



Henry James

Complete Stories 1898–1910

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COMPLETE STORIES

1898-1910



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DENIS DONOGHUE
WROTE THE NOTES FOR THIS VOLUME

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John Delavoy

THE FRIEND who kindly took me to the first night of poor Windon's first—which was also poor Windon's last: it was removed as fast as, at an unlucky dinner, a dish of too perceptible a presence—also obligingly pointed out to me the notabilities in the house. So it was that we came round, just opposite, to a young lady in the front row of the balcony—a young lady in mourning so marked that I rather wondered to see her at a place of pleasure. I dare say my surprise was partly produced by my thinking her face, as I made it out at the distance, refined enough to aid a little the contradiction. I remember at all events dropping a word about the manners and morals of London—a word to the effect that, for the most part, elsewhere, people so bereaved as to be so becraped were bereaved enough to stay at home. We recognised of course, however, during the wait, that nobody ever did stay at home; and, as my companion proved vague about my young lady, who was yet somehow more interesting than any other as directly in range, we took refuge in the several theories that might explain her behaviour. One of these was that she had a sentiment for Windon which could override superstitions; another was that her scruples had been mastered by an influence discernible on the spot. This was nothing less than the spell of a gentleman beside her, whom I had at first mentally disconnected from her on account of some visibility of difference. He was not, as it were, quite good enough to have come with her; and yet he was strikingly handsome, whereas she, on the contrary, would in all likelihood have been pronounced almost occultly so. That was what, doubtless, had led me to put a question about her; the fact of her having the kind of distinction that is quite independent of beauty. Her friend, on the other hand, whose clustering curls were fair, whose moustache and whose fixed monocular glass particularly, if indescribably, matched them, and whose expanse of white shirt and waistcoat had the air of carrying out and balancing the scheme of his large white forehead—her friend had the kind of beauty that is quite independent of distinction. That he was

her friend—and very much—was clear from his easy imagination of all her curiosities. He began to show her the company, and to do much better in this line than my own companion did for me, inasmuch as he appeared even to know who we ourselves were. That gave a propriety to my finding, on the return from a dip into the lobby in the first entr'acte, that the lady beside me was at last prepared to identify him. I, for my part, knew too few people to have picked up anything. She mentioned a friend who had edged in to speak to her and who had named the gentleman opposite as Lord Yarracome.

Somehow I questioned the news. "It sounds like the sort of thing that's too good to be true."

"Too good?"

"I mean he's too much like it."

"Like what? Like a lord?"

"Well, like the name, which is expressive, and—yes—even like the dignity. Isn't that just what lords are usually not?" I didn't, however, pause for a reply, but inquired further if his lordship's companion might be regarded as his wife.

"Dear, no. She's Miss Delavoy."

I forget how my friend had gathered this—not from the informant who had just been with her; but on the spot I accepted it, and the young lady became vividly interesting. "The daughter of the great man?"

"What great man?"

"Why, the wonderful writer, the immense novelist: the one who died last year." My friend gave me a look that led me to add: "Did you never hear of him?" and, though she professed inadvertence, I could see her to be really so vague that—perhaps a trifle too sharply—I afterwards had the matter out with her. Her immediate refuge was in the question of Miss Delavoy's mourning. It was for *him*, then, her illustrious father; though that only deepened the oddity of her coming so soon to the theatre, and coming with a lord. My companion spoke as if the lord made it worse, and, after watching the pair a moment with her glass, observed that it was easy to see he could do anything he liked with his young lady. I permitted her, I confess, but little benefit from this diversion, insisting on giving it to her plainly that I didn't

know what we were coming to and that there was in the air a gross indifference to which perhaps more almost than anything else the general density on the subject of Delavoy's genius testified. I even let her know, I am afraid, how scant, for a supposedly clever woman, I thought the grace of these *lacuna*; and I may as well immediately mention that, as I have had time to see, we were not again to be just the same allies as before my explosion. This was a brief, thin flare, but it expressed a feeling, and the feeling led me to concern myself for the rest of the evening, perhaps a trifle too markedly, with Lord Yarracome's victim. She was the image of a nearer approach, of a personal view: I mean in respect to my great artist, on whose consistent aloofness from the crowd I needn't touch, any more than on his patience in going his way and attending to his work, the most unadvertised, unreported, un-interviewed, unphotographed, uncriticised of all originals. Was he not the man of the time about whose private life we delightfully knew least? The young lady in the balcony, with the stamp of her close relation to him in her very dress, was a sudden opening into that region. I borrowed my companion's glass; I treated myself, in this direction—yes, I was momentarily gross—to an excursion of some minutes. I came back from it with the sense of something gained; I felt as if I had been studying Delavoy's own face, no portrait of which I had ever met. The result of it all, I easily recognised, would be to add greatly to my impatience for the finished book he had left behind, which had not yet seen the light, which was announced for a near date, and as to which rumour—I mean of course only in the particular warm air in which it lived at all—had already been sharp. I went out after the second act to make room for another visitor—they buzzed all over the place—and when I rejoined my friend she was primed with rectifications.

“He isn't Lord Yarracome at all. He's only Mr. Beston.”

I fairly jumped; I see, as I now think, that it was as if I had read the future in a flash of lightning. “Only——? The mighty editor?”

“Yes, of the celebrated *Cynosure*.” My interlocutress was determined this time not to be at fault. “He's always at first nights.”

“What a chance for me, then,” I replied, “to judge of my particular fate!”

“Does that depend on Mr. Beston?” she inquired; on which I again borrowed her glass and went deeper into the subject.

“Well, my literary fortune does. I sent him a fortnight ago the best thing I’ve ever done. I’ve not as yet had a sign from him, but I can perhaps make out in his face, in the light of his type and expression, some little portent or promise.” I did my best, but when after a minute my companion asked what I discovered I was obliged to answer “Nothing!” The next moment I added: “He won’t take it.”

“Oh, I hope so!”

“That’s just what I’ve been doing.” I gave back the glass. “Such a face is an abyss.”

“Don’t you think it handsome?”

“Glorious. Gorgeous. Immense. Oh, I’m lost! What does Miss Delavoy think of it?” I then articulated.

“Can’t you see?” My companion used her glass. “She’s under the charm—she has succumbed. How else can he have dragged her here in her state?” I wondered much, and indeed her state seemed happy enough, though somehow, at the same time, the pair struck me as not in the least matching. It was only for half a minute that my friend made them do so by going on: “It’s perfectly evident. She’s not a daughter, I should have told you, by the way—she’s only a sister. They’ve struck up an intimacy in the glow of his having engaged to publish from month to month the wonderful book that, as I understand you, her brother has left behind.”

That was plausible, but it didn’t bear another look. “Never!” I at last returned. “Daughter or sister, that fellow won’t touch him.”

“Why in the world——?”

“Well, for the same reason that, as you’ll see, he won’t touch *me*. It’s wretched, but we’re too good for him.” My explanation did as well as another, though it had the drawback of leaving me to find another for Miss Delavoy’s enslavement. I was not to find it that evening, for as poor Windon’s play went on we had other problems to meet, and at the end our objects of interest were lost to sight in the general blinding blizzard. The affair was a bitter “frost,”

and if we were all in our places to the last everything else had disappeared. When I got home it was to be met by a note from Mr. Beston accepting my article almost with enthusiasm, and it is a proof of the rapidity of my fond revulsion that before I went to sleep, which was not till ever so late, I had excitedly embraced the prospect of letting him have, on the occasion of Delavoy's new thing, my peculiar view of the great man. I must add that I was not a little ashamed to feel I had made a fortune the very night Windon had lost one.

II

Mr. Beston really proved, in the event, most kind, though his appeal, which promised to become frequent, was for two or three quite different things before it came round to my peculiar view of Delavoy. It in fact never addressed itself at all to that altar, and we met on the question only when, the posthumous volume having come out, I had found myself wound up enough to risk indiscretions. By this time I had twice been with him and had had three or four of his notes. They were the barest bones, but they phrased, in a manner, a connection. This was not a triumph, however, to bring me so near to him as to judge of the origin and nature of his relations with Miss Delavoy. That his magazine would, after all, publish no specimens was proved by the final appearance of the new book at a single splendid bound. The impression it made was of the deepest—it remains the author's highest mark; but I heard, in spite of this, of no emptying of table-drawers for Mr. Beston's benefit. What the book is we know still better to-day, and perhaps even Mr. Beston does; but there was no approach at the time to a general rush, and I therefore of course saw that if he was thick with the great man's literary legatee—as I, at least, supposed her—it was on some basis independent of his bringing anything out. Nevertheless he quite rose to the idea of my study, as I called it, which I put before him in a brief interview.

“You ought to have something. That thing has brought him to the front with a leap——!”

“The front? What do you call the front?”

He had laughed so good-humouredly that I could do the same. "Well, the front is where you and I are." I told him my paper was already finished.

"Ah then, you must write it again."

"Oh, but look at it first——!"

"You must write it again," Mr. Beston only repeated. Before I left him, however, he had explained a little. "You must see his sister."

"I shall be delighted to do that."

"She's a great friend of mine, and my having something may please her—which, though my first, my only duty is to please my subscribers and shareholders, is a thing I should rather like to do. I'll take from you something of the kind you mention, but only if she's favourably impressed by it."

I just hesitated, and it was not without a grain of hypocrisy that I artfully replied: "I would much rather *you* were!"

"Well, I shall be if she is." Mr. Beston spoke with gravity. "She can give you a good deal, don't you know?—all sorts of leads and glimpses. She naturally knows more about him than anyone. Besides, she's charming herself."

To dip so deep could only be an enticement; yet I already felt so saturated, felt my cup so full, that I almost wondered what was left to me to learn, almost feared to lose, in greater waters, my feet and my courage. At the same time I welcomed without reserve the opportunity my patron offered, making as my one condition that if Miss Delavoy assented he would print my article as it stood. It was arranged that he should tell her that I would, with her leave, call upon her, and I begged him to let her know in advance that I was prostrate before her brother. He had all the air of thinking that he should have put us in a relation by which *The Cynosure* would largely profit, and I left him with the peaceful consciousness that if I had baited my biggest hook he had opened his widest mouth. I wondered a little, in truth, how he could care enough for Delavoy without caring more than enough, but I may at once say that I was, in respect to Mr. Beston, now virtually in possession of my point of view. This had revealed to me an intellectual economy of the rarest kind. There was not a thing in the world—with a single exception, on which I shall presently touch—that he valued for itself, and not a scrap he knew

about anything save whether or no it would do. To "do" with Mr. Beston, was to do for *The Cynosure*. The wonder was that he could know that of things of which he knew nothing else whatever.

There are a hundred reasons, even in this most private record, which, from a turn of mind so unlike Mr. Beston's, I keep exactly for a love of the fact in itself: there are a hundred confused delicacies, operating however late, that hold my hand from any motion to treat the question of the effect produced on me by first meeting with Miss Delavoy. I say there are a hundred, but it would better express my sense perhaps to speak of them all in the singular. Certain it is that one of them embraces and displaces the others. It was not the first time, and I dare say it was not even the second, that I grew sure of a shyness on the part of this young lady greater than any exhibition in such a line that my kindred constitution had ever allowed me to be clear about. My own diffidence, I may say, kept me in the dark so long that my perception of hers had to be retroactive—to go back and put together and, with an element of relief, interpret and fill out. It failed, inevitably, to operate in respect to a person in whom the infirmity of which I speak had none of the awkwardness, the tell-tale anguish, that makes it as a rule either ridiculous or tragic. It was too deep, too still, too general—it was perhaps even too proud. I must content myself, however, with saying that I have in all my life known nothing more beautiful than the faint, cool morning-mist of confidence less and less embarrassed in which it slowly evaporated. We have made the thing all out since, and we understand it all now. It took her longer than I measured to believe that a man without her particular knowledge could make such an approach to her particular love. The approach was made in my paper, which I left with her on my first visit and in which, on my second, she told me she had not an alteration to suggest. She said of it what I had occasionally, to an artist, heard said, or said myself, of a likeness happily caught: that to touch it again would spoil it, that it had "come" and must only be left. It may be imagined that after such a speech I was willing to wait for anything; unless indeed it be suggested that there could be then nothing more to wait for. A great deal more, at any rate, seemed to arrive,

and it was all in conversation about Delavoy that we ceased to be hindered and hushed. The place was still full of him, and in everything there that spoke to me I heard the sound of his voice. I read his style into everything—I read it into his sister. She was surrounded by his relics, his possessions, his books; all of which were not many, for he had worked without material reward: this only, however, made each more charged, somehow, and more personal. He had been her only devotion, and there were moments when she might have been taken for the guardian of a temple or a tomb. That was what brought me nearer than I had got even in my paper; the sense that it was he, in a manner, who had made her, and that to be with her was still to be with himself. It was not only that I could talk to him so; it was that he listened and that he also talked. Little by little and touch by touch she built him up to me; and then it was, I confess, that I felt, in comparison, the shrinkage of what I had written. It grew faint and small—though indeed only for myself; it had from the first, for the witness who counted so much more, a merit that I have ever since reckoned the great good fortune of my life, and even, I will go so far as to say, a fine case of inspiration. I hasten to add that this case had been preceded by a still finer. Miss Delavoy had made of her brother the year before his death a portrait in pencil that was precious for two rare reasons. It was the only representation of the sort in existence, and it was a work of curious distinction. Conventional but sincere, highly finished and smaller than life, it had a quality that, in any collection, would have caused it to be scanned for some signature known to the initiated. It was a thing of real vision, yet it was a thing of taste, and as soon as I learned that our hero, sole of his species, had succeeded in never, save on this occasion, sitting, least of all to a photographer, I took the full measure of what the studied strokes of a pious hand would some day represent for generations more aware of John Delavoy than, on the whole, his own had been. My feeling for them was not diminished, moreover, by learning from my young lady that Mr. Beston, who had given them some attention, had signified that, in the event of his publishing an article, he would like a reproduction of the drawing to accompany it. The “pictures” in *The Cynosure* were in general

a marked chill to my sympathy: I had always held that, like good wine, honest prose needed, as it were, no bush. I took them as a sign that if good wine, as we know, is more and more hard to meet, the other commodity was becoming as scarce. The bushes, at all events, in *The Cynosure*, quite planted out the text; but my objection fell in the presence of Miss Delavoy's sketch, which already, in the forefront of my study, I saw as a flower in the coat of a bridegroom.

I was obliged just after my visit to leave town for three weeks and was, in the country, surprised at their elapsing without bringing me a proof from Mr. Beston. I finally wrote to ask of him an explanation of the delay; for which in turn I had again to wait so long that before I heard from him I received a letter from Miss Delavoy, who, thanking me as for a good office, let me know that our friend had asked her for the portrait. She appeared to suppose that I must have put in with him some word for it that availed more expertly than what had passed on the subject between themselves. This gave me occasion, on my return to town, to call on her for the purpose of explaining how little as yet, unfortunately, she owed me. I am not indeed sure that it didn't quicken my return. I knocked at her door with rather a vivid sense that if Mr. Beston had her drawing I was yet still without my proof. My privation was the next moment to feel a sharper pinch, for on entering her apartment I found Mr. Beston in possession. Then it was that I was fairly confronted with the problem given me from this time to solve. I began at that hour to look it straight in the face. What I in the first place saw was that Mr. Beston was "making up" to our hostess; what I saw in the second—what at any rate I believed I saw—was that she had come a certain distance to meet him; all of which would have been simple and usual enough had not the very things that gave it such a character been exactly the things I should least have expected. Even this first time, as my patron sat there, I made out somehow that in that position at least he was sincere and sound. Why should this have surprised me? Why should I immediately have asked myself how he would make it pay? He was there because he liked to be, and where was the wonder of his liking? There was no wonder in my own, I felt, so that my state of mind must have been already

a sign of how little I supposed we could like the same things. This even strikes me, on looking back, as an implication sufficiently ungraceful of the absence on Miss Delavoy's part of direct and designed attraction. I dare say indeed that Mr. Beston's subjection would have seemed to me a clearer thing if I had not had by the same stroke to account for his friend's. She liked him, and I grudged her that, though with the actual limits of my knowledge of both parties I had literally to invent reasons for its being a perversity, I could only in private treat it as one, and this in spite of Mr. Beston's notorious power to please. He was the handsomest man in "literary" London, and, controlling the biggest circulation—a body of subscribers as vast as a conscript army—he represented in a manner the modern poetry of numbers. He was in love moreover, or he thought he was; that flushed with a general glow the large surface he presented. This surface, from my quiet corner, struck me as a huge tract, a sort of particoloured map, a great spotted social chart. He abounded in the names of things, and his mind was like a great staircase at a party—you heard them bawled at the top. He ought to have liked Miss Delavoy because *her* name, so announced, sounded well, and I grudged him, as I grudged the young lady, the higher motive of an intelligence of her charm. It was a charm so fine and so veiled that if she had been a piece of prose or of verse I was sure he would never have discovered it. The oddity was that, as the case stood, he had seen she would "do." I too had seen it, but then I was a critic: these remarks will sadly have miscarried if they fail to show the reader how much of one.

III

I mentioned my paper and my disappointment, but I think it was only in the light of subsequent events that I could fix an impression of his having, at the moment, looked a trifle embarrassed. He smote his brow and took out his tablets; he deplored the accident of which I complained, and promised to look straight into it. An accident it could only have been, the result of a particular pressure, a congestion of work. Of course he had had my letter and had fully supposed it had been answered and acted on. My spirits revived at this, and I