The Aspern Papers

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This is a short story by James. It is built upon an idea of a clever plot which he only needs to flesh out while keeping up the suspense. As far as the reader is surprised by the ending, but yet finds it perfectly logical, he has succeeded. The plot supposedly based on a true story is easy to summarize. A very old woman was once the lover of a famous poet long since dead, or at least the recipient of his most ardent love letters. Nothing like frustrated love to stimulate the imagination. Love that is gratified is soon satiated and loses interest. By chance the narrator and his colleague, also an aficionado of the poet, learns that this woman is still alive, although she must be close to a hundred, if not beyond. Although an American, she lives as a recluse in Venice with a niece in very restricted circumstances in a palace of sorts. The efforts of his colleague to get access to the papers, which must be there, unless they have already, God forbid, been destroyed, are stymied. The old lady wants to have nothing to do with him. The narrator will try a more circumspect way, by being a border using an assumed name, he may eventually gain their confidence, and thus in this way hopefully be able to lay his hands on what they so much covet. There is plenty of space in the palace and by offering to pay a ridiculous sum, some twenty times over the going rate, he gets access. The old woman is very greedy. He settles down with a servant and starts at great expense to himself improve the garden by growing flowers, which he sends up in great profusion to the ladies. He is really going out of his way to court them. The niece, a silly middle-aged woman, all withered from lack of exposure to life, is more susceptible to his charms, taking to them as a wilted flower takes to water. Gradually he gets into her confidence. In fact so far that he discloses his true identity and his ultimate quest, and the poor lady, enamored by his attention, promises to help him out. But he cannot contain himself one dark night, but sneaks into the living quarters of the ladies, confident that they are sound asleep. While he is on verge of trying whether the secretary is open, after all if so, this must have been arranged by his accomplice the niece, he is suddenly caught red-handed by the old invalid, who stares at him, and then collapses. He is overwhelmed with remorse and shame and leaves his abode for a fortnight. When he returns he finds that the old lady has died, but not in connection with his nightly prying, and already been buried. His main concern is of course whether the documents are intact. Have they been destroyed, but if so hardly by the old lady herself. He is assured that they have been saved, but the niece is not at liberty to give it to him. Why not? She is being coy about it, until it dawns on him, that she will be willing to give it over on one condition, namely that he marries her. The idea strikes him as so appalling that he flees the premises and lets his personal gondolier ferry him randomly along the labyrinth of canals. Eventually he realizes that he cannot leave the niece without some kind of acknowledgment, maybe a letter may suffice, but he finds that he is unable to phrase it properly. He returns the next morning for a personal interview, fearful that this may be taken as a consent, he meets with the woman who is transformed, triumphant almost, and

with her triumph there is a beauty and a spirit that was never before to be seen in that meek and confused silly woman. But he needs not to worry, she has understood, and it is this awareness of having been stood up, that lends her a confidence she was so sadly lacking before. In fact she has taken a fateful and logical step by destroying the letters, one by one, feeding them into a fire. It took a long time, she tells him, because there were so many of them. Why had she done it? Why, she asks incredulously, what use were they to her after his refusal? The perfect logical revenge. And how bitter for the narrator. Had it not been much easier to accept that the old woman had destroyed them long ago, or at least done it just before she died. That would have been poetic justice of the kind you can accept. But to have been so vey close to them, only to have them snatched away in front of his very eyes. He leaves Venice right away the niece does not ever want to see him again, and in the privacy of his solitary existence, the loss of the letters pains him immensely.

Now how to flesh out the story? First the Venetian setting. The Lido, the Piazza, the restaurants, and above all the canals. The dreariness of the palazzo where they reside and hide, big, dirty, unfurnished (he needs to get his own), but yet impressive and full of lost grandeur, where the two expatriate American women live like squatters. But yet for all his effort, James does not really make the city come alive, its presence never rises above that of stage prop. The depiction of milieu is not his forte, his forte is conversation. So the plot is driven by the conversation and interviews he is allowed to have with the ladies. The old woman comes across as an old misery hag, interested only in his money. When she looks at him, her eyes are hid behind a green shading veil, so she will be able to observe and scrutinize him, while he will not be able to respond in kind. She has something which is very precious to him, and thus, in spite of his extreme liberality, she has the upper hand. When he finally sees her eyes, it is on that fateful pry, and the effect is almost that of a ghost story. She may be a withered old invalid, having outlived herself and her times, now unable to take care of herself, constantly having to be wheeled around, but her eyes show that there is still fire in her. Maybe the fire, that once fired the poet? The young niece comes across as young and innocent, although of course older, maybe even much older than the narrator. Most of the interchange is between the two of them. He shows concern and he shows kindness, but those all have ulterior reasons, and are not genuine in the sense of thriving on themselves. According to James, the narrator commits a sin, the sin of treating a person, not as a end unto herself, but as a means to an end. The critic Michael Gorra, makes a big deal, about this Kantian imperative, (although the connection to Kant may not have been known to James himself, whose reading in philosophy was limited), being at the heart of James morality, and to which he would return over and over again [1]. The old spinster, unused to such attention, does of course see it as being made love to, and succumbs, actually going out on a limb, exposing herself to the point of offering a big bribe. The narrator has to be punished of course, and James exerts his punishment through the mistreated niece with great delight. That touch of burning a letter one at a time adds to the act a palpability that goes not only to the heart of the narrator, but also to the readers, who have been manipulated to identify themselves with him.

[1] In a 'Portrait of a Novel'.