

ГЕНРИ ДЖЕЙМС

THE PENSION
BEAUREPAS

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The Pension Beaurepas

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The Pension Beaurepas:

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Henry James

The Pension Beaurepas

CHAPTER I

I was not rich—on the contrary; and I had been told the Pension Beaurepas was cheap. I had, moreover, been told that a boarding-house is a capital place for the study of human nature. I had a fancy for a literary career, and a friend of mine had said to me, "If you mean to write you ought to go and live in a boarding-house; there is no other such place to pick up material." I had read something of this kind in a letter addressed by Stendhal to his sister: "I have a passionate desire to know human nature, and have a great mind to live in a boarding-house, where people cannot conceal their real characters." I was an admirer of *La Chartreuse de Parme*, and it appeared to me that one could not do better than follow in the footsteps of its author. I remembered, too, the magnificent boarding-house in Balzac's *Pere Goriot*,—the "pension bourgeoise des deux sexes et autres," kept by Madame Vauquer, nee De Conflans. Magnificent, I mean, as a piece of portraiture; the establishment, as an establishment, was certainly sordid enough, and I hoped for better things from the Pension Beaurepas. This institution was one of the most esteemed in Geneva, and, standing in a little

garden of its own, not far from the lake, had a very homely, comfortable, sociable aspect. The regular entrance was, as one might say, at the back, which looked upon the street, or rather upon a little place, adorned like every place in Geneva, great or small, with a fountain. This fact was not prepossessing, for on crossing the threshold you found yourself more or less in the kitchen, encompassed with culinary odours. This, however, was no great matter, for at the Pension Beaurepas there was no attempt at gentility or at concealment of the domestic machinery. The latter was of a very simple sort. Madame Beaurepas was an excellent little old woman—she was very far advanced in life, and had been keeping a pension for forty years— whose only faults were that she was slightly deaf, that she was fond of a surreptitious pinch of snuff, and that, at the age of seventy-three, she wore flowers in her cap. There was a tradition in the house that she was not so deaf as she pretended; that she feigned this infirmity in order to possess herself of the secrets of her lodgers. But I never subscribed to this theory; I am convinced that Madame Beaurepas had outlived the period of indiscreet curiosity. She was a philosopher, on a matter-of-fact basis; she had been having lodgers for forty years, and all that she asked of them was that they should pay their bills, make use of the door-mat, and fold their napkins. She cared very little for their secrets. "J'en ai vus de toutes les couleurs," she said to me. She had quite ceased to care for individuals; she cared only for types, for categories. Her large observation had

made her acquainted with a great number, and her mind was a complete collection of "heads." She flattered herself that she knew at a glance where to pigeon-hole a new-comer, and if she made any mistakes her deportment never betrayed them. I think that, as regards individuals, she had neither likes nor dislikes, but she was capable of expressing esteem or contempt for a species. She had her own ways, I suppose, of manifesting her approval, but her manner of indicating the reverse was simple and unvarying. "Je trouve que c'est deplace"—this exhausted her view of the matter. If one of her inmates had put arsenic into the pot-au-feu, I believe Madame Beaurepas would have contented herself with remarking that the proceeding was out of place. The line of misconduct to which she most objected was an undue assumption of gentility; she had no patience with boarders who gave themselves airs. "When people come chez moi, it is not to cut a figure in the world; I have never had that illusion," I remember hearing her say; "and when you pay seven francs a day, tout compris, it comprises everything but the right to look down upon the others. But there are people who, the less they pay, the more they take themselves au serieux. My most difficult boarders have always been those who have had the little rooms."

Madame Beaurepas had a niece, a young woman of some forty odd years; and the two ladies, with the assistance of a couple of thick-waisted, red-armed peasant women, kept the house going. If on your exits and entrances you peeped into the kitchen, it made very little difference; for Celestine, the cook,

had no pretension to be an invisible functionary or to deal in occult methods. She was always at your service, with a grateful grin she blacked your boots; she trudged off to fetch a cab; she would have carried your baggage, if you had allowed her, on her broad little back. She was always tramping in and out, between her kitchen and the fountain in the place, where it often seemed to me that a large part of the preparation for our dinner went forward—the wringing out of towels and table-cloths, the washing of potatoes and cabbages, the scouring of saucepans and cleansing of water—bottles. You enjoyed, from the doorstep, a perpetual back-view of Celestine and of her large, loose, woollen ankles, as she craned, from the waist, over into the fountain and dabbled in her various utensils. This sounds as if life went on in a very make-shift fashion at the Pension Beaurepas—as if the tone of the establishment were sordid. But such was not at all the case. We were simply very bourgeois; we practised the good old Genevese principle of not sacrificing to appearances. This is an excellent principle—when you have the reality. We had the reality at the Pension Beaurepas: we had it in the shape of soft short beds, equipped with fluffy duvets; of admirable coffee, served to us in the morning by Celestine in person, as we lay recumbent on these downy couches; of copious, wholesome, succulent dinners, conformable to the best provincial traditions. For myself, I thought the Pension Beaurepas picturesque, and this, with me, at that time was a great word. I was young and ingenuous: I had just come from America. I wished to perfect

myself in the French tongue, and I innocently believed that it flourished by Lake Lemman. I used to go to lectures at the Academy, and come home with a violent appetite. I always enjoyed my morning walk across the long bridge (there was only one, just there, in those days) which spans the deep blue out-gush of the lake, and up the dark steep streets of the old Calvinistic city. The garden faced this way, toward the lake and the old town; and this was the pleasantest approach to the house. There was a high wall, with a double gate in the middle, flanked by a couple of ancient massive posts; the big rusty grille contained some old-fashioned iron-work. The garden was rather mouldy and weedy, tangled and untended; but it contained a little thin—flowing fountain, several green benches, a rickety little table of the same complexion, and three orange-trees, in tubs, which were deposited as effectively as possible in front of the windows of the salon.

CHAPTER II

As commonly happens in boarding-houses, the rustle of petticoats was, at the Pension Beaurepas, the most familiar form of the human tread. There was the usual allotment of economical widows and old maids, and to maintain the balance of the sexes there were only an old Frenchman and a young American. It hardly made the matter easier that the old Frenchman came from Lausanne. He was a native of that estimable town, but he had once spent six months in Paris, he had tasted of the tree of knowledge; he had got beyond Lausanne, whose resources he pronounced inadequate. Lausanne, as he said, "manquait d'agremens." When obliged, for reasons which he never specified, to bring his residence in Paris to a close, he had fallen back on Geneva; he had broken his fall at the Pension Beaurepas. Geneva was, after all, more like Paris, and at a Genevese boarding-house there was sure to be plenty of Americans with whom one could talk about the French metropolis. M. Pigeonneau was a little lean man, with a large narrow nose, who sat a great deal in the garden, reading with the aid of a large magnifying glass a volume from the cabinet de lecture.

One day, a fortnight after my arrival at the Pension Beaurepas, I came back, rather earlier than usual from my academic session; it wanted half an hour of the midday breakfast. I went into the

salon with the design of possessing myself of the day's Galignani before one of the little English old maids should have removed it to her virginal bower—a privilege to which Madame Beaurepas frequently alluded as one of the attractions of the establishment. In the salon I found a new-comer, a tall gentleman in a high black hat, whom I immediately recognised as a compatriot. I had often seen him, or his equivalent, in the hotel parlours of my native land. He apparently supposed himself to be at the present moment in a hotel parlour; his hat was on his head, or, rather, half off it—pushed back from his forehead, and rather suspended than poised. He stood before a table on which old newspapers were scattered, one of which he had taken up and, with his eye-glass on his nose, was holding out at arm's-length. It was that honourable but extremely diminutive sheet, the Journal de Geneve, a newspaper of about the size of a pocket-handkerchief. As I drew near, looking for my Galignani, the tall gentleman gave me, over the top of his eye-glass, a somewhat solemn stare. Presently, however, before I had time to lay my hand on the object of my search, he silently offered me the Journal de Geneve.

"It appears," he said, "to be the paper of the country."

"Yes," I answered, "I believe it's the best."

He gazed at it again, still holding it at arm's-length, as if it had been a looking-glass. "Well," he said, "I suppose it's natural a small country should have small papers. You could wrap it up, mountains and all, in one of our dailies!"

I found my Galignani, and went off with it into the garden, where I seated myself on a bench in the shade. Presently I saw the tall gentleman in the hat appear in one of the open windows of the salon, and stand there with his hands in his pockets and his legs a little apart. He looked very much bored, and—I don't know why—I immediately began to feel sorry for him. He was not at all a picturesque personage; he looked like a jaded, faded man of business. But after a little he came into the garden and began to stroll about; and then his restless, unoccupied carriage, and the vague, unacquainted manner in which his eyes wandered over the place, seemed to make it proper that, as an older resident, I should exercise a certain hospitality. I said something to him, and he came and sat down beside me on my bench, clasping one of his long knees in his hands.

"When is it this big breakfast of theirs comes off?" he inquired.

"That's what I call it—the little breakfast and the big breakfast.

I never thought I should live to see the time when I should care to

eat two breakfasts. But a man's glad to do anything over here."

"For myself," I observed, "I find plenty to do."

He turned his head and glanced at me with a dry, deliberate, kind-looking eye. "You're getting used to the life, are you?"

"I like the life very much," I answered, laughing.

"How long have you tried it?"

"Do you mean in this place?"

"Well, I mean anywhere. It seems to me pretty much the same all over."

"I have been in this house only a fortnight," I said.

"Well, what should you say, from what you have seen?" my companion asked.

"Oh," said I, "you can see all there is immediately. It's very simple."

"Sweet simplicity, eh? I'm afraid my two ladies will find it too simple."

"Everything is very good," I went on. "And Madame Beurepas is a charming old woman. And then it's very cheap."

"Cheap, is it?" my friend repeated meditatively.

"Doesn't it strike you so?" I asked. I thought it very possible he had not inquired the terms. But he appeared not to have heard me; he sat there, clasping his knee and blinking, in a contemplative manner, at the sunshine.

"Are you from the United States, sir?" he presently demanded, turning his head again.

"Yes, sir," I replied; and I mentioned the place of my nativity.

"I presumed," he said, "that you were American or English. I'm from the United States myself; from New York city. Many of our people here?"

"Not so many as, I believe, there have sometimes been. There are two or three ladies."

"Well," my interlocutor declared, "I am very fond of ladies' society. I think when it's superior there's nothing comes up to

it. I've got two ladies here myself; I must make you acquainted with them."

I rejoined that I should be delighted, and I inquired of my friend whether he had been long in Europe.

"Well, it seems precious long," he said, "but my time's not up yet.

We have been here fourteen weeks and a half."

"Are you travelling for pleasure?" I asked.

My companion turned his head again and looked at me—looked at me so long in silence that I at last also turned and met his eyes.

"No, sir," he said presently. "No, sir," he repeated, after a considerable interval.

"Excuse me," said I, for there was something so solemn in his tone that I feared I had been indiscreet.

He took no notice of my ejaculation; he simply continued to look at me. "I'm travelling," he said, at last, "to please the doctors. They seemed to think they would like it."

"Ah, they sent you abroad for your health?"

"They sent me abroad because they were so confoundedly muddled they didn't know what else to do."

"That's often the best thing," I ventured to remark.

"It was a confession of weakness; they wanted me to stop plaguing them. They didn't know enough to cure me, and that's the way they thought they would get round it. I wanted to be cured—I didn't want to be transported. I hadn't done any harm."

I assented to the general proposition of the inefficiency of doctors, and asked my companion if he had been seriously ill.

"I didn't sleep," he said, after some delay.

"Ah, that's very annoying. I suppose you were overworked."

"I didn't eat; I took no interest in my food."

"Well, I hope you both eat and sleep now," I said.

"I couldn't hold a pen," my neighbour went on. "I couldn't sit still. I couldn't walk from my house to the cars—and it's only a little way. I lost my interest in business."

"You needed a holiday," I observed.

"That's what the doctors said. It wasn't so very smart of them. I had been paying strict attention to business for twenty-three years."

"In all that time you have never had a holiday?" I exclaimed with horror.

My companion waited a little. "Sundays," he said at last.

"No wonder, then, you were out of sorts."

"Well, sir," said my friend, "I shouldn't have been where I was three years ago if I had spent my time travelling round Europe. I was in a very advantageous position. I did a very large business. I was considerably interested in lumber." He paused, turned his head, and looked at me a moment. "Have you any business interests yourself?" I answered that I had none, and he went on again, slowly, softly, deliberately. "Well, sir, perhaps you are not aware that business in the United States is not what it was a short time since. Business interests are very insecure. There

seems to be a general falling-off. Different parties offer different explanations of the fact, but so far as I am aware none of their observations have set things going again." I ingeniously intimated that if business was dull, the time was good for coming away; whereupon my neighbour threw back his head and stretched his legs a while. "Well, sir, that's one view of the matter certainly. There's something to be said for that. These things should be looked at all round. That's the ground my wife took. That's the ground," he added in a moment, "that a lady would naturally take;" and he gave a little dry laugh.

"You think it's slightly illogical," I remarked.

"Well, sir, the ground I took was, that the worse a man's business is, the more it requires looking after. I shouldn't want to go out to take a walk—not even to go to church—if my house was on fire. My firm is not doing the business it was; it's like a sick child, it requires nursing. What I wanted the doctors to do was to fix me up, so that I could go on at home. I'd have taken anything they'd have given me, and as many times a day. I wanted to be right there; I had my reasons; I have them still. But I came off all the same," said my friend, with a melancholy smile.

I was a great deal younger than he, but there was something so simple and communicative in his tone, so expressive of a desire to fraternise, and so exempt from any theory of human differences, that I quite forgot his seniority, and found myself offering him paternal advice. "Don't think about all that," said I. "Simply enjoy yourself, amuse yourself, get well. Travel about and see

Europe. At the end of a year, by the time you are ready to go home, things will have improved over there, and you will be quite well and happy."

My friend laid his hand on my knee; he looked at me for some moments, and I thought he was going to say, "You are very young!" But he said presently, "YOU have got used to Europe any way!"

CHAPTER III

At breakfast I encountered his ladies—his wife and daughter. They were placed, however, at a distance from me, and it was not until the pensionnaires had dispersed, and some of them, according to custom, had come out into the garden, that he had an opportunity of making me acquainted with them.

"Will you allow me to introduce you to my daughter?" he said, moved apparently by a paternal inclination to provide this young lady with social diversion. She was standing with her mother, in one of the paths, looking about with no great complacency, as I imagined, at the homely characteristics of the place, and old M. Pigeonneau was hovering near, hesitating apparently between the desire to be urbane and the absence of a pretext. "Mrs. Ruck—Miss Sophy Ruck," said my friend, leading me up.

Mrs. Ruck was a large, plump, light-coloured person, with a smooth fair face, a somnolent eye, and an elaborate coiffure. Miss Sophy was a girl of one-and-twenty, very small and very pretty—what I suppose would have been called a lively brunette. Both of these ladies were attired in black silk dresses, very much trimmed; they had an air of the highest elegance.

"Do you think highly of this pension?" inquired Mrs. Ruck, after a few preliminaries.

"It's a little rough, but it seems to me comfortable," I answered.

"Does it take a high rank in Geneva?" Mrs. Ruck pursued.

"I imagine it enjoys a very fair fame," I said, smiling.

"I should never dream of comparing it to a New York boarding-house," said Mrs. Ruck.

"It's quite a different style," her daughter observed.

Miss Ruck had folded her arms; she was holding her elbows with a pair of white little hands, and she was tapping the ground with a pretty little foot.

"We hardly expected to come to a pension," said Mrs. Ruck. "But we thought we would try; we had heard so much about Swiss pensions. I was saying to Mr. Ruck that I wondered whether this was a favourable specimen. I was afraid we might have made a mistake."

"We knew some people who had been here; they thought everything of Madame Beaurepas," said Miss Sophy. "They said she was a real friend."

"Mr. and Mrs. Parker—perhaps you have heard her speak of them," Mrs.

Ruck pursued.

"Madame Beaurepas has had a great many Americans; she is very fond of

Americans," I replied.

"Well, I must say I should think she would be, if she compares them with some others."

"Mother is always comparing," observed Miss Ruck.

"Of course I am always comparing," rejoined the elder lady.

"I never had a chance till now; I never knew my privileges. Give me an American!" And Mrs. Ruck indulged in a little laugh.

"Well, I must say there are some things I like over here," said Miss Sophy, with courage. And indeed I could see that she was a young woman of great decision.

"You like the shops—that's what you like," her father affirmed.

The young lady addressed herself to me, without heeding this remark.

"I suppose you feel quite at home here."

"Oh, he likes it; he has got used to the life!" exclaimed Mr. Ruck.

"I wish you'd teach Mr. Ruck," said his wife. "It seems as if he couldn't get used to anything."

"I'm used to you, my dear," the husband retorted, giving me a humorous look.

"He's intensely restless," continued Mrs. Ruck.

"That's what made me want to come to a pension. I thought he would settle down more."

"I don't think I AM used to you, after all," said her husband.

In view of a possible exchange of conjugal repartee I took refuge in conversation with Miss Ruck, who seemed perfectly able to play her part in any colloquy. I learned from this young lady that, with her parents, after visiting the British Islands, she had been spending a month in Paris, and that she thought she should have died when she left that city. "I hung out of the

carriage, when we left the hotel," said Miss Ruck, "I assure you I did. And mother did, too."

"Out of the other window, I hope," said I.

"Yes, one out of each window," she replied promptly. "Father had hard work, I can tell you. We hadn't half finished; there were ever so many places we wanted to go to."

"Your father insisted on coming away?"

"Yes; after we had been there about a month he said he had enough. He's fearfully restless; he's very much out of health. Mother and I said to him that if he was restless in Paris he needn't hope for peace anywhere. We don't mean to leave him alone till he takes us back." There was an air of keen resolution in Miss Ruck's pretty face, of lucid apprehension of desirable ends, which made me, as she pronounced these words, direct a glance of covert compassion toward her poor recalcitrant father. He had walked away a little with his wife, and I saw only his back and his stooping, patient-looking shoulders, whose air of acute resignation was thrown into relief by the voluminous tranquillity of Mrs. Ruck. "He will have to take us back in September, any way," the young girl pursued; "he will have to take us back to get some things we have ordered."

"Have you ordered a great many things?" I asked jocosely.

"Well, I guess we have ordered SOME. Of course we wanted to take advantage of being in Paris—ladies always do. We have left the principal things till we go back. Of course that is the principal interest, for ladies. Mother said she should feel so

shabby if she just passed through. We have promised all the people to be back in September, and I never broke a promise yet. So Mr. Ruck has got to make his plans accordingly."

"And what are his plans?"

"I don't know; he doesn't seem able to make any. His great idea was to get to Geneva; but now that he has got here he doesn't seem to care. It's the effect of ill health. He used to be so bright; but now he is quite subdued. It's about time he should improve, any way. We went out last night to look at the jewellers' windows—in that street behind the hotel. I had always heard of those jewellers' windows. We saw some lovely things, but it didn't seem to rouse father. He'll get tired of Geneva sooner than he did of Paris."

"Ah," said I, "there are finer things here than the jewellers' windows. We are very near some of the most beautiful scenery in Europe."

"I suppose you mean the mountains. Well, we have seen plenty of mountains at home. We used to go to the mountains every summer. We are familiar enough with the mountains. Aren't we, mother?" the young lady demanded, appealing to Mrs. Ruck, who, with her husband, had drawn near again.

"Aren't we what?" inquired the elder lady.

"Aren't we familiar with the mountains?"

"Well, I hope so," said Mrs. Ruck.

Mr. Ruck, with his hands in his pockets, gave me a sociable wink.—

"There's nothing much you can tell them!" he said.

The two ladies stood face to face a few moments, surveying each other's garments. "Don't you want to go out?" the young girl at last inquired of her mother.

"Well, I think we had better; we have got to go up to that place."

"To what place?" asked Mr. Ruck.

"To that jeweller's—to that big one."

"They all seemed big enough; they were too big!" And Mr. Ruck gave me another wink.

"That one where we saw the blue cross," said his daughter.

"Oh, come, what do you want of that blue cross?" poor Mr. Ruck demanded.

"She wants to hang it on a black velvet ribbon and tie it round her neck," said his wife.

"A black velvet ribbon? No, I thank you!" cried the young lady. "Do you suppose I would wear that cross on a black velvet ribbon? On a nice little gold chain, if you please—a little narrow gold chain, like an old-fashioned watch-chain. That's the proper thing for that blue cross. I know the sort of chain I mean; I'm going to look for one. When I want a thing," said Miss Ruck, with decision, "I can generally find it."

"Look here, Sophy," her father urged, "you don't want that blue cross."

"I do want it—I happen to want it." And Sophy glanced at me with a little laugh.

Her laugh, which in itself was pretty, suggested that there were various relations in which one might stand to Miss Ruck; but I think I was conscious of a certain satisfaction in not occupying the paternal one. "Don't worry the poor child," said her mother.

"Come on, mother," said Miss Ruck.

"We are going to look about a little," explained the elder lady to me, by way of taking leave.

"I know what that means," remarked Mr. Ruck, as his companions moved away. He stood looking at them a moment, while he raised his hand to his head, behind, and stood rubbing it a little, with a movement that displaced his hat. (I may remark in parenthesis that I never saw a hat more easily displaced than Mr. Ruck's.) I supposed he was going to say something querulous, but I was mistaken. Mr. Ruck was unhappy, but he was very good-natured. "Well, they want to pick up something," he said. "That's the principal interest, for ladies."

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