

*Penguin Popular Classics*

# THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

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HENRY JAMES



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BY HENRY JAMES

HENRY JAMES (1843-1916). American novelist, playwright, essayist and critic, he remains one of the most influential literary figures writing at the turn of the century.

Born in New York of both Irish and Scottish ancestry, Henry James was the second of the five children of Sir Henry James, a prominent theologian and philosopher of the day. His father held strong views on how children should be brought up and Henry James, along with his brothers, received a remarkably cosmopolitan education. Tutored privately at home until 1855, he was then educated intermittently in Geneva, Paris, Boulogne and Bonn. In 1862 he attended Harvard Law School, but left after only a year. Encouraged by his friend and fellow writer William Dean Howells he started to write articles and reviews for various journals. In 1869, finding America hostile towards creative talent and attracted by a Europe steeped in history, he left the United States for his first extended trip abroad. Travelling to London, Paris and Rome, James saw himself as a detached spectator of life and his early published works recount his experiences. His first novel, *Roderick Hudson* (1875), is concerned with the failure of an American sculptor in Rome, and his novels *The American* (1877) and *The Europeans* (1878) are centred on the differences between the two continents. Attracted by the intellectual and social hierarchy that Paris seemed to offer, James lived there for one year. While in Paris he met Flaubert and Turgenev, but never really mingled with them. He later described Paris as forever 'holding one at arm's length, and condemning one to a meagre scraping of the surface'. In 1876 he settled in London, which he made his home for the next twenty years. Over the next decade James wrote some of his best work, including the popular novella *Daisy Miller* (1879), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1882), *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). As well as writing twenty novels and nearly one hundred short stories, James also wrote several plays, but his success as a dramatist was limited. Abandoning the dramatic form, after being booed

at the opening of his play *Guy Domville* in 1895, he returned to fiction, and his later works include *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Awkward Age* (1899), *The Wings of A Dove*, (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). James had an extraordinary grasp of the English language, which is reflected in his highly stylistic writing – Thomas Hardy called it ‘a ponderously warm manner of saying nothing in infinite sentences’. James remained in London until the late 1890s, when he moved to Lamb House in Rye, Sussex. Popular among London’s literati, he was also much admired by younger writers. His allegiance to all things English was very strong and he became a naturalized citizen in 1915, after the outbreak of the First World War. He was later awarded the Order of Merit. Henry James died in 1916.

*The Portrait of a Lady*, published in 1881, is one of James’s most popular and exciting novels. The story is centred on Isabel Archer, the ‘lady’ in the title and an American in Europe. She is surrounded by possible suitors, but her final choice of husband turns out to be the most dangerous.

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# 1

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UNDER certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not—some people of course never do—the situation is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime. The implements of the little feast had been disposed upon the lawn of an old English country-house, in what I should call the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon. Part of the afternoon had waned, but much of it was left, and what was left was of the finest and rarest quality. Real dusk would not arrive for many hours; but the flood of summer light had begun to ebb, the air had grown mellow, the shadows were long upon the smooth, dense turf. They lengthened slowly, however, and the scene expressed that sense of leisure still to come which is perhaps the chief source of one's enjoyment of such a scene at such an hour. From five o'clock to eight is on certain occasions a little eternity; but on such an occasion as this the interval could be only an eternity of pleasure. The persons concerned in it were taking their pleasure quietly, and they were not of the sex which is supposed to furnish the regular votaries of the ceremony I have mentioned. The shadows on the perfect lawn were straight and angular; they were the shadows of an old man sitting in a deep wicker-chair near the low table on which the tea had been served, and of two younger men strolling to and fro, in desultory talk, in front of him. The old man had his cup in his hand; it was an unusually large cup, of a brilliant pattern from the rest of the set, and painted in brilliant colours. He disposed of its contents with much circumspection, holding it for a long time close to his chin, with his face turned to the house. His companions had either finished their tea or were indifferent to their privilege; they smoked cigarettes as they contin-

ued to stroll. One of them, from time to time, as he passed, looked with a certain attention at the elder man, who, unconscious of observation, rested his eyes upon the rich red front of his dwelling. The house that rose beyond the lawn was a structure to repay such consideration, and was the most characteristic object in the peculiarly English picture I have attempted to sketch.

It stood upon a low hill, above the river—the river being the Thames, at some forty miles from London. A long gabled front of red brick, with the complexion of which time and the weather had played all sorts of picturesque tricks, only, however, to improve and refine it, presented itself to the lawn, with its patches of ivy, its clustered chimneys, its windows smothered in creepers. The house had a name and a history; the old gentleman taking his tea would have been delighted to tell you these things: how it had been built under Edward the Sixth, had offered a night's hospitality to the great Elizabeth (whose august person had extended itself upon a huge, magnificent, and terribly angular bed which still formed the principal honour of the sleeping apartments), had been a good deal bruised and defaced in Cromwell's wars, and then, under the Restoration, repaired and much enlarged; and how, finally, after having been remodelled and disfigured in the eighteenth century, it had passed into the careful keeping of a shrewd American banker, who had bought it originally because (owing to circumstances too complicated to set forth) it was offered at a great bargain; bought it with much grumbling at its ugliness, its antiquity, its incommodity, and who now, at the end of twenty years, had become conscious of a real aesthetic passion for it, so that he knew all its points, and would tell you just where to stand to see them in combination, and just the hour when the shadows of its various protuberances—which fell so softly upon the warm, weary brickwork—were of the right measure. Besides this, as I have said, he could have counted off most of the successive owners and occupants, several of whom were known to general fame; doing so, however, with an undemonstrative conviction that the latest phase of its destiny was not the least honourable. The front of the house, overlooking that portion of the lawn with which we are concerned, was not the entrance-front; this was in quite another quarter. Privacy here reigned supreme, and the wide carpet of turf that covered the level hill-top seemed but the extension of a luxurious interior. The great still oaks and beeches

flung down a shade as dense as that of velvet curtains; and the place was furnished, like a room, with cushioned seats, with rich-coloured rugs, with the books and papers that lay upon the grass. The river was at some distance; where the ground began to slope, the lawn, properly speaking, ceased. But it was none the less a charming walk down to the water.

The old gentleman at the tea-table, who had come from America thirty years before, had brought with him, at the top of his baggage, his American physiognomy; and he had not only brought it with him, but he had kept it in the best order, so that, if necessary, he might have taken it back to his own country with perfect confidence. But at present, obviously, he was not likely to displace himself; his journeys were over, and he was taking the rest that precedes the great rest. He had a narrow, clean-shaven face, with evenly distributed features, and an expression of placid acuteness. It was evidently a face in which the range of expression was not large; so that the air of contented shrewdness was all the more of a merit. It seemed to tell that he had been successful in life, but it seemed to tell also that his success had not been exclusive and invidious, but had had much of the inoffensiveness of failure. He had certainly had a great experience of men; but there was an almost rustic simplicity in the faint smile that played upon his lean, spacious cheek, and lighted up his humorous eye, as he at last slowly and carefully deposited his big tea-cup upon the table. He was neatly dressed, in well-brushed black; but a shawl was folded upon his knees, and his feet were encased in thick, embroidered slippers. A beautiful collie dog lay upon the grass near his chair, watching the master's face almost as tenderly as the master contemplated the still more magisterial physiognomy of the house; and a little bristling, bustling terrier bestowed a desultory attendance upon the other gentlemen.

One of these was a remarkably well-made man of five-and-thirty, with a face as English as that of the old gentleman I have just sketched was something else; a noticeably handsome face, fresh-coloured, fair, and frank, with firm, straight features, a lively grey eye, and the rich adornment of a chestnut beard. This person had a certain fortunate, brilliant exceptional look—the air of a happy temperament fertilized by a high civilization—which would have made almost any observer envy him at a venture. He was booted and spurred, as if he had dismounted from a long ride; he wore a white hat, which looked too large for him; he held his two hands be-



hind him, and in one of them—a large, white, well-shaped fist—was crumpled a pair of soiled dog-skin gloves.

His companion, measuring the length of the lawn beside him, was a person of quite another pattern, who, although he might have excited grave curiosity, would not, like the other, have provoked you to wish yourself, almost blindly, in his place. Tall, lean, loosely and feebly put together, he had an ugly, sickly, witty, charming face—furnished, but by no means decorated, with a straggling moustache and whisker. He looked clever and ill—a combination by no means felicitous; and he wore a brown velvet jacket. He carried his hands in his pockets, and there was something in the way he did it that showed the habit was inveterate. His gait had a shambling, wandering quality; he was not very firm on his legs. As I have said, whenever he passed the old man in the chair, he rested his eyes upon him; and at this moment, with their faces brought into relation, you would easily have seen that they were father and son.

The father caught his son's eye at last, and gave him a mild, responsible smile.

"I am getting on very well," he said.

"Have you drunk your tea?" asked the son.

"Yes, and enjoyed it."

"Shall I give you some more?"

The old man considered, placidly.

"Well, I guess I will wait and see."

He had, in speaking, the American tone.

"Are you cold?" his son inquired.

The father slowly rubbed his legs.

"Well, I don't know. I can't tell till I feel."

"Perhaps some one might feel for you," said the younger man, laughing.

"Oh, I hope some one will always feel for me! Don't you feel for me, Lord Warburton?"

"Oh yes, immensely," said the gentleman addressed as Lord Warburton, promptly. "I am bound to say you look wonderfully comfortable."

"Well, I suppose I am, in most respects." And the old man looked down at his green shawl, and smoothed it over his knees. "The fact is, I have been comfortable so many years that I suppose I have got so used to it I don't know it."

"Yes, that's the bore of comfort," said Lord Warburton. "We only know when we are uncomfortable."

"It strikes me that we are rather particular," said his companion.

"Oh yes, there is no doubt we're particular," Lord Warburton murmured.

And then the three men remained silent awhile; the two younger ones standing looking down at the other, who presently asked for more tea.

"I should think you would be very unhappy with that shawl," said Lord Warburton, while his companion filled the old man's cup again.

"Oh no, he must have the shawl!" cried the gentleman in the velvet coat. "Don't put such ideas as that into his head."

"It belongs to my wife," said the old man, simply.

"Oh, if it's for sentimental reasons—" And Lord Warburton made a gesture of apology.

"I suppose I must give it to her when she comes," the old man went on.

"You will please to do nothing of the kind. You will keep it to cover your poor old legs."

"Well, you mustn't abuse my legs," said the old man. "I guess they are as good as yours."

"Oh, you are perfectly free to abuse mine," his son replied, giving him his tea.

"Well, we are two lame ducks; I don't think there is much difference."

"I am much obliged to you for calling me a duck. How is your tea?"

"Well, it's rather hot."

"That's intended to be a merit."

"Ah, there's a great deal of merit," murmured the old man, kindly. "He's a very good nurse, Lord Warburton."

"Isn't he a bit clumsy?" asked his lordship.

"Oh no, he's not clumsy—considering that he's an invalid himself. He's a very good nurse—for a sick-nurse. I call him my sick-nurse because he's sick himself."

"Oh, come, daddy!" the ugly young man exclaimed.

"Well, you are; I wish you weren't. But I suppose you can't help it."

"I might try: that's an idea," said the young man.

"Were you ever sick, Lord Warburton?" his father asked.

Lord Warburton considered a moment.

"Yes, sir, once, in the Persian Gulf."

"He is making light of you, daddy," said the other young man. "That's a sort of joke."

"Well, there seem to be so many sorts now," daddy replied, serenely. "You don't look as if you had been sick, anyway, Lord Warburton."

"He is sick of life; he was just telling me so; going on fearfully about it," said Lord Warburton's friend.

"Is that true, sir?" asked the old man gravely.

"If it is, your son gave me no consolation. He's a wretched fellow to talk to—a regular cynic. He doesn't seem to believe anything."

"That's another sort of joke," said the person accused of cynicism.

"It's because his health is so poor," his father explained to Lord Warburton. "It affects his mind, and colours his way of looking at things; he seems to feel as if he had never had a chance. But it's almost entirely theoretical, you know; it doesn't seem to affect his spirits. I have hardly ever seen him when he wasn't cheerful—about as he is at present. He often cheers me up."

The young man so described looked at Lord Warburton and laughed.

"Is it a glowing eulogy or an accusation of levity? Should you like me to carry out my theories, daddy?"

"By Jove, we should see some queer things!" cried Lord Warburton.

"I hope you haven't taken up that sort of tone," said the old man.

"Warburton's tone is worse than mine; he pretends to be bored. I am not in the least bored; I find life only too interesting."

"Ah, *too* interesting; you shouldn't allow it to be that, you know!"

"I am never bored when I come here," said Lord Warburton. "One gets such uncommonly good talk."

"Is that another sort of joke?" asked the old man. "You have no excuse for being bored anywhere. When I was your age, I had never heard of such a thing."

"You must have developed very late."

"No, I developed very quick; that was just the reason. When I was twenty years old, I was very highly developed indeed. I was working, tooth and nail. You wouldn't be bored if you had something to do; but all you young men are too idle. You think too much of your pleasure. You are too fastidious, and too indolent, and too rich."

"Oh, I say," cried Lord Warburton, "you're hardly the person to accuse a fellow-creature of being too rich!"

"Do you mean because I am a banker?" asked the old man.

"Because of that, if you like; and because you are so ridiculously wealthy."

"He isn't very rich," said the other young man, indicating his father. "He has given away an immense deal of money."

"Well, I suppose it was his own," said Lord Warburton; "and in that case could there be a better proof of wealth? Let not a public benefactor talk of one's being too fond of pleasure."

"Daddy is very fond of pleasure—of other people's."

The old man shook his head.

"I don't pretend to have contributed anything to the amusement of my contemporaries."

"My dear father, you are too modest!"

"That's a kind of joke, sir," said Lord Warburton.

"You young men have too many jokes. When there are no jokes, you have nothing left."

"Fortunately there are always more jokes," the ugly young man remarked.

"I don't believe it—I believe things are getting more serious. You young men will find that out."

"The increasing seriousness of things—that is the great opportunity of jokes."

"They will have to be grim jokes," said the old man. "I am convinced there will be great changes; and not all for the better."

"I quite agree with you, sir," Lord Warburton declared. "I am very sure there will be great changes, and that all sorts of queer things will happen. That's why I find so much difficulty in applying your advice; you know you told me the other day that I ought to 'take hold' of something. One hesitates to take hold of a thing that may the next moment be knocked sky-high."

"You ought to take hold of a pretty woman," said his companion. "He is trying hard to fall in love," he added, by way of explanation, to his father.

"The pretty women themselves may be sent flying!" Lord Warburton exclaimed.

"No, no, they will be firm," the old man rejoined; "they will not be affected by the social and political changes I just referred to."

"You mean they won't be abolished? Very well, then, I will lay hands on one as soon as possible, and tie her round my neck as a life-preserver."

"The ladies will save us," said the old man; "that is, the best of them will—for I make a difference between them. Make up to a good one and marry her, and your life will become much more interesting."

A momentary silence marked perhaps on the part of his auditors a sense of the magnanimity of this speech, for it was a secret neither for his son nor for his visitor that his own experiment in matrimony had not been a happy one. As he said, however, he made a difference; and these words may have been intended as a confession of personal error; though of course it was not in place for either of his companions to remark that apparently the lady of his choice had not been one of the best.

"If I marry an interesting woman, I shall be interested: is that what you say?" Lord Warburton asked. "I am not at all keen about marrying—your son misrepresented me; but there is no knowing what an interesting woman might do with me."

"I should like to see your idea of an interesting woman," said his friend.

"My dear fellow, you can't see ideas—especially such ethereal ones as mine. If I could see it myself—that would be a great step in advance."

"Well, you may fall in love with whomsoever you please; but you must not fall in love with my niece," said the old man.

His son broke into a laugh. "He will think you mean that as a provocation! My dear father, you have lived with the English for thirty years, and you have picked up a good many of the things they say. But you have never learned the things they don't say!"

"I say what I please," the old man declared, with all his serenity.

"I haven't the honour of knowing your niece," Lord Warburton said. "I think it is the first time I have heard of her."

"She is a niece of my wife's; Mrs. Touchett brings her to England."

Then young Mr. Touchett explained. "My mother, you know, has been spending the winter in America, and we are

expecting her back. She writes that she has discovered a niece, and that she has invited her to come with her."

"I see—very kind of her," said Lord Warburton. "Is the young lady interesting?"

"We hardly know more about her than you; my mother has not gone into details. She chiefly communicates with us by means of telegrams, and her telegrams are rather inscrutable. They say women don't know how to write them but my mother has thoroughly mastered the art of condensation. 'Tired America, hot weather awful, return England with niece, first steamer, decent cabin.' That's the sort of message we get from her—that was the last that came. But there had been another before, which I think contained the first mention of the niece. 'Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk, address here. Taken sister's girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent.' Over that my father and I have scarcely stopped puzzling; it seems to admit of so many interpretations."

"There is one thing very clear in it," said the old man; "she has given the hotel-clerk a dressing."

"I am not sure even of that, since he has driven her from the field. We thought at first that the sister mentioned might be the sister of the clerk; but the subsequent mention of a niece seems to prove that the allusion is to one of my aunts. Then there was a question as to whose the two other sisters were; they are probably two of my late aunt's daughters. But who is 'quite independent,' and in what sense is the term used?—that point is not yet settled. Does the expression apply more particularly to the young lady my mother has adopted, or does it characterize her sisters equally?—and is it used in a moral or in a financial sense? Does it mean that they have been left well off, or that they wish to be under no obligations? Or does it simply mean that they are fond of their own way?"

"Whatever else it means, it is pretty sure to mean that," Mr. Touchett remarked.

"You will see for yourself," said Lord Warburton. "When does Mrs. Touchett arrive?"

"We are quite in the dark; as soon as she can find a decent cabin. She may be waiting for it yet; on the other hand, she may already have disembarked in England."

"In that case she would probably have telegraphed to you."

"She never telegraphs when you would expect it—only

when you don't," said the old man. "She likes to drop on me suddenly; she thinks she will find me doing something wrong. She has never done so yet, but she is not discouraged."

"It's her independence," her son explained, more favourably. "Whatever that of those young ladies may be, her own is a match for it. She likes to do everything for herself, and has no belief in any one's power to help her. She thinks me of no more use than a postage stamp without gum, and she would never forgive me if I should presume to go to Liverpool to meet her."

"Will you at least let me know when your cousin arrives?" Lord Warburton asked.

"Only on the condition I have mentioned—that you don't fall in love with her!" Mr. Touchett declared.

"That strikes me as hard. Don't you think me good enough?"

"I think you too good—because I shouldn't like her to marry you. She hasn't come here to look for a husband, I hope; so many young ladies are doing that, as if there were no good ones at home. Then she is probably engaged; American girls are usually engaged, I believe. Moreover, I am not sure, after all, that you would be a good husband."

"Very likely she is engaged; I have known a good many American girls, and they always were; but I could never see that it made any difference, upon my word! As for my being a good husband, I am not sure of that either; one can but try!"

"Try as much as you please, but don't try on my niece," said the old man, whose opposition to the idea was broadly humorous.

"Ah, well," said Lord Warburton, with a humour broader still, "perhaps, after all, she is not worth trying on!"

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WHILE this exchange of pleasantries took place between the two, Ralph Touchett wandered away a little, with his usual slouching gait, his hands in his pockets, and his little rowdyish terrier at his heels. His face was turned towards the

house, but his eyes were bent, musingly, upon the lawn; so that he had been an object of observation to a person who had just made her appearance in the doorway of the dwelling for some moments before he perceived her. His attention was called to her by the conduct of his dog, who had suddenly darted forward, with a little volley of shrill barks, in which the note of welcome, however, was more sensible than that of defiance. The person in question was a young lady, who seemed immediately to interpret the greeting of the little terrier. He advanced with great rapidity, and stood at her feet, looking up and barking hard; whereupon, without hesitation, she stooped and caught him in her hands, holding him face to face while he continued his joyous demonstration. His master now had had time to follow and to see that Bunchie's new friend was a tall girl in a black dress, who at first sight looked pretty. She was bare-headed, as if she were staying in the house—a fact which conveyed perplexity to the son of its master, conscious of that immunity from visitors which had for some time been rendered necessary by the latter's ill health. Meantime the two other gentlemen had also taken note of the new-comer.

"Dear me, who is that strange woman?" Mr. Touchett had asked.

"Perhaps it is Mrs. Touchett's niece—the independent young lady," Lord Warburton suggested. "I think she must be, from the way she handles the dog."

The collie, too, had now allowed his attention to be diverted, and he trotted toward the young lady in the doorway, slowly setting his tail in motion as he went.

"But where is my wife, then?" murmured the old man.

"I suppose the young lady has left her somewhere; that's a part of the independence."

The girl spoke to Ralph, smiling, while she still held up the terrier. "Is this your little dog, sir?"

"He was mine a moment ago; but you have suddenly acquired a remarkable air of property in him."

"Couldn't we share him?" asked the girl. "He's such a little darling."

Ralph looked at her a moment; she was unexpectedly pretty. "You may have him altogether," he said.

The young lady seemed to have a great deal of confidence, both in herself and in others; but this abrupt generosity made her blush. "I ought to tell you that I am probably your



cousin," she murmured, putting down the dog. "And here's another!" she added quickly, as the collie came up.

"Probably?" the young man exclaimed, laughing. "I supposed it was quite settled! Have you come with my mother?"

"Yes, half an hour ago."

"And has she deposited you and departed again?"

"No, she went straight to her room; and she told me that, if I should see you, I was to say to you that you must come to her there at a quarter to seven."

The young man looked at his watch. "Thank you very much; I shall be punctual." And then he looked at his cousin. "You are very welcome here," he went on. "I am delighted to see you."

She was looking at everything, with an eye that denoted quick perception—at her companion, at the two dogs, at the two gentlemen under the trees, at the beautiful scene that surrounded her. "I have never seen anything so lovely as this place," she said. "I have been all over the house; it's too enchanting."

"I am sorry you should have been here so long without our knowing it."

"Your mother told me that in England people arrived very quietly; so I thought it was all right. Is one of those gentlemen your father?"

"Yes, the elder one—the one sitting down," said Ralph.

The young girl gave a laugh. "I don't suppose it's the other. Who is the other?"

"He is a friend of ours—Lord Warburton."

"Oh, I hoped there would be a lord; it's just like a novel!" And then—"Oh you adorable creature!" she suddenly cried, stooping down and picking up the little terrier again.

She remained standing where they had met, making no offer to advance or to speak to Mr. Touchett, and while she lingered in the doorway, slim and charming, her interlocutor wondered whether she expected the old man to come and pay her his respects. American girls were used to a great deal of deference, and it had been intimated that this one had a high spirit. Indeed, Ralph could see that in her face.

"Won't you come and make acquaintance with my father?" he nevertheless ventured to ask. "He is old and infirm—he doesn't leave his chair."

"Ah, poor man, I am very sorry!" the girl exclaimed, immediately moving forward. "I got the impression from your mother that he was rather—rather strong."