VINTAGE **JAMES**

The Portrait of a Lady

Contents

About the Book

Isabel Archer’s main aim in life is to protect her independence. She is not interested in settling down and compromising her freedom for the sake of marriage. However, on a trip around Europe with her aunt, she finds herself captivated by the charming Gilbert Osmond, who is very interested in the idea of adding Isabel to his collection of beautiful artworks ...

About the Author

Henry James was born on 15 April 1843 in New York to a wealthy and intellectual family and as a youth travelled widely and studied in Europe. He briefly studied law at Harvard before he took up writing full-time. His first novel, *Watch and Ward*, was published in 1871 and many followed including *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *Washington Square* (1880), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Awkward Age* (1899), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). He also wrote short stories, reviews, biographies, plays and travel books. After a brief period in Paris, James moved to London. He later settled in Rye in Sussex and became a British citizen in 1915. Henry James died on 28 February 1916.

OTHER NOVELS BY HENRY JAMES

Watch and Ward
Roderick Hudson
The American
The Europeans
Confidence
Washington Square
The Bostonians
The Princess Casamassima
The Reverberator
The Tragic Muse
The Other House
The Spoils of Poynton
What Maisie Knew
The Awkward Age
The Sacred Fount
The Wings of the Dove
The Ambassadors
The Golden Bowl
The Outcry
The Ivory Tower
The Sense of the Past

The Portrait of a Lady

Henry James

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

CHAPTER I

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 food 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 different 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 continued 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 pictorial tricks, only, however, to improve and refine it, presented to the lawn 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. At present, obviously, nevertheless, 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 features evenly distributed and an expression of placid acuteness. It was evidently a face in which the range of representation 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, yet 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 eyes 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 took in 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 fertilised by a high civilisation – 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 behind 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 a different 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 they were father and son. The father caught his son's eye at last and gave him a mild, responsive smile.

'I'm 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'll wait and see.' He had, in speaking, the American tone.

'Are you cold?' the son enquired.

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'm 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've been comfortable so many years that I suppose I've 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're uncomfortable.'

'It strikes me we're rather particular,' his companion remarked.

'Oh yes, there's no doubt we're particular,' Lord Warburton murmured. And then the three men remained

silent a while; 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,’ Lord Warburton resumed 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’ll please to do nothing of the kind. You’ll 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’re perfectly free to abuse mine,’ his son replied, giving him his tea.

‘Well, we’re two lame ducks; I don’t think there’s much difference.’

‘I’m much obliged to you for calling me a duck. How’s 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’s 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, any way, Lord Warburton.’

‘He’s 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 in 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’ve 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’m 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’m 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’ve 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’re 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’m a banker?’ asked the old man.

‘Because of that, if you like; and because you have – haven’t you? – such unlimited means.’

‘He isn’t very rich,’ the other young man mercifully pleaded. ‘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’s 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’re 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’ve 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, then – that’s the great opportunity of jokes.’

‘They’ll have to be grim jokes,’ said the old man. ‘I’m convinced there will be great changes; and not all for the

better.’

‘I quite agree with you, sir,’ Lord Warburton declared. ‘I’m 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’s 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’ll be firm,’ the old man rejoined; ‘they’ll not be affected by the social and political changes I just referred to.’

‘You mean they won’t be abolished? Very well, then, I’ll 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’m not at all keen about marrying – your son misrepresented me; but

there’s 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 highly ethereal ones as mine. If I could only see it myself – that would be a great step in advance.’

‘Well, you may fall in love with whomsoever you please; but you mustn’t fall in love with my niece,’ said the old man.

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

‘I say what I please,’ the old man returned with all his serenity.

‘I haven’t the honour of knowing your niece,’ Lord Warburton said. ‘I think it’s the first time I’ve heard of her.’

‘She’s 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’re expecting her back. She writes that she has discovered a niece and that she has invited her to come out 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's one thing very clear in it,' said the old man; 'she has given the hotel-clerk a dressing.'

'I'm 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's "quite independent", and in what sense is the term used? – that point's not yet settled. Does the expression apply more particularly to the young lady my mother has adopted, or does it characterise her sisters equally? – and is it used in a moral or in a financial sense? Does it mean that they've been left well off, or that they wish to be under no obligations? or does it simply mean that they're fond of their own way?'

'Whatever else it means, it's pretty sure to mean that,' Mr Touchett remarked.

'You'll see for yourself,' said Lord Warburton. 'When does Mrs Touchett arrive?'

'We're 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'll find me doing something wrong. She has never done so yet, but she's not discouraged.'

'It's her share in the family trait, the independence she speaks of.' Her son's appreciation of the matter was more

favourable. ‘Whatever the high spirit 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’ve mentioned – that you don’t fall in love with her!’ Mr Touchett replied.

‘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’s probably engaged; American girls are usually engaged, I believe. Moreover I’m not sure, after all, that you’d be a remarkable husband.’

‘Very likely she’s engaged; I’ve 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,’ Mr Touchett’s visitor pursued, ‘I’m not sure of that either. One can but try!’

‘Try as much as you please, but don’t try on my niece,’ smiled 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’s not worth trying on!’

CHAPTER II

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 toward the house, but his eyes were bent musingly on the lawn; so that he had been an object of observation to a person who had just made her appearance in the ample doorway 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 small beast. 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 quick chatter. 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 bareheaded, 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 newcomer.

'Dear me, who's that strange woman?' Mr Touchett had asked.

'Perhaps it's 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’s 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’ve suddenly acquired a remarkable air of property in him.’

‘Couldn’t we share him?’ asked the girl. ‘He’s such a perfect little darling.’

Ralph looked at her a moment; she was unexpectedly pretty. ‘You may have him altogether,’ he then replied.

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’m probably your cousin,’ she brought out, 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 arrived 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’re very welcome here. I’m delighted to see you.’

She was looking at everything, with an eye that denoted clear perception – at her companion, at the two dogs, at the two gentlemen under the trees, at the beautiful scene that

surrounded her. ‘I’ve never seen anything so lovely as this place. I’ve been all over the house; it’s too enchanting.’

‘I’m 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 girl gave a laugh. ‘I don’t suppose it’s the other. Who’s the other?’

‘He’s 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 small dog again.

She remained standing where they had met, making no offer to advance or to speak to Mr Touchett, and while she lingered so near the threshold, slim and charming, her interlocutor wondered if 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’s old and infirm – he doesn’t leave his chair.’

‘Ah, poor man, I’m very sorry!’ the girl exclaimed, immediately moving forward. ‘I got the impression from your mother that he was rather – rather intensely active.’

Ralph Touchett was silent a moment. ‘She hasn’t seen him for a year.’

‘Well, he has a lovely place to sit. Come along, little hound.’

‘It’s a dear old place,’ said the young man, looking sidewise at his neighbour.

‘What’s his name?’ she asked, her attention having again reverted to the terrier.

‘My father’s name?’

‘Yes,’ said the young lady with amusement; ‘but don’t tell him I asked you.’

They had come by this time to where old Mr Touchett was sitting, and he slowly got up from his chair and introduced himself.

‘My mother has arrived,’ said Ralph, ‘and this is Miss Archer.’

The old man placed his two hands on her shoulders, looked at her a moment with extreme benevolence and then gallantly kissed her. ‘It’s a great pleasure to me to see you here; but I wish you had given us a chance to receive you.’

‘Oh, we were received,’ said the girl. ‘There were about a dozen servants in the hall. And there was an old woman curtseying at the gate.’

‘We can do better than that – if we have notice!’ And the old man stood there smiling, rubbing his hands and slowly shaking his head at her. ‘But Mrs Touchett doesn’t like receptions.’

‘She went straight to her room.’

‘Yes – and locked herself in. She always does that. Well, I suppose I shall see her next week.’ And Mrs Touchett’s husband slowly resumed his former posture.

‘Before that,’ said Miss Archer. ‘She’s coming down to dinner – at eight o’clock. Don’t you forget a quarter to seven,’ she added, turning with a smile to Ralph.

‘What’s to happen at a quarter to seven?’

‘I’m to see my mother,’ said Ralph.

‘Ah, happy boy!’ the old man commented. ‘You must sit down – you must have some tea,’ he observed to his wife’s niece.

‘They gave me some tea in my room the moment I got there’, this young lady answered. ‘I’m sorry you’re out of health,’ she added, resting her eyes upon her venerable host.

‘Oh, I’m an old man, my dear; it’s time for me to be old. But I shall be the better for having you here.’

She had been looking all round her again – at the lawn, the great trees, the reedy, silvery Thames, the beautiful old house; and while engaged in this survey she had made room in it for her companions; a comprehensiveness of observation easily conceivable on the part of a young woman who was evidently both intelligent and excited. She had seated herself and put away the little dog; her white hands, in her lap, were folded upon her black dress; her head was erect, her eye lighted, her flexible figure turned itself easily this way and that, in sympathy with the alertness with which she evidently caught impressions. Her impressions were numerous, and they were all reflected in a clear, still smile. ‘I’ve never seen anything so beautiful as this.’

‘It’s looking very well,’ said Mr Touchett. ‘I know the way it strikes you. I’ve been through all that. But you’re very beautiful yourself,’ he added with a politeness by no means crudely jocular and with the happy consciousness that his advanced age gave him the privilege of saying such things – even to young persons who might possibly take alarm at them.

What degree of alarm this young person took need not be exactly measured; she instantly rose, however, with a blush which was not a refutation. ‘Oh yes, of course I’m lovely!’ she returned with a quick laugh. ‘How old is your house? Is it Elizabethan?’

‘It’s early Tudor,’ said Ralph Touchett.

She turned toward him, watching his face. ‘Early Tudor? How very delightful! And I suppose there are a great many others.’

‘There are many much better ones.’

‘Don’t say that, my son!’ the old man protested. ‘There’s nothing better than this.’

‘I’ve got a very good one; I think in some respects it’s rather better,’ said Lord Warburton, who as yet had not spoken, but who had kept an attentive eye upon Miss Archer. He slightly inclined himself, smiling; he had an excellent manner with women. The girl appreciated it in an instant; she had not forgotten that this was Lord Warburton. ‘I should like very much to show it to you,’ he added.

‘Don’t believe him,’ cried the old man; ‘don’t look at it! It’s a wretched old barrack – not to be compared with this.’

‘I don’t know – I can’t judge,’ said the girl, smiling at Lord Warburton.

In this discussion Ralph Touchett took no interest whatever; he stood with his hands in his pockets, looking greatly as if he should like to renew his conversation with his new-found cousin. ‘Are you very fond of dogs?’ he enquired by way of beginning. He seemed to recognise that it was an awkward beginning for a clever man.

‘Very fond of them indeed.’

‘You must keep the terrier, you know,’ he went on, still awkwardly.

‘I’ll keep him while I’m here, with pleasure.’

‘That will be for a long time, I hope.’

‘You’re very kind. I hardly know. My aunt must settle that.’

‘I’ll settle it with her – at a quarter to seven.’ And Ralph looked at his watch again.

‘I’m glad to be here at all,’ said the girl.

‘I don’t believe you allow things to be settled for you.’

‘Oh yes; if they’re settled as I like them.’

‘I shall settle this as I like it,’ said Ralph. ‘It’s most unaccountable that we should never have known you.’

‘I was there – you had only to come and see me.’

‘There? Where do you mean?’

‘In the United States: in New York and Albany and other American places.’

‘I’ve been there – all over, but I never saw you. I can’t make it out.’

Miss Archer just hesitated. ‘It was because there had been some disagreement between your mother and my father, after my mother’s death, which took place when I was a child. In consequence of it we never expected to see you.’

‘Ah, but I don’t embrace all my mother’s quarrels – heaven forbid!’ the young man cried. ‘You’ve lately lost your father?’ he went on more gravely.

‘Yes; more than a year ago. After that my aunt was very kind to me; she came to see me and proposed that I should come with her to Europe.’

‘I see,’ said Ralph. ‘She has adopted you.’

‘Adopted me?’ The girl stared, and her blush came back to her, together with a momentary look of pain which gave her interlocutor some alarm. He had underestimated the effect of his words. Lord Warburton, who appeared constantly desirous of a nearer view of Miss Archer, strolled towards the two cousins at the moment, and as he did so she rested her wider eyes on him. ‘Oh no; she has not adopted me. I’m not a candidate for adoption.’

‘I beg a thousand pardons,’ Ralph murmured. ‘I meant – I meant —’ He hardly knew what he meant.

‘You meant she has taken me up. Yes; she likes to take people up. She has been very kind to me; but,’ she added with a certain visible eagerness of desire to be explicit, ‘I’m very fond of my liberty.’

‘Are you talking about Mrs Touchett?’ the old man called out from his chair. ‘Come here, my dear, and tell me about her. I’m always thankful for information.’

The girl hesitated again, smiling. ‘She’s really very benevolent,’ she answered; after which she went over to her uncle, whose mirth was excited by her words.

Lord Warburton was left standing with Ralph Touchett, to whom in a moment he said: ‘You wished a while ago to see my idea of an interesting woman. There it is!’

CHAPTER III

MRS TOUCHETT WAS certainly a person of many oddities, of which her behaviour on returning to her husband's house after many months was a noticeable specimen. She had her own way of doing all that she did, and this is the simplest description of a character which, although by no means without liberal motions, rarely succeeded in giving an impression of suavity. Mrs Touchett might do a great deal of good, but she never pleased. This way of her own, of which she was so fond, was not intrinsically offensive – it was just unmistakeably distinguished from the ways of others. The edges of her conduct were so very clear-cut that for susceptible persons it sometimes had a knife-like effect. That hard fineness came out in her deportment during the first hours of her return from America, under circumstances in which it might have seemed that her first act would have been to exchange greetings with her husband and son. Mrs Touchett, for reasons which she deemed excellent, always retired on such occasions into impenetrable seclusion, postponing the more sentimental ceremony until she had repaired the disorder of dress with a completeness which had the less reason to be of high importance as neither beauty nor vanity were concerned in it. She was a plain-faced old woman, without graces and without any great elegance, but with an extreme respect for her own motives. She was usually prepared to explain these – when the explanation was asked as a favour; and in such a case they proved totally different from those that had been attributed to her. She was virtually separated from her husband, but she appeared to perceive nothing irregular in the situation.

It had become clear, at an early stage of their community, that they should never desire the same thing at the same moment, and this appearance had prompted her to rescue disagreement from the vulgar realm of accident. She did what she could to erect it into a law – a much more edifying aspect of it – by going to live in Florence, where she bought a house and established herself; and by leaving her husband to take care of the English branch of his bank. This arrangement greatly pleased her; it was so felicitously definite. It struck her husband in the same light, in a foggy square in London, where it was at times the most definite fact he discerned; but he would have preferred that such unnatural things should have a greater vagueness. To agree to disagree had cost him an effort; he was ready to agree to almost anything but that, and saw no reason why either assent or dissent should be so terribly consistent. Mrs Touchett indulged in no regrets nor speculations, and usually came once a year to spend a month with her husband, a period during which she apparently took pains to convince him that she had adopted the right system. She was not fond of the English style of life, and had three or four reasons for it to which she currently alluded; they bore upon minor points of that ancient order, but for Mrs Touchett they amply justified non-residence. She detested bread-sauce, which, as she said, looked like a poultice and tasted like soap; she objected to the consumption of beer by her maidservants; and she affirmed that the British laundress (Mrs Touchett was very particular about the appearance of her linen) was not a mistress of her art. At fixed intervals she paid a visit to her own country; but this last had been longer than any of its predecessors.

She had taken up her niece – there was little doubt of that. One wet afternoon, some four months earlier than the occurrence lately narrated, this young lady had been seated alone with a book. To say she was so occupied is to say that her solitude did not press upon her; for her love of

knowledge had a fertilising quality and her imagination was strong. There was at this time, however, a want of fresh taste in her situation which the arrival of an unexpected visitor did much to correct. The visitor had not been announced; the girl heard her at last walking about the adjoining room. It was in an old house at Albany, a large, square, double house, with a notice of sale in the windows of one of the lower apartments. There were two entrances, one of which had long been out of use but had never been removed. They were exactly alike – large white doors, with an arched frame and wide sidelights, perched upon little ‘stoops’ of red stone, which descended sidewise to the brick pavement of the street. The two houses together formed a single dwelling, the party-wall having been removed and the rooms placed in communication. These rooms, above-stairs, were extremely numerous, and were painted all over exactly alike, in a yellowish white which had grown sallow with time. On the third floor there was a sort of arched passage, connecting the two sides of the house, which Isabel and her sisters used in their childhood to call the tunnel and which, though it was short and well-lighted, always seemed to the girl to be strange and lonely, especially on winter afternoons. She had been in the house, at different periods, as a child; in those days her grandmother lived there. Then there had been an absence of ten years, followed by a return to Albany before her father’s death. Her grandmother, old Mrs Archer, had exercised, chiefly within the limits of the family, a large hospitality in the early period, and the little girls often spent weeks under her roof – weeks of which Isabel had the happiest memory. The manner of life was different from that of her own home – larger, more plentiful, practically more festal; the discipline of the nursery was delightfully vague and the opportunity of listening to the conversation of one’s elders (which with Isabel was a highly-valued pleasure) almost unbounded. There was a constant coming and going; her grandmother’s