A collection of my favorite passages from The Portrait of a Lady (Penguin classics edition, for page numbers).

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The place owed much of its mysterious melancholy to the fact that it was properly entered from the second door of the house, the door that had been condemned, and that it was secured by bolts which a particularly slender little girl found it impossible to slide. She knew that this silent, motionless portal opened into the street; if the sidelights had not been filled with green paper she might have looked out upon the little brown stoop and the well-worn brick pavement. But she had no wish to look out, for this would have interfered with her theory that there was a strange, unseen place on the other side – a place that became to the child's imagination, according to its different moods, a region of delight or of terror.

Pg. 104

It was almost as unnecessary to cultivate doubt of one's self as to cultivate doubt of one's best friend: one should try to be one's own best friend and to give one's self, in this manner, distinguished company.

...

On the whole, reflectively, she [Isabel] was in no uncertainty about the things that were wrong. She had no love of their look, but when she fixed them hard she recognized them. It was wrong to be mean, to be jealous, to be false, to be cruel ... Her life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce; she would be what she appeared and she would appear what she was. Sometimes she went so far as to wish that she might find herself some day in a difficult position, so that she should have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion demanded.

Pg. 120

'I shall always tell you,' her [Isabel's] aunt answered, 'whenever I see you taking what seems to me too much liberty.'

'Pray do; but I don't say I shall always think your remonstrance just.'

'Very likely not. You're too fond of your own ways.'

'Yes, I think I'm very fond of them. But I always want to know the things one shouldn't do.'

'So as to do them?' Asked her aunt.

'So as to choose,' said Isabel.

Pg. 126

[Ralph Touchett] 'Well, I mean Lord Warburton and his friends – the radicals of the upper class. Of course I only know the way it strikes me. They talk about the changes, but I don't think they quite realize.' ...

'Don't you think they're sincere?' Isabel asked.

'Well, they want to feel earnest,' Mr. Touchett allowed; but it seems as if they took it out in theories mostly. Their radical views are a kind of amusement; they've got to have some amusement, and they might have coarser tastes than that. You see they're very luxurious, and these progressive ideas are about their biggest luxury. They make them feel moral and yet don't damage their position. They think a great deal of their position; don't let one of them ever persuade you he doesn't, for if you were to proceed on that basis you'd be pulled up very short.'

Pg. 186

'I'm not bent on a life of misery,' said Isabel. 'I've always been intensely determined to be happy, and I've often believed I should be. I've told people that; you can ask them. But it comes over me every now and then that I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself.'

[Caspar Goodwood] 'By separating yourself from what?'

'From life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer.'

Pg. 208

[Caspar Goodwood] 'An effort calculated for what?' And then as she hung fire, 'I'm capable of nothing with regard to you,' he went on,

'but just of being infernal in love with you. If one's strong loves only the more strongly.'

[Isabel] 'There's a good deal in that;' and indeed our young lady felt the force of it – felt it thrown off, into the vast of truth and poetry, as practically a bait to her imagination. But she promptly came round. 'Think of me or not, as you find most possible; only leave me alone.'

'Until when?'

'Well, for a year or tow.'

'Which do you mean? Between one year and two there's all the difference in the world.'

'Call it two then,' said Isabel with a studied effect of eagerness.

'And what shall I gain by that?' Her friend asked with no sign of wincing.

'You'll have obliged me greatly.'

'And what will be my reward?'

'Do you need a reward for an act of generosity?'

'Yes, when it involves a great sacrifice.'

'There's no generosity without some sacrifice. Men don't understand such things. If you make the sacrifice you'll have all my admiration.'

...

'Why do you make me say such things to you?' She cried in a trembling voice. 'I only want to be gentle – to be thoroughly kind. It's not delightful to me to feel people care for me and yet to have to try and reason them out of it. I think others also ought to be considerate; we have each to judge for ourselves. I know you're considerate, as much as you can be; you've good reasons for what you do. But I really don't want to marry, or to talk about it at all now. I shall probably never do it – no, never. I've a perfect right to feel that way, and it's no kindness to a woman to press her so hard, to urge her against her will. If I give you pain I can only say I'm very sorry. It's not my fault; I can't marry you simply to please you. I won't say that I shall always remain your friend, because when women say that, in these situations, it passes, I believe, for a sort of mockery. But try me some day.'

Pg. 249

[Madame Merle] 'He's Gilbert Osmond – he lives in Italy; that's all one can say about him or make of him. He's exceedingly clever, a man made to be distinguished; but, as I tell you, you exhaust the description when you say he's Mr. Osmond who lives tout betement in Italy. No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything.'

Pg. 253

[Madame Merle] 'What shall we call our "self"? Where does it being? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for things! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.'

This was very metaphysical; not more so, however, than several observations Madame Merle had already made. Isabel was fond of metaphysics, but was unable to accompany her friend into this bold analysis of the human personality. 'I don't agree with you. I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!'

'You dress very well,' Madame Merle lightly interposed.

'Possibly; but I don't care to be judged by that. My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me. To begin with it's not my own choice that I wear them; they're imposed upon me by society.'

'Should you prefer to go without them?' Madame Merle enquired in a tone which virtually terminated the discussion.

Pg. 327

... the image of a quiet terrace above the sweet Val d'Arno and holding by the hand a little girl whose bell-like clearness gave a new grace to childhood. The picture had no flourishes, but she [Madame

Merle] liked its lowness of tone and the atmosphere of summer twilight that pervaded it. It spoke of the kind of personal issue that touched her most nearly; of the choice between objects, subjects, contacts — what might she call them? — of a thin and those of a rich association; of a lonely, studious life in a lovely land; of an old sorrow that sometimes ached today; of a feeling of pride that was perhaps exaggerated, but that had an element of nobleness; of a care for beauty and perfection so natural and so cultivated together that the career appeared to stretch beneath it in the disposed vistas and with the ranges of steps and terraces and fountains of a formal Italian garden — allowing only for arid places freshened by the natural dews of a quaint half-anxious, half-helpless fatherhood.

Pg. 359

[Gilbert Osmond to Isabel] 'Go everywhere,' he said at last, in a low, kind voice; 'do everything; get everything out of life. Be happy — be triumphant.'

...

'What I wish to say to you,' he went on at last, looking up, 'is that I find I'm in love with you.' ... 'I'm absolutely in love with you.'

Pg. 480

Isabel had an undefined conviction that to serve for another person than their proprietor traditions must be of a thoroughly superior kind; but she nevertheless assented to this intimation that she too must march to the stately music that floated down from unknown periods in her husband's past; she who of old had been so free of step, so desultory, so devious, so much the reverse of processional. There were certain things they must do, a certain posture they must take, certain people they must know and not know. When she saw this right system close about her, draped through it was in pictured tapestries, that sense of darkness and suffocation of which I have spoken took possession of her; she seemed shut up with an odor of mould and decay. She had resisted of course; at first very humorously, ironically, tenderly; then, as the situation grew more serious, eagerly, passionately, pleadingly. She had pleaded the cause of freedom, of doing as they chose, of not caring for the aspect and denomination of their life — the cause of other instincts and longing, of quite another ideal.

Pg. 578

He [Gilbert Osmond] had wanted to do something sudden and arbitrary, something unexpected and refined; to mark the difference between his sympathies and her own, and show that if he regarded his daughter as a precious work of art it was natural he should be more and more careful about the finishing touches. If he wished to be effective he had succeeded; the incident struck a chill into Isabel's heart. Pansy had known the convent in her childhood and had found a happy home there ... The old Protestant tradition had never faded from Isabel's imagination, and as her thoughts attached themselves to this striking example of her husband's genius – she sat looking, like him, at the basket of flowers – poor little Pansy became the heroine of a tragedy.

Pg. 620

[Ralph Touchett] 'You've been like an angel beside my bed. You know they talk about the angel of death. It's the most beautiful of all. You've been like that; as if you were waiting for me.'

[Isabel] 'I was not waiting for your death; I was waiting for – for this. This is not death, dear Ralph.'

'Not for you – no. There's nothing makes us feel so much alive as to see others die. That's the sensation of life – the sense that we remain. I've had it – even I. But now I'm of no use to give it to others. With me it's all over.'