

ГЕНРИ
ДЖЕЙМС

THE

PATAGONIA

Генри Джеймс

The Patagonia

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Henry James

The Patagonia

I

The houses were dark in the August night and the perspective of Beacon Street, with its double chain of lamps, was a foreshortened desert. The club on the hill alone, from its semi-cylindrical front, projected a glow upon the dusky vagueness of the Common, and as I passed it I heard in the hot stillness the click of a pair of billiard-balls. As “every one” was out of town perhaps the servants, in the extravagance of their leisure, were profaning the tables. The heat was insufferable and I thought with joy of the morrow, of the deck of the steamer, the freshening breeze, the sense of getting out to sea. I was even glad of what I had learned in the afternoon at the office of the company—that at the eleventh hour an old ship with a lower standard of speed had been put on in place of the vessel in which I had taken my passage. America was roasting, England might very well be stuffy, and a slow passage (which at that season of the year would probably also be a fine one) was a guarantee of ten or twelve days of fresh air.

I strolled down the hill without meeting a creature, though I could see through the palings of the Common that that recreative expanse was peopled with dim forms. I remembered Mrs. Nettlepoint’s house—she lived in those days (they are not so distant, but there have been changes) on the water-side, a little way beyond the spot at which the Public Garden terminates; and I reflected that like myself she would be spending the night in Boston if it were true that, as had been mentioned to me a few days before at Mount Desert, she was to embark on the morrow for Liverpool. I presently saw this appearance confirmed by a light above her door and in two or three of her windows, and I determined to ask for her, having nothing to do till bedtime. I had come out simply to pass an hour, leaving my hotel to the blaze of its gas and the perspiration of its porters; but it occurred to me that my old friend might very *well* not know of the substitution of the *Patagonia* for the *Scandinavia*, so that I should be doing her a service to prepare her mind. Besides, I could offer to help her, to look after her in the morning: lone women are grateful for support in taking ship for far countries.

It came to me indeed as I stood on her door-step that as she had a son she might not after all be so lone; yet I remembered at the same time that Jasper Nettlepoint was not quite a young man to lean upon, having—as I at least supposed—a life of his own and tastes and habits which had long since diverted him from the maternal side. If he did happen just now to be at home my solicitude would of course seem officious; for in his many wanderings—I believed he had roamed all over the globe—he would certainly have learned how to manage. None the less, in fine, I was very glad to show Mrs. Nettlepoint I thought of her. With my long absence I had lost sight of her; but I had liked her of old, she had been a good friend to my sisters, and I had in regard to her that sense which is pleasant to those who in general have gone astray or got detached, the sense that she at least knew all about me.

I could trust her at any time to tell people I was respectable. Perhaps I was conscious of how little I deserved this indulgence when it came over me that I hadn’t been near her for ages. The measure of that neglect was given by my vagueness of mind about Jasper. However, I really belonged nowadays to a different generation; I was more the mother’s contemporary than the son’s.

Mrs. Nettlepoint was at home: I found her in her back drawing-room, where the wide windows opened to the water. The room was dusky—it was too hot for lamps—and she sat slowly moving her fan and looking out on the little arm of the sea which is so pretty at night, reflecting the lights of Cambridgeport and Charlestown. I supposed she was musing on the loved ones she was to leave behind, her married daughters, her grandchildren; but she struck a note more specifically Bostonian as she said to me, pointing with her fan to the Back Bay: “I shall see nothing more charming than that

over there, you know!” She made me very welcome, but her son had told her about the *Patagonia*, for which she was sorry, as this would mean a longer voyage. She was a poor creature in any boat and mainly confined to her cabin even in weather extravagantly termed fine—as if any weather could be fine at sea.

“Ah then your son’s going with you?” I asked.

“Here he comes, he’ll tell you for himself much better than I can pretend to.” Jasper Nettlepoint at that moment joined us, dressed in white flannel and carrying a large fan. “Well, my dear, have you decided?” his mother continued with no scant irony. “He hasn’t yet made up his mind, and we sail at ten o’clock!”

“What does it matter when my things are put up?” the young man said. “There’s no crowd at this moment; there will be cabins to spare. I’m waiting for a telegram—that will settle it. I just walked up to the club to see if it was come—they’ll send it there because they suppose this house unoccupied. Not yet, but I shall go back in twenty minutes.”

“Mercy, how you rush about in this temperature!” the poor lady exclaimed while I reflected that it was perhaps *his* billiard-balls I had heard ten minutes before. I was sure he was fond of billiards.

“Rush? not in the least. I take it uncommon easy.”

“Ah I’m bound to say you do!” Mrs. Nettlepoint returned with inconsequence. I guessed at a certain tension between the pair and a want of consideration on the young man’s part, arising perhaps from selfishness. His mother was nervous, in suspense, wanting to be at rest as to whether she should have his company on the voyage or be obliged to struggle alone. But as he stood there smiling and slowly moving his fan he struck me somehow as a person on whom this fact wouldn’t sit too heavily.

He was of the type of those whom other people worry about, not of those who worry about other people. Tall and strong, he had a handsome face, with a round head and close-curling hair; the whites of his eyes and the enamel of his teeth, under his brown moustache, gleamed vaguely in the lights of the Back Bay. I made out that he was sunburnt, as if he lived much in the open air, and that he looked intelligent but also slightly brutal, though not in a morose way. His brutality, if he had any, was bright and finished. I had to tell him who I was, but even then I saw how little he placed me and that my explanations gave me in his mind no great identity or at any rate no great importance. I foresaw that he would in intercourse make me feel sometimes very young and sometimes very old, caring himself but little which. He mentioned, as if to show our companion that he might safely be left to his own devices, that he had once started from London to Bombay at three quarters of an hour’s notice.

“Yes, and it must have been pleasant for the people you were with!”

“Oh the people I was with—!” he returned; and his tone appeared to signify that such people would always have to come off as they could. He asked if there were no cold drinks in the house, no lemonade, no iced syrups; in such weather something of that sort ought always to be kept going.

When his mother remarked that surely at the club they *were* kept going he went on: “Oh yes, I had various things there; but you know I’ve walked down the hill since. One should have something at either end. May I ring and see?” He rang while Mrs. Nettlepoint observed that with the people they had in the house, an establishment reduced naturally at such a moment to its simplest expression—they were burning up candle-ends and there were no luxuries—she wouldn’t answer for the service.

The matter ended in her leaving the room in quest of cordials with the female domestic who had arrived in response to the bell and in whom Jasper’s appeal aroused no visible intelligence.

She remained away some time and I talked with her son, who was sociable but desultory and kept moving over the place, always with his fan, as if he were properly impatient. Sometimes he seated himself an instant on the window-sill, and then I made him out in fact thoroughly good-looking—a fine brown clean young athlete. He failed to tell me on what special contingency his decision depended; he only alluded familiarly to an expected telegram, and I saw he was probably fond at no time of the trouble of explanations. His mother’s absence was a sign that when it might be a question of gratifying him she had grown used to spare no pains, and I fancied her rummaging in some close

storeroom, among old preserve-pots, while the dull maid-servant held the candle awry. I don't know whether this same vision was in his own eyes; at all events it didn't prevent his saying suddenly, as he looked at his watch, that I must excuse him—he should have to go back to the club. He would return in half an hour—or in less. He walked away and I sat there alone, conscious, on the dark dismantled simplified scene, in the deep silence that rests on American towns during the hot season—there was now and then a far cry or a splash in the water, and at intervals the tinkle of the bells of the horse-cars on the long bridge, slow in the suffocating night—of the strange influence, half-sweet, half-sad, that abides in houses uninhabited or about to become so, in places muffled and bereaved, where the unheeded sofas and patient belittered tables seem (like the disconcerted dogs, to whom everything is alike sinister) to recognise the eve of a journey.

After a while I heard the sound of voices, of steps, the rustle of dresses, and I looked round, supposing these things to denote the return of Mrs. Nettlepoint and her handmaiden with the refecton prepared for her son. What I saw however was two other female forms, visitors apparently just admitted, and now ushered into the room. They were not announced—the servant turned her back on them and rambled off to our hostess. They advanced in a wavering tentative unIntroduced way—partly, I could see, because the place was dark and partly because their visit was in its nature experimental, a flight of imagination or a stretch of confidence. One of the ladies was stout and the other slim, and I made sure in a moment that one was talkative and the other reserved. It was further to be discerned that one was elderly and the other young, as well as that the fact of their unlikeness didn't prevent their being mother and daughter. Mrs. Nettlepoint reappeared in a very few minutes, but the interval had sufficed to establish a communication—really copious for the occasion—between the strangers and the unknown gentleman whom they found in possession, hat and stick in hand. This was not my doing—for what had I to go upon?—and still less was it the doing of the younger and the more indifferent, or less courageous, lady. She spoke but once—when her companion informed me that she was going out to Europe the next day to be married. Then she protested “Oh mother!” in a tone that struck me in the darkness as doubly odd, exciting my curiosity to see her face.

It had taken the elder woman but a moment to come to that, and to various other things, after I had explained that I myself was waiting for Mrs. Nettlepoint, who would doubtless soon come back.

“Well, she won't know me—I guess she hasn't ever heard much about me,” the good lady said; “but I've come from Mrs. Allen and I guess that will make it all right. I presume you know Mrs. Allen?”

I was unacquainted with this influential personage, but I assented vaguely to the proposition.

Mrs. Allen's emissary was good-humoured and familiar, but rather appealing than insistent (she remarked that if her friend *had* found time to come in the afternoon—she had so much to do, being just up for the day, that she couldn't be sure—it would be all right); and somehow even before she mentioned Merrimac Avenue (they had come all the way from there) my imagination had associated her with that indefinite social limbo known to the properly-constituted Boston mind as the South End—a nebulous region which condenses here and there into a pretty face, in which the daughters are an “improvement” on the mothers and are sometimes acquainted with gentlemen more gloriously domiciled, gentlemen whose wives and sisters are in turn not acquainted with them.

When at last Mrs. Nettlepoint came in, accompanied by candles and by a tray laden with glasses of coloured fluid which emitted a cool tinkling, I was in a position to officiate as master of the ceremonies, to introduce Mrs. Mavis and Miss Grace Mavis, to represent that Mrs. Allen had recommended them—nay, had urged them—just to come that way, informally and without fear; Mrs. Allen who had been prevented only by the pressure of occupations so characteristic of her (especially when up from Mattapoissett for a few hours' desperate shopping) from herself calling in the course of the day to explain who they were and what was the favour they had to ask of her benevolent friend.

Good-natured women understand each other even when so divided as to sit residentially above and below the salt, as who should say; by which token our hostess had quickly mastered the main facts:

Mrs. Allen's visit that morning in Merrimac Avenue to talk of Mrs. Amber's great idea, the classes at the public schools in vacation (she was interested with an equal charity to that of Mrs. Mavis—even in such weather!—in those of the South End) for games and exercises and music, to keep the poor unoccupied children out of the streets; then the revelation that it had suddenly been settled almost from one hour to the other that Grace should sail for Liverpool, Mr. Porterfield at last being ready.

He was taking a little holiday; his mother was with him, they had come over from Paris to see some of the celebrated old buildings in England, and he had telegraphed to say that if Grace would start right off they would just finish it up and be married. It often happened that when things had dragged on that way for years they were all huddled up at the end. Of course in such a case she, Mrs. Mavis, had had to fly round. Her daughter's passage was taken, but it seemed too dreadful she should make her journey all alone, the first time she had ever been at sea, without any companion or escort. *She* couldn't go—Mr. Mavis was too sick: she hadn't even been able to get him off to the seaside.

“Well, Mrs. Nettlepoint's going in that ship,” Mrs. Allen had said; and she had represented that nothing was simpler than to give her the girl in charge. When Mrs. Mavis had replied that this was all very well but that she didn't know the lady, Mrs. Allen had declared that that didn't make a speck of difference, for Mrs. Nettlepoint was kind enough for anything. It was easy enough to *know* her, if that was all the trouble! All Mrs. Mavis would have to do would be to go right up to her next morning, when she took her daughter to the ship (she would see her there on the deck with her party) and tell her fair and square what she wanted. Mrs. Nettlepoint had daughters herself and would easily understand. Very likely she'd even look after Grace a little on the other side, in such a queer situation, going out alone to the gentleman she was engaged to: she'd just help her, like a good Samaritan, to turn round before she was married. Mr. Porterfield seemed to think they wouldn't wait long, once she was there: they would have it right over at the American consul's. Mrs. Allen had said it would perhaps be better still to go and see Mrs. Nettlepoint beforehand, that day, to tell her what they wanted: then they wouldn't seem to spring it on her just as she was leaving. She herself (Mrs. Allen) would call and say a word for them if she could save ten minutes before catching her train. If she hadn't come it was because she hadn't saved her ten minutes but she had made them feel that they must come all the same. Mrs. Mavis liked that better, because on the ship in the morning there would be such a confusion. She didn't think her daughter would be any trouble—conscientiously she didn't. It was just to have some one to speak to her and not sally forth like a servant-girl going to a situation.

“I see, I'm to act as a sort of bridesmaid and to give her away,” Mrs. Nettlepoint obligingly said. Kind enough in fact for anything, she showed on this occasion that it was easy enough to know her. There is notoriously nothing less desirable than an imposed aggravation of effort at sea, but she accepted without betrayed dismay the burden of the young lady's dependence and allowed her, as Mrs. Mavis said, to hook herself on. She evidently had the habit of patience, and her reception of her visitors' story reminded me afresh—I was reminded of it whenever I returned to my native land—that my dear compatriots are the people in the world who most freely take mutual accommodation for granted. They have always had to help themselves, and have rather magnanimously failed to learn just where helping others is distinguishable from that. In no country are there fewer forms and more reciprocities.

It was doubtless not singular that the ladies from Merrimac Avenue shouldn't feel they were importunate: what was striking was that Mrs. Nettlepoint didn't appear to suspect it. However, she would in any case have thought it inhuman to show this—though I could see that under the surface she was amused at everything the more expressive of the pilgrims from the South End took for granted.

I scarce know whether the attitude of the younger visitor added or not to the merit of her good nature. Mr. Porterfield's intended took no part in the demonstration, scarcely spoke, sat looking at the Back Bay and the lights on the long bridge. She declined the lemonade and the other mixtures which, at Mrs. Nettlepoint's request, I offered her, while her mother partook freely of everything and

I reflected—for I as freely drained a glass or two in which the ice tinkled—that Mr. Jasper had better hurry back if he wished to enjoy these luxuries.

Was the effect of the young woman's reserve meanwhile ungracious, or was it only natural that in her particular situation she shouldn't have a flow of compliment at her command? I noticed that Mrs. Nettlepoint looked at her often, and certainly though she was undemonstrative Miss Mavis was interesting. The candlelight enabled me to see that though not in the very first flower of her youth she was still fresh and handsome. Her eyes and hair were dark, her face was pale, and she held up her head as if, with its thick braids and everything else involved in it, it were an appurtenance she wasn't ashamed of. If her mother was excellent and common she was not common—not at least flagrantly so—and perhaps also not excellent. At all events she wouldn't be, in appearance at least, a dreary appendage; which in the case of a person "hooking on" was always something gained. Was it because something of a romantic or pathetic interest usually attaches to a good creature who has been the victim of a "long engagement" that this young lady made an impression on me from the first—favoured as I had been so quickly with this glimpse of her history? I could charge her certainly with no positive appeal; she only held her tongue and smiled, and her smile corrected whatever suggestion might have forced itself upon me that the spirit within her was dead—the spirit of that promise of which she found herself doomed to carry out the letter.

What corrected it less, I must add, was an odd recollection which gathered vividness as I listened to it—a mental association evoked by the name of Mr. Porterfield. Surely I had a personal impression, over-smearred and confused, of the gentleman who was waiting at Liverpool, or who presently would be, for Mrs. Nettlepoint's protégée. I had met him, known him, some time, somewhere, somehow, on the other side. Wasn't he studying something, very hard, somewhere—probably in Paris—ten years before, and didn't he make extraordinarily neat drawings, linear and architectural? Didn't he go to a table d'hôte, at two francs twenty-five, in the Rue Bonaparte, which I then frequented, and didn't he wear spectacles and a Scotch plaid arranged in a manner which seemed to say "I've trustworthy information that that's the way they do it in the Highlands"? Wasn't he exemplary to positive irritation, and very poor, poor to positive oppression, so that I supposed he had no overcoat and his tartan would be what he slept under at night? Wasn't he working very hard still, and wouldn't he be, in the natural course, not yet satisfied that he had found his feet or knew enough to launch out? He would be a man of long preparations—Miss Mavis's white face seemed to speak to one of that. It struck me that if I had been in love with her I shouldn't have needed to lay such a train for the closer approach.

Architecture was his line and he was a pupil of the École des Beaux Arts. This reminiscence grew so much more vivid with me that at the end of ten minutes I had an odd sense of knowing—by implication—a good deal about the young lady.

Even after it was settled that Mrs. Nettlepoint would do everything possible for her the other visitor sat sipping our iced liquid and telling how "low" Mr. Mavis had been. At this period the girl's silence struck me as still more conscious, partly perhaps because she deprecated her mother's free flow—she was enough of an "improvement" to measure that—and partly because she was too distressed by the idea of leaving her infirm, her perhaps dying father. It wasn't indistinguishable that they were poor and that she would take out a very small purse for her trousseau. For Mr. Porterfield to make up the sum his own case would have had moreover greatly to change. If he had enriched himself by the successful practice of his profession I had encountered no edifice he had reared—his reputation hadn't come to my ears.

Mrs. Nettlepoint notified her new friends that she was a very inactive person at sea: she was prepared to suffer to the full with Miss Mavis, but not prepared to pace the deck with her, to struggle with her, to accompany her to meals. To this the girl replied that she would trouble her little, she was sure: she was convinced she should prove a wretched sailor and spend the voyage on her back.

Her mother scoffed at this picture, prophesying perfect weather and a lovely time, and I interposed to the effect that if I might be trusted, as a tame bachelor fairly sea-seasoned, I should be delighted

to give the new member of our party an arm or any other countenance whenever she should require it. Both the ladies thanked me for this—taking my professions with no sort of abatement—and the elder one declared that we were evidently going to be such a sociable group that it was too bad to have to stay at home. She asked Mrs. Nettlepoint if there were any one else in our party, and when our hostess mentioned her son—there was a chance of his embarking but (wasn't it absurd?) he hadn't decided yet—she returned with extraordinary candour: “Oh dear, I do hope he'll go: that would be so lovely for Grace.”

Somehow the words made me think of poor Mr. Porterfield's tartan, especially as Jasper Nettlepoint strolled in again at that moment. His mother at once challenged him: it was ten o'clock; had he by chance made up his great mind? Apparently he failed to hear her, being in the first place surprised at the strange ladies and then struck with the fact that one of them wasn't strange. The young man, after a slight hesitation, greeted Miss Mavis with a handshake and a “Oh good-evening, how do you do?” He didn't utter her name—which I could see he must have forgotten; but she immediately pronounced his, availing herself of the American girl's discretion to “present” him to her mother.

“Well, you might have told me you knew him all this time!” that lady jovially cried. Then she had an equal confidence for Mrs. Nettlepoint. “It would have saved me a worry—an acquaintance already begun.”

“Ah my son's acquaintances!” our hostess murmured.

“Yes, and my daughter's too!” Mrs. Mavis gaily echoed. “Mrs. Allen didn't tell us *you* were going,” she continued to the young man.

“She'd have been clever if she had been able to!” Mrs. Nettlepoint sighed.

“Dear mother, I have my telegram,” Jasper remarked, looking at Grace Mavis.

“I know you very little,” the girl said, returning his observation.

“I've danced with you at some ball—for some sufferers by something or other.”

“I think it was an inundation or a big fire,” she a little languidly smiled. “But it was a long time ago—and I haven't seen you since.”

“I've been in far countries—to my loss. I should have said it was a big fire.”

“It was at the Horticultural Hall. I didn't remember your name,” said Grace Mavis.

“That's very unkind of you, when I recall vividly that you had a pink dress.”

“Oh I remember that dress—your strawberry tarletan: you looked lovely in it!” Mrs. Mavis broke out. “You must get another just like it—on the other side.”

“Yes, your daughter looked charming in it,” said Jasper Nettlepoint. Then he added to the girl: “Yet you mentioned my name to your mother.”

“It came back to me—seeing you here. I had no idea this was your home.”

“Well, I confess it isn't, much. Oh there are some drinks!”—he approached the tray and its glasses.

“Indeed there are and quite delicious”—Mrs. Mavis largely wiped her mouth.

“Won't you have another then?—a pink one, like your daughter's gown.”

“With pleasure, sir. Oh do see them over,” Mrs. Mavis continued, accepting from the young man's hand a third tumbler.

“My mother and that gentleman? Surely they can take care of themselves,” he freely pleaded.

“Then my daughter—she has a claim as an old friend.”

But his mother had by this time interposed. “Jasper, what does your telegram say?”

He paid her no heed: he stood there with his glass in his hand, looking from Mrs. Mavis to Miss Grace.

“Ah leave her to me, madam; I'm quite competent,” I said to Mrs. Mavis.

Then the young man gave me his attention. The next minute he asked of the girl: “Do you mean you're going to Europe?”

“Yes, tomorrow. In the same ship as your mother.”

“That’s what we’ve come here for, to see all about it,” said Mrs. Mavis.

“My son, take pity on me and tell me what light your telegram throws,” Mrs. Nettlepoint went on.

“I will, dearest, when I’ve quenched my thirst.” And he slowly drained his glass.

“Well, I declare you’re worse than Gracie,” Mrs. Mavis commented. “She was first one thing and then the other—but only about up to three o’clock yesterday.”

“Excuse me—won’t you take something?” Jasper inquired of Gracie; who however still declined, as if to make up for her mother’s copious *consummation*. I found myself quite aware that the two ladies would do well to take leave, the question of Mrs. Nettlepoint’s good will being so satisfactorily settled and the meeting of the morrow at the ship so near at hand and I went so far as to judge that their protracted stay, with their hostess visibly in a fidget, gave the last proof of their want of breeding. Miss Grace after all then was not such an improvement on her mother, for she easily might have taken the initiative of departure, in spite of Mrs. Mavis’s evident “game” of making her own absorption of refreshment last as long as possible. I watched the girl with increasing interest; I couldn’t help asking myself a question or two about her and even perceiving already (in a dim and general way) that rather marked embarrassment, or at least anxiety attended her. Wasn’t it complicating that she should have needed, by remaining long enough, to assuage a certain suspense, to learn whether or no Jasper were going to sail? Hadn’t something particular passed between them on the occasion or at the period to which we had caught their allusion, and didn’t she really not know her mother was bringing her to *his* mother’s, though she apparently had thought it well not to betray knowledge? Such things were symptomatic—though indeed one scarce knew of what—on the part of a young lady betrothed to that curious cross-barred phantom of a Mr. Porterfield. But I am bound to add that she gave me no further warrant for wonder than was conveyed in her all tacitly and covertly encouraging her mother to linger. Somehow I had a sense that *she* was conscious of the indecency of this. I got up myself to go, but Mrs. Nettlepoint detained me after seeing that my movement wouldn’t be taken as a hint, and I felt she wished me not to leave my fellow visitors on her hands.

Jasper complained of the closeness of the room, said that it was not a night to sit in a room—one ought to be out in the air, under the sky. He denounced the windows that overlooked the water for not opening upon a balcony or a terrace, until his mother, whom he hadn’t yet satisfied about his telegram, reminded him that there was a beautiful balcony in front, with room for a dozen people.

She assured him we would go and sit there if it would please him.

“It will be nice and cool tomorrow, when we steam into the great ocean,” said Miss Mavis, expressing with more vivacity than she had yet thrown into any of her utterances my own thought of half an hour before. Mrs. Nettlepoint replied that it would probably be freezing cold, and her son murmured that he would go and try the drawing-room balcony and report upon it. Just as he was turning away he said, smiling, to Miss Mavis: “Won’t you come with me and see if it’s pleasant?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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