

**THE PORTRAIT OF A  
LADY, IN THREE  
VOLUMES, VOL. II**

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The portrait of a lady, In three volumes, Vol. II by Henry James

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# THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

BY

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## THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY.

### I.

SOME fortnight after this incident Madame Merle drove up in a hansom cab to the house in Winchester Square. As she descended from her vehicle she observed, suspended between the dining-room windows, a large, neat, wooden tablet, on whose fresh black ground were inscribed in white paint the words—"This noble freehold mansion to be sold;" with the name of the agent to whom application should be made. "They certainly lose no time," said the visitor, as, after sounding the big brass knocker, she waited to be admitted; "it's a practical country!" And within the house, as she ascended to the drawing-room, she perceived numerous signs of abdication; pictures removed from the walls and placed upon sofas, windows undraped and floors laid bare. Mrs. Touchett presently received her, and intimated in a few words that condolences might be taken for granted.

"I know what you are going to say—he was a very good man. But I know it better than any one, because I gave him more chance to show it. In that I think I was a good wife." Mrs. Touchett added that at the end her husband apparently



recognised this fact. "He has treated me liberally," she said; "I won't say more liberally than I expected, because I didn't expect. You know that as a general thing I don't expect. But he chose, I presume, to recognise the fact that though I lived much abroad, and mingled—you may say freely—in foreign life, I never exhibited the smallest preference for any one else."

"For any one but yourself," Madame Merle mentally observed; but the reflection was perfectly inaudible.

"I never sacrificed my husband to another," Mrs. Touchett continued, with her stout curtness.

"Oh no," thought Madame Merle; "you never did anything for another!"

There was a certain cynicism in these mute comments which demands an explanation; the more so as they are not in accord either with the view—somewhat superficial perhaps—that we have hitherto enjoyed of Madame Merle's character, or with the literal facts of Mrs. Touchett's history; the more so, too, as Madame Merle had a well-founded conviction that her friend's last remark was not in the least to be construed as a side-thrust at herself. The truth is, that the moment she had crossed the threshold she received a subtle impression that Mr. Touchett's death had had consequences, and that these consequences had been profitable to a little circle of persons among whom she was not numbered. Of course it was an event which would naturally have consequences; her imagination had more than once rested upon this fact during her stay at Gardencourt. But it had been one thing to foresee it mentally, and it was another to behold it actually. The idea of a distribution of property—she would almost have said of spoils—just now pressed upon her senses and irritated her with a sense of exclusion. I am far from wishing to say that Madame Merle was one of the hungry

ones of the world ; but we have already perceived that she had desires which had never been satisfied. If she had been questioned, she would of course have admitted—with a most becoming smile—that she had not the faintest claim to a share in Mr. Touchett's relics. "There was never anything in the world between us," she would have said. "There was never that, poor man!"—with a fillip of her thumb and her third finger. I hasten to add, moreover, that if her private attitude at the present moment was somewhat incongruously invidious, she was very careful not to betray herself. She had, after all, as much sympathy for Mrs. Touchett's gains as for her losses.

"He has left me this house," the newly-made widow said ; "but of course I shall not live in it ; I have a much better house in Florence. The will was opened only three days since, but I have already offered the house for sale. I have also a share in the bank ; but I don't yet understand whether I am obliged to leave it there. If not, I shall certainly take it out. Ralph, of course, has Gardencourt ; but I am not sure that he will have means to keep up the place. He is of course left very well off, but his father has given away an immense deal of money ; there are bequests to a string of third cousins in Vermont. Ralph, however, is very fond of Gardencourt, and would be quite capable of living there—in summer—with a maid-of-all-work and a gardener's boy. There is one remarkable clause in my husband's will," Mrs. Touchett added. "He has left my niece a fortune."

"A fortune !" Madame Merle repeated, softly.

"Isabel steps into something like seventy thousand pounds."

Madame Merle's hands were clasped in her lap ; at this she raised them, still clasped, and held them a moment against her

bosom, while her eyes, a little dilated, fixed themselves on those of her friend. "Ah," she cried, "the clever creature!"

Mrs. Touchett gave her a quick look. "What do you mean by that?"

For an instant Madame Merle's colour rose, and she dropped her eyes. "It certainly is clever to achieve such results—without an effort!"

"There certainly was no effort; don't call it an achievement."

Madame Merle was rarely guilty of the awkwardness of retracting what she had said; her wisdom was shown rather in maintaining it and placing it in a favourable light. "My dear friend, Isabel would certainly not have had seventy thousand pounds left her if she had not been the most charming girl in the world. Her charm includes great cleverness."

"She never dreamed, I am sure, of my husband's doing anything for her; and I never dreamed of it either, for he never spoke to me of his intention," Mrs. Touchett said. "She had no claim upon him whatever; it was no great recommendation to him that she was my niece. Whatever she achieved she achieved unconsciously."

"Ah," rejoined Madame Merle, "those are the greatest strokes!"

Mrs. Touchett gave a shrug. "The girl is fortunate; I don't deny that. But for the present she is simply stupefied."

"Do you mean that she doesn't know what to do with the money?"

"That, I think, she has hardly considered. She doesn't know what to think about the matter at all. It has been as if a big gun were suddenly fired off behind her; she is feeling herself, to see if she be hurt. It is but three days since she received a visit from the principal executor, who came in person,