but not so much of a Bohemian as you think.

And not at all penniless! I have a hundred pounds in my pocket.

I have an engagement to make fifty sketches, and I mean to paint the portraits of all our cousins, and of all their cousins, at a hundred dollars a head."

"You are not ambitious," said Eugenia.

"You are, dear Baroness," the young man replied.

The Baroness was silent a moment, looking out at the sleet-darkened grave-yard and the bumping horse-cars. "Yes, I am ambitious," she said at last. "And my

ambition has brought me to this dreadful place!" She glanced about her-- the room had a certain vulgar nudity; the bed and the window were curtainless-- and she gave a little passionate sigh. "Poor old ambition!" she exclaimed. Then she flung herself down upon a sofa which stood near against the wall, and covered her face with her hands.

Her brother went on with his drawing, rapidly and skillfully; after some moments he sat down beside her and showed her his sketch. "Now, don't you think that 's pretty good for an obscure Bohemian?" he asked. "I have knocked off another fifty francs."

Eugenia glanced at the little picture as he laid it on her lap. "Yes, it is very clever," she said. And in a moment she added, "Do you suppose our cousins do that?"

"Do what?"

"Get into those things, and look like that."

Felix meditated awhile. "I really can't say. It will be interesting to discover."

"Oh, the rich people can't!" said the Baroness.