

What Maisie knew

H. James

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Is it not an incredible that an elderly bachelor like Henry James can write a story about a young girl? What could he possibly know about such a creature? Has he ever had any prolonged contact, let alone interest in such people? Obviously James has not set out to elucidate the psychology of a girl, although there is of course no reason that he would be entirely innocent of such expertise, but to employ a literary device, something he also admits in his preface. A story is being told, a story of neglect and gross indecency, but not explicitly, but through the limited intelligence and understanding of an innocent child. The reader is thus invited to fill in the details of which is only presented in a most fragmentary way. This is a game of course, but one at which James is particularly adept and in which he is expected to taken quite an interest, along with the prospective reader to be treated to the game.

The plot is simple enough. Two young parents divorce and end up sharing the custody of the issue of their shortlived relation. They hate each other, and make no secret of their mutual hostility to the child, whom they use as a means in their on-going battle of mutual suspicion and acrimonious resentment. But as they eventually tire of each other, even in hate, they also lose interest in their child. So the child is abandoned and her care is assumed by her rivaling governesses. On the side of the mother an older widowed mother who has lost her child in an accident, and on the side of the father a young beautiful woman who is soon to marry him. The mother on her side is simultaneously re-married to a young aristocrat. The real twist of the story is that her two step-parents are drawn to each other, in fact it is the child itself, who unwittingly brings about this union. Meanwhile her real parents pursue their pleasures, and her step-parents, although separated by respective marriage, become her real ones, assisted by the widow.

The plot picks up in connection with a trip across the channel. Both step-parents are being set free, presumably to take up with each other. But what to do with the child? The step-father makes an agreement with the mother that he will divorce her, and will furthermore assume the financial responsibility for the child on condition that he needs not support her mother. The father, apparently kept by some rich hideous Contess, is already out of the picture, he could as well be dead, or rather the child dead to him. (In one key-scene, amounting to his last interview with her, he makes a pro-forma offer to her to join him in America. The offer is of course not serious, and he is just too happy to set her off in a cab, at the conclusion of their short meeting, involving a brief encounter with the Countess.) The step-mother will not consent to live with the step-father and keep the child, if that means taking on the widow. The widow, not entirely surprisingly, adores the step-father and hates the step-mother, her erstwhile rival. The young aristocrat wavers. In the end he tries to ask the girl to give up the widow. The poor girl, all her life so desperately seeking comfort and reassurance from anyone thrown into her path, is torn between conflicting loyalties, her situation becomes unbearable, as she would ideally

not want to give up anyone, the least of all her step-father, with whom she is in love. In the end, the step-father gives up his claims, after all his desire for the step-mother is stronger than his affection and sense of duty for his step-child, and the girl, somewhat anti-climactically, returns with the widow to England. What to make of that? Will she, a child out of affluence, live the rest of her life in impecunity? Who would provide for her generously? The parents irrevocably out of the picture, her step-parents side-stepped? End of story.

This is of course vintage James. The prose is very elabourate, and the focus is entirely on the subtleties of social intercourse. As usual when it comes to the evocation of place, James falters. It is not that he leaves the sense of location entirely abstract, in fact describing the scene at Boulougne, glimpses of a foreign mileus are not only actually hinted at but even attempted to be elaborated on. Old women, medieval quarters, the puddles on the plage, a scene at a railway station, yet, as always, with James it all remains very shadowy. The Jamesian universe has little space for the sensuality of the external world, it is almost exclusively concerned with mind, or rather the interrelations of minds. The fine balances of what is definitely known, what is only sensed, what is merely guessed and what remains for ever hidden.

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