

THE BOSTONIANS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-00398-9 — The Bostonians
Henry James , Edited by Daniel Karlin
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-00398-9 — The Bostonians
Henry James , Edited by Daniel Karlin
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

BOOK FIRST

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-00398-9 — The Bostonians
Henry James , Edited by Daniel Karlin
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

I.

“OLIVE will come down in about ten minutes; she told me to tell you that. About ten; that is exactly like Olive. Neither five nor fifteen, and yet not ten exactly, but either nine or eleven. She didn’t tell me to say she was glad to see you, because she doesn’t know whether she is or not, and she wouldn’t for the world expose herself to telling a fib. She is very honest, is Olive Chancellor; she is full of rectitude. Nobody tells fibs in Boston; I don’t know what to make of them all. Well, I am very glad to see you, at any rate.”

These words were spoken with much volubility by a fair, plump, smiling woman who entered a narrow drawing-room in which a visitor, kept waiting for a few moments, was already absorbed in a book. The gentleman had not even needed to sit down to become interested: apparently he had taken up the volume from a table as soon as he came in, and, standing there, after a single glance round the apartment, had lost himself in its pages. He threw it down at the approach of Mrs. Luna, laughed, shook hands with her, and said in answer to her last remark, “You imply that you do tell fibs. Perhaps that is one.”

“Oh no; there is nothing wonderful in my being glad to see you,” Mrs. Luna rejoined, “when I tell you that I have been three long weeks in this unprevaricating city.”

“That has an unflattering sound for me,” said the young man. “I pretend not to prevaricate.”

“Dear me, what’s the good of being a Southerner?” the lady asked. “Olive told me to tell you she hoped you will stay to dinner. And if she said it, she does really hope it. She is willing to risk that.”

“Just as I am?” the visitor inquired, presenting himself with rather a work-a-day aspect.

Mrs. Luna glanced at him from head to foot, and gave a little smiling sigh, as if he had been a long sum in addition. And, indeed, he was very long, Basil Ransom, and he even looked a little hard and discouraging, like a column of figures, in spite of the friendly face which he bent upon his hostess’s deputy, and which, in its thinness, had a deep dry line, a sort of premature wrinkle,

on either side of the mouth. He was tall and lean, and dressed throughout in black; his shirt-collar was low and wide, and the triangle of linen, a little crumpled, exhibited by the opening of his waistcoat, was adorned by a pin containing a small red stone. In spite of this decoration the young man looked poor—as poor as a young man could look who had such a fine head and such magnificent eyes. Those of Basil Ransom were dark, deep, and glowing; his head had a character of elevation which fairly added to his stature; it was a head to be seen above the level of a crowd, on some judicial bench or political platform, or even on a bronze medal. His forehead was high and broad, and his thick black hair, perfectly straight and glossy, and without any division, rolled back from it in a leonine manner. These things, the eyes especially, with their smouldering fire, might have indicated that he was to be a great American statesman; or, on the other hand, they might simply have proved that he came from Carolina or Alabama. He came, in fact, from Mississippi, and he spoke very perceptibly with the accent of that country. It is not in my power to reproduce by any combination of characters this charming dialect; but the initiated reader will have no difficulty in evoking the sound, which is to be associated in the present instance with nothing vulgar or vain. This lean, pale, sallow, shabby, striking young man, with his superior head, his sedentary shoulders, his expression of bright grimness and hard enthusiasm, his provincial, distinguished appearance, is, as a representative of his sex, the most important personage in my narrative; he played a very active part in the events I have undertaken in some degree to set forth. And yet the reader who likes a complete image, who desires to read with the senses as well as with the reason, is entreated not to forget that he prolonged his consonants and swallowed his vowels, that he was guilty of elisions and interpolations which were equally unexpected, and that his discourse was pervaded by something sultry and vast, something almost African in its rich, basking tone, something that suggested the teeming expanse of the cotton-field. Mrs. Luna looked up at all this, but saw only a part of it; otherwise she would not have replied in a bantering manner, in answer to his inquiry: “Are you ever different from this?” Mrs. Luna was familiar—intolerably familiar.

Basil Ransom coloured a little. Then he said: “Oh yes; when I dine out I usually carry a six-shooter and a bowie-knife.” And he took up his hat vaguely—a soft black hat with a low crown and an immense straight brim.

Mrs. Luna wanted to know what he was doing. She made him sit down; she assured him that her sister quite expected him, would feel as sorry as she could ever feel for anything—for she was a kind of fatalist, anyhow—if he didn't stay to dinner. It was an immense pity—she herself was going out; in Boston you must jump at invitations. Olive, too, was going somewhere after dinner, but he mustn't mind that; perhaps he would like to go with her. It wasn't a party—Olive didn't go to parties; it was one of those weird meetings she was so fond of.

“What kind of meetings do you refer to? You speak as if it were a rendezvous of witches on the Brocken.”

“Well, so it is; they are all witches and wizards, mediums, and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals.”

Basil Ransom stared; the yellow light in his brown eyes deepened. “Do you mean to say your sister's a roaring radical?”

“A radical? She's a female Jacobin—she's a nihilist. Whatever is, is wrong, and all that sort of thing. If you are going to dine with her, you had better know it.”

“Oh, murder!” murmured the young man vaguely, sinking back in his chair with his arms folded. He looked at Mrs. Luna with intelligent incredulity. She was sufficiently pretty; her hair was in clusters of curls, like bunches of grapes; her tight bodice seemed to crack with her vivacity; and from beneath the stiff little plaits of her petticoat a small fat foot protruded, resting upon a stilted heel. She was attractive and impertinent, especially the latter. He seemed to think it was a great pity, what she had told him; but he lost himself in this consideration, or, at any rate, said nothing for some time, while his eyes wandered over Mrs. Luna, and he probably wondered what body of doctrine *she* represented, little as she might partake of the nature of her sister. Many things were strange to Basil Ransom; Boston especially was strewn with surprises, and he was a man who liked to understand. Mrs. Luna was drawing on her gloves; Ransom had never seen any that were so long; they reminded him of stockings, and he wondered how she managed without garters above the elbow. “Well, I suppose I might have known that,” he continued, at last.

“You might have known what?”

“Well, that Miss Chancellor would be all that you say. She was brought up in the city of reform.”

“Oh, it isn’t the city; it’s just Olive Chancellor. She would reform the solar system if she could get hold of it. She’ll reform you, if you don’t look out. That’s the way I found her when I returned from Europe.”

“Have you been in Europe?” Ransom asked.

“Mercy, yes! Haven’t you?”

“No, I haven’t been anywhere. Has your sister?”

“Yes; but she stayed only an hour or two. She hates it; she would like to abolish it. Didn’t you know I had been to Europe?” Mrs. Luna went on, in the slightly aggrieved tone of a woman who discovers the limits of her reputation.

Ransom reflected he might answer her that until five minutes ago he didn’t know she existed; but he remembered that this was not the way in which a Southern gentleman spoke to ladies, and he contented himself with saying that she must condone his Bœotian ignorance (he was fond of an elegant phrase); that he lived in a part of the country where they didn’t think much about Europe, and that he had always supposed she was domiciled in New York. This last remark he made at a venture, for he had, naturally, not devoted any supposition whatever to Mrs. Luna. His dishonesty, however, only exposed him the more.

“If you thought I lived in New York, why in the world didn’t you come and see me?” the lady inquired.

“Well, you see, I don’t go out much, except to the courts.”

“Do you mean the law-courts? Every one has got some profession over here! Are you very ambitious? You look as if you were.”

“Yes, very,” Basil Ransom replied, with a smile, and the curious feminine softness with which Southern gentlemen enunciate that adverb.

Mrs. Luna explained that she had been living in Europe for several years — ever since her husband died — but had come home a month before, come home with her little boy, the only thing she had in the world, and was paying a visit to her sister, who, of course, was the nearest thing after the child. “But it isn’t the same,” she said. “Olive and I disagree so much.”

“While you and your little boy don’t,” the young man remarked.

“Oh no, I never differ from Newton!” And Mrs. Luna added that now she was back she didn’t know what she should do. That was the worst of coming back; it was like being born again, at one’s age — one had to begin life afresh. One didn’t even know what one had come back for. There were

people who wanted one to spend the winter in Boston; but she couldn't stand that—she knew, at least, what she had not come back for. Perhaps she should take a house in Washington; did he ever hear of that little place? They had invented it while she was away. Besides, Olive didn't want her in Boston, and didn't go through the form of saying so. That was one comfort with Olive; she never went through any forms.

Basil Ransom had got up just as Mrs. Luna made this last declaration; for a young lady had glided into the room, who stopped short as it fell upon her ears. She stood there looking, consciously and rather seriously, at Mr. Ransom; a smile of exceeding faintness played about her lips—it was just perceptible enough to light up the native gravity of her face. It might have been likened to a thin ray of moonlight resting upon the wall of a prison.

“If that were true,” she said, “I shouldn't tell you that I am very sorry to have kept you waiting.”

Her voice was low and agreeable—a cultivated voice—and she extended a slender white hand to her visitor, who remarked with some solemnity (he felt a certain guilt of participation in Mrs. Luna's indiscretion) that he was intensely happy to make her acquaintance. He observed that Miss Chancellor's hand was at once cold and limp; she merely placed it in his, without exerting the smallest pressure. Mrs. Luna explained to her sister that her freedom of speech was caused by his being a relation—though, indeed, he didn't seem to know much about them. She didn't believe he had ever heard of her, Mrs. Luna, though he pretended, with his Southern chivalry, that he had. She must be off to her dinner now, she saw the carriage was there, and in her absence Olive might give any version of her she chose.

“I have told him you are a radical, and you may tell him, if you like, that I am a painted Jezebel. Try to reform him; a person from Mississippi is sure to be all wrong. I shall be back very late; we are going to a theatre-party; that's why we dine so early. Good-bye, Mr. Ransom,” Mrs. Luna continued, gathering up the feathery white shawl which added to the volume of her fairness. “I hope you are going to stay a little, so that you may judge us for yourself. I should like you to see Newton, too; he is a noble little nature, and I want some advice about him. You only stay to-morrow? Why, what's the use of that? Well, mind you come and see me in New York; I shall be sure to be part of the winter there. I shall send you a card; I won't let you off. Don't come out; my sister has the first claim. Olive, why don't you take him

to your female convention?” Mrs. Luna’s familiarity extended even to her sister; she remarked to Miss Chancellor that she looked as if she were got up for a sea-voyage. “I am glad I haven’t opinions that prevent my dressing in the evening!” she declared from the doorway. “The amount of thought they give to their clothing, the people who are afraid of looking frivolous!”