

**THE PORTRAIT OF
A LADY VOL. III**

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The portrait of a lady vol. III by Henry James

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HENRY JAMES

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VOL. III.

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BY

HENRY JAMES, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "THE EUROPEANS," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY.

I.

ISABEL had not seen much of Madame Merle since her marriage, this lady having indulged in frequent absences from Rome. At one time she had spent six months in England; at another she had passed a portion of a winter in Paris. She had made numerous visits to distant friends, and gave countenance to the idea that for the future she should be a less inveterate Roman than in the past. As she had been inveterate in the past only in the sense of constantly having an apartment in one of the sunniest niches of the Pincian—an apartment which often stood empty—this suggested a prospect of almost constant absence; a danger which Isabel at one period had been much inclined to deplore. Familiarity had modified in some degree her first impression of Madame Merle, but it had not essentially altered it; there was still a kind of wonder of admiration in it. Madame Merle was armed at all points; it was a pleasure to see a person so completely equipped for the social battle. She carried her flag discreetly, but her weapons were polished steel, and she used them with a skill which struck Isabel as more and more that of a veteran. She was never weary, never overcome

with disgust; she never appeared to need rest or consolation. She had her own ideas; she had of old exposed a great many of them to Isabel, who knew also that under an appearance of extreme self-control her highly-cultivated friend concealed a rich sensibility. But her will was mistress of her life; there was something brilliant in the way she kept going. It was as if she had learned the secret of it—as if the art of life were some clever trick that she had guessed. Isabel, as she herself grew older, became acquainted with revulsions, with disgust; there were days when the world looked black, and she asked herself with some peremptoriness what it was that she was pretending to live for. Her old habit had been to live by enthusiasm, to fall in love with suddenly-perceived possibilities, with the idea of a new attempt. As a young girl, she used to proceed from one little exaltation to the other; there were scarcely any dull places between. But Madame Merle had suppressed enthusiasm; she fell in love now-a-days with nothing; she lived entirely by reason, by wisdom. There were hours when Isabel would have given anything for lessons in this art; if Madame Merle had been near, she would have made an appeal to her. She had become aware more than before of the advantage of being like that—of having made one's self a firm surface, a sort of caselet of silver. But, as I say, it was not till the winter, during which we lately renewed acquaintance with our heroine, that Madame Merle made a continuous stay in Rome. Isabel now saw more of her than she had done since her marriage; but by this time Isabel's needs and inclinations had considerably changed. It was not at present to Madame Merle that she would have applied for instruction; she had lost the desire to know this lady's clever trick. If she had troubles she must keep them to herself, and if life was difficult it would not make it easier to

confess herself beaten. Madame Merle was doubtless of great use to herself, and an ornament to any circle; but was she—would she be—of use to others in periods of refined embarrassment? The best way to profit by Madame Merle—this indeed Isabel had always thought—was to imitate her; to be as firm and bright as she. She recognised no embarrassments, and Isabel, considering this fact, determined, for the fiftieth time, to brush aside her own. It seemed to her, too, on the renewal of an intercourse which had virtually been interrupted, that Madame Merle was changed—that she pushed to the extreme a certain rather artificial fear of being indiscreet. Ralph Touchett, we know, had been of the opinion that she was prone to exaggeration, to forcing the note—was apt, in the vulgar phrase, to overdo it. Isabel had never admitted this charge—had never, indeed, quite understood it; Madame Merle's conduct, to her perception, always bore the stamp of good taste, was always "quiet." But in this matter of not wishing to intrude upon the inner life of the Osmond family, it at last occurred to our heroine that she overdid it a little. That, of course, was not the best taste; that was rather violent. She remembered too much that Isabel was married; that she had now other interests; that though she, Madame Merle, had known Gilbert Osmond and his little Pansy very well, better almost than any one, she was after all not one of them. She was on her guard; she never spoke of their affairs till she was asked, even pressed—as when her opinion was wanted; she had a dread of seeming to meddle. Madame Merle was as candid as we know, and one day she candidly expressed this dread to Isabel.

"I must be on my guard," she said; "I might so easily, without suspecting it, offend you. You would be right to be offended, even if my intention should have been of the purest. I must

not forget that I knew your husband long before you did; I must not let that betray me. If you were a silly woman you might be jealous. You are not a silly woman; I know that perfectly. But neither am I; therefore I am determined not to get into trouble. A little harm is very soon done; a mistake is made before one knows it. Of course, if I had wished to make love to your husband, I had ten years to do it in, and nothing to prevent; so it isn't likely I shall begin to-day, when I am so much less attractive than I was. But if I were to annoy you by seeming to take a place that doesn't belong to me, you wouldn't make that reflection; you would simply say that I was forgetting certain differences. I am determined not to forget them. Of course a good friend isn't always thinking of that; one doesn't suspect one's friends of injustice. I don't suspect you, my dear, in the least; but I suspect human nature. Don't think I make myself uncomfortable; I am not always watching myself. I think I sufficiently prove it in talking to you as I do now. All I wish to say is, however, that if you were to be jealous—that is the form it would take—I should be sure to think it was a little my fault. It certainly wouldn't be your husband's."

Isabel had had three years to think over Mrs. Touchett's theory that Madame Merle had made Gilbert Osmond's marriage. We know how she had at first received it. Madame Merle might have made Gilbert Osmond's marriage, but she certainly had not made Isabel Archer's. That was the work of—Isabel scarcely knew what: of nature, of providence, of fortune, of the eternal mystery of things. It was true that her aunt's complaint had been not so much of Madame Merle's activity as of her duplicity; she had brought about the marriage and then she had denied her guilt. Such guilt would not have been great, to