

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-01143-4 — The Princess Casamassima  
Henry James , Edited by Adrian Poole  
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## Book First

### I

“Oh yes, I daresay I can find the child, if you would like to see him,” Miss Pynsent<sup>1</sup> said; she had a fluttering wish to assent to every suggestion made by her visitor, whom she regarded as a high and rather terrible personage. To look for the little boy she came out of her small parlour, which she had been ashamed to exhibit in so untidy a state, with paper “patterns” lying about on the furniture and snippings of stuff scattered over the carpet—she came out of this somewhat stuffy sanctuary, dedicated at once to social intercourse and to the ingenious art to which her life had been devoted, and, opening the house door, turned her eyes up and down the little street. It would presently be tea-time,<sup>2</sup> and she knew that at that solemn hour Hyacinth narrowed the circle of his wanderings. She was anxious and impatient, and in a fever of excitement and complacency, not wanting to keep Mrs. Bowerbank waiting, though she sat there, heavily and consideringly, as if she meant to stay; and wondering not a little whether the object of her quest would have a dirty face. Mrs. Bowerbank had intimated so definitely that she thought it remarkable on Miss Pynsent’s part to have taken care of him gratuitously for so many years, that the humble dressmaker, whose imagination took flights about every one but herself, and who had never been conscious of an exemplary benevolence, suddenly aspired to appear, throughout, as devoted to the child as she had struck her solemn, substantial guest as being, and felt how much she should like him to come in fresh and frank, and looking as pretty as he sometimes did. Miss Pynsent, who blinked confusedly as she surveyed the outer prospect, was very much flushed, partly with the agitation of what Mrs. Bowerbank had told her, and partly because, when she offered that lady a drop of something refreshing, at the end of so long an expedition, she had said she couldn’t think of touching anything unless Miss Pynsent would keep her company. The cheffonier<sup>3</sup> (as Amanda was always careful to call it), beside the fireplace, yielded up a small bottle which had formerly contained eau-de-cologne and which now exhibited half a pint of a rich gold-coloured liquid. Miss Pynsent was very delicate; she lived on tea and watercress, and she kept the little bottle in the cheffonier only for great emergencies. She didn’t like hot brandy and water, with a lump or two

THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA

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of sugar, but she partook of half a tumbler on the present occasion, which was of a highly exceptional kind. At this time of day the boy was often planted in front of the little sweet-shop on the other side of the street, an establishment where periodical literature, as well as tough toffy and hard lollipops, was dispensed, and where song-books and pictorial sheets were attractively exhibited in the small-paned, dirty window. He used to stand there for half an hour at a time, spelling out the first page of the romances in the *Family Herald* and the *London Journal*,<sup>4</sup> and admiring the obligatory illustration in which the noble characters (they were always of the highest birth) were presented to the carnal eye. When he had a penny he spent only a fraction of it on stale sugar-candy; with the remaining halfpenny he always bought a ballad, with a vivid woodcut at the top.<sup>5</sup> Now, however, he was not at his post of contemplation; nor was he visible anywhere to Miss Pynsent's impatient glance.

"Millicent Henning, tell me quickly, have you seen my child?" These words were addressed by Miss Pynsent to a little girl who sat on the doorstep of the adjacent house, nursing a dingy doll, and who had an extraordinary luxuriance of dark brown hair, surmounted by a torn straw hat. Miss Pynsent pronounced her name Enning.<sup>6</sup>

The child looked up from her dandling and patting, and after a stare of which the blankness was somewhat exaggerated, replied: "Law no, Miss Pynsent, I never see him."

"Aren't you always messing about with him, you naughty little girl?" the dressmaker returned, with sharpness. "Isn't he round the corner, playing marbles, or — or some jumping game?" Miss Pynsent went on, trying to be suggestive.

"I assure *you*, he never plays nothing," said Millicent Henning, with a mature manner which she bore out by adding, "And I don't know why I should be called naughty, neither."

"Well, if you want to be called good, please go and find him and tell him there's a lady here come on purpose to see him, this very instant." Miss Pynsent waited a moment, to see if her injunction would be obeyed, but she got no satisfaction beyond another gaze of deliberation, which made her feel that the child's perversity was as great as the beauty, somewhat soiled and dimmed, of her insolent little face. She turned back into the house, with an exclamation of despair, and as soon as she had disappeared Millicent Henning sprang erect and began to race down the street in the direction of another, which crossed

THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA

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it. I take no unfair advantage of the innocence of childhood in saying that the motive of this young lady's flight was not a desire to be agreeable to Miss Pynsent, but an extreme curiosity on the subject of the visitor who wanted to see Hyacinth Robinson.<sup>7</sup> She wished to participate, if only in imagination, in the interview that might take place, and she was moved also by a quick revival of friendly feeling for the boy, from whom she had parted only half an hour before with considerable asperity. She was not a very clinging little creature, and there was no one in her own domestic circle to whom she was much attached; but she liked to kiss Hyacinth when he didn't push her away and tell her she was tiresome. It was in this action and epithet he had indulged half an hour ago; but she had reflected rapidly (while she stared at Miss Pynsent) that this was the worst he had ever done. Millicent Henning was only eight years of age, but she knew there was worse in the world than that.

Mrs. Bowerbank, in a leisurely, roundabout way, wandered off to her sister, Mrs. Chipperfield, whom she had come into that part of the world to see, and the whole history of the dropsical tendencies<sup>8</sup> of whose husband, an undertaker with a business that had been a blessing because you could always count on it, she unfolded to Miss Pynsent between the sips of a second glass. She was a high-shouldered, towering woman, and suggested squareness as well as a pervasion of the upper air, so that Amanda reflected that she must be very difficult to fit, and had a sinking at the idea of the number of pins she would take. Her sister had nine children and she herself had seven, the eldest of whom she left in charge of the others when she went to her service. She was on duty at the prison only during the day; she had to be there at seven in the morning, but she got her evenings at home, quite regular and comfortable. Miss Pynsent thought it wonderful she could talk of comfort in such a life as that, but could easily imagine she should be glad to get away at night, for at that time the place must be much more terrible.

"And aren't you frightened of them — ever?" she inquired, looking up at her visitor with her little heated face.

Mrs. Bowerbank was very slow, and considered her so long before replying, that she felt herself to be, in an alarming degree, in the eye of the law; for who could be more closely connected with the administration of justice than a female turnkey, especially so big and majestic a one? "I expect they are more frightened of me," she replied at last; and it was an idea into which Miss Pynsent could easily enter.

THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA

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“And at night I suppose they rave, quite awful,” the little dressmaker suggested, feeling vaguely that prisons and madhouses<sup>9</sup> came very much to the same.

“Well, if they do, we hush ’em up,” Mrs. Bowerbank remarked, rather portentously; while Miss Pynsent fidgeted to the door again, without results, to see if the child had become visible. She observed to her guest that she couldn’t call it anything but contrary that he should not turn up, when he knew so well, most days in the week, when his tea was ready. To which Mrs. Bowerbank rejoined, fixing her companion again with the steady orb of justice, “And do he have his tea, that way, by himself, like a little gentleman?”

“Well, I try to give it to him tidy-like, at a suitable hour,” said Miss Pynsent, guiltily. “And there might be some who would say that, for the matter of that, he *is* a little gentleman,” she added, with an effort at mitigation which, as she immediately became conscious, only involved her more deeply.

“There are people silly enough to say anything. If it’s your parents that settle your station, the child hasn’t much to be thankful for,” Mrs. Bowerbank went on, in the manner of a woman accustomed to looking facts in the face.

Miss Pynsent was very timid, but she adored the aristocracy, and there were elements in the boy’s life which she was not prepared to sacrifice even to a person who represented such a possibility of grating bolts and clanking chains. “I suppose we oughtn’t to forget that his father was very high,” she suggested, appealingly, with her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

“His father? Who knows who *he* was? He doesn’t set up for having a father, does he?”

“But, surely, wasn’t it proved that Lord Frederick——?”

“My dear woman, nothing was proved except that she stabbed his lordship in the back with a very long knife, that he died of the blow, and that she got the full sentence. What does such a piece as that know about fathers? The less said about the poor child’s ancestors the better!”

This view of the case caused Miss Pynsent fairly to gasp, for it pushed over with a touch a certain tall imaginative structure which she had been piling up for years. Even as she heard it crash around her she couldn’t forbear the attempt to save at least some of the material. “Really——really,” she panted, “she never had to do with any one but the nobility!”

Mrs. Bowerbank surveyed her hostess with an expressionless eye. “My dear young lady, what does a respectable little body like you, that sits all day with

THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA

---

her needle and scissors, know about the doings of a wicked low foreigner that carries a knife? I was there when she came in, and I know to what she had sunk. Her conversation was choice, I assure you.”

“Oh, it’s very dreadful, and of course I know nothing in particular,” Miss Pynsent quavered. “But she wasn’t low when I worked at the same place with her, and she often told me she would do nothing for any one that wasn’t at the very top.”

“She might have talked to you of something that would have done you both more good,” Mrs. Bowerbank remarked, while the dressmaker felt rebuked in the past as well as in the present. “At the very top, poor thing! Well, she’s at the very bottom now. If she wasn’t low when she worked, it’s a pity she didn’t stick to her work; and as for pride of birth, that’s an article I recommend your young friend to leave to others. You had better believe what I say, because I’m a woman of the world.”

Indeed she was, as Miss Pynsent felt, to whom all this was very terrible, letting in the cold light of the penal system on a dear, dim little theory. She had cared for the child because maternity was in her nature, and this was the only manner in which fortune had put it in her path to become a mother. She had as few belongings as the baby, and it had seemed to her that he would add to her importance in the little world of Lomax Place<sup>10</sup> (if she kept it a secret how she came by him), quite in the proportion in which she should contribute to his maintenance. Her weakness and loneliness went out to his, and in the course of time this united desolation was peopled by the dressmaker’s romantic mind with a hundred consoling evocations. The boy proved neither a dunce nor a reprobate; but what endeared him to her most was her conviction that he belonged, “by the left hand”,<sup>11</sup> as she had read in a novel, to an ancient and exalted race, the list of whose representatives and the record of whose alliances she had once (when she took home some work and was made to wait, alone, in a lady’s boudoir) had the opportunity of reading in a fat red book,<sup>12</sup> eagerly and tremblingly consulted. She bent her head before Mrs. Bowerbank’s overwhelming logic, but she felt in her heart that she shouldn’t give the child up for all that, that she believed in him still, and that she recognised, as distinctly as she revered, the quality of her betters. To believe in Hyacinth, for Miss Pynsent, was to believe that he *was* the son of the extremely immoral Lord Frederick. She had, from his earliest age, made him feel that there was a grandeur in his past, and as Mrs. Bowerbank would be sure not to approve of such aberrations Miss Pynsent prayed she might not

THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA

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question her on that part of the business. It was not that, when it was necessary, the little dressmaker had any scruple about using the arts of prevarication; she was a kind and innocent creature, but she told fibs as freely as she invented trimmings. She had, however, not yet been questioned by an emissary of the law, and her heart beat faster when Mrs. Bowerbank said to her, in deep tones, with an effect of abruptness, "And pray, Miss Pynsent, does the child know it?"

"Know about Lord Frederick?" Miss Pynsent palpitated.

"Bother Lord Frederick! Know about his mother."

"Oh, I can't say that. I have never told him."

"But has any one else told him?"

To this inquiry Miss Pynsent's answer was more prompt and more proud; it was with an agreeable sense of having conducted herself with extraordinary wisdom and propriety that she replied, "How could any one know? I have never breathed it to a creature!"

Mrs. Bowerbank gave utterance to no commendation; she only put down her empty glass and wiped her large mouth with much thoroughness and deliberation. Then she said, as if it were as cheerful an idea as, in the premises, she was capable of expressing, "Ah, well, there'll be plenty, later on, to give him all information!"

"I pray God he may live and die without knowing it!" Miss Pynsent cried, with eagerness.

Her companion gazed at her with a kind of professional patience. "You don't keep your ideas together. How can he go to her, then, if he's never to know?"

"Oh, did you mean she would tell him?" Miss Pynsent responded, plaintively.

"Tell him! He won't need to be told, once she gets hold of him and gives him — what she told me."

"What she told you?" Miss Pynsent repeated, open-eyed.

"The kiss her lips have been famished for, for years."

"Ah, poor desolate woman!" the little dressmaker murmured, with her pity gushing up again. "Of course he'll see she's fond of him," she pursued, simply. Then she added, with an inspiration more brilliant, "We might tell him she's his aunt!"

"You may tell him she's his grandmother, if you like. But it's all in the family."

"Yes, on that side," said Miss Pynsent, musingly and irrepressibly. "And will she speak French?" she inquired. "In that case he won't understand."

"Oh, a child will understand its own mother, whatever she speaks," Mrs. Bowerbank returned, declining to administer a superficial comfort. But

THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA

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she subjoined, opening the door for escape from a prospect which bristled with dangers, "Of course, it's just according to your own conscience. You needn't bring the child at all, unless you like. There's many a one that wouldn't. There's no compulsion."

"And would nothing be done to me, if I didn't?" poor Miss Pynsent asked, unable to rid herself of the impression that it was somehow the arm of the law that was stretched out to touch her.

"The only thing that could happen to you would be that *he* might throw it up against you later," the lady from the prison observed, with a gloomy impartiality.

"Yes, indeed, if he were to know that I had kept him back."

"Oh, he'd be sure to know, one of these days. We see a great deal of that — the way things come out," said Mrs. Bowerbank, whose view of life seemed to abound in cheerless contingencies. "You must remember that it is her dying wish, and that you may have it on your conscience."

"That's a thing I *never* could abide!" the little dressmaker exclaimed, with great emphasis and a visible shiver; after which she picked up various scattered remnants of muslin and cut paper and began to roll them together with a desperate and mechanical haste. "It's quite awful, to know what to do — if you are very sure she *is* dying."

"Do you mean she's shamming? we have plenty of that — but we know how to treat 'em."

"Lord, I suppose so," murmured Miss Pynsent; while her visitor went on to say that the unfortunate person on whose behalf she had undertaken this solemn pilgrimage might live a week and might live a fortnight, but if she lived a month, would violate (as Mrs. Bowerbank might express herself) every established law of nature, being reduced to skin and bone, with nothing left of her but the main desire to see her child.

"If you're afraid of her talking, it isn't much she'd be able to say. And we shouldn't allow you more than about eight minutes," Mrs. Bowerbank pursued, in a tone that seemed to refer itself to an iron discipline.

"I'm sure I shouldn't want more; that would be enough to last me many a year," said Miss Pynsent, accommodatingly. And then she added, with another illumination, "Don't you think he might throw it up against me that I *did* take him? People might tell him about her in later years; but if he hadn't seen her he wouldn't be obliged to believe them."

THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA

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Mrs. Bowerbank considered this a moment, as if it were rather a super-subtle<sup>13</sup> argument, and then answered, quite in the spirit of her official pessimism, "There is one thing you may be sure of: whatever you decide to do, as soon as ever he grows up he will make you wish you had done the opposite." Mrs. Bowerbank called it *opposite*.

"Oh, dear, then, I'm glad it will be a long time."

"It will be ever so long, if once he gets it into his head! At any rate, you must do as you think best. Only, if you come, you mustn't come when it's all over."

"It's too impossible to decide."

"It is, indeed," said Mrs. Bowerbank, with superior consistency. And she seemed more placidly grim than ever when she remarked, gathering up her loosened shawl, that she was much obliged to Miss Pynsent for her civility, and had been quite freshened up: her visit had so completely deprived her hostess of that sort of calm. Miss Pynsent gave the fullest expression to her perplexity in the supreme exclamation:

"If you could only wait and see the child, I'm sure it would help you to judge!"

"My dear woman, I don't want to judge—it's none of our business!" Mrs. Bowerbank exclaimed; and she had no sooner uttered the words than the door of the room creaked open and a small boy stood there gazing at her. Her eyes rested on him a moment, and then, most unexpectedly, she gave an inconsequent cry. "Is that the child? Oh, Lord o' mercy, don't take *him!*"

"Now *ain't* he shrinking and sensitive?" demanded Miss Pynsent, who had pounced upon him, and, holding him an instant at arm's length, appealed eagerly to her visitor. "Ain't he delicate and high-bred, and wouldn't he be thrown into a state?" Delicate as he might be the little dressmaker shook him smartly for his naughtiness in being out of the way when he was wanted, and brought him to the big, square-faced, deep-voiced lady who took up, as it were, all that side of the room. But Mrs. Bowerbank laid no hand upon him; she only dropped her gaze from a tremendous height, and her forbearance seemed a tribute to that fragility of constitution on which Miss Pynsent desired to insist, just as her continued gravity was an implication that this scrupulous woman might well not know what to do.

"Speak to the lady nicely, and tell her you are very sorry to have kept her waiting."

The child hesitated a moment, while he reciprocated Mrs. Bowerbank's inspection, and then he said, with a strange, cool, conscious indifference (Miss