

The American (Illustrated)



This is about a successful American businessman in his thirties who leaves the USA, having made his fortune in copper and railroads, to travel around Europe and to find a wife. He encounters an old friend in the Louvre who takes him home and introduces him to his own interesting wife. Mrs. Tristram takes Christopher happily under her wing, absorbs him into her circle of friends, and tells him of an old friend who'd be just the perfect wife for him - a young and beautiful widowed countess of unimpeachable descent. Christopher meets Claire de Cintre and from that moment his one obsession is to marry her. An attractive hero, he possesses remarkable talents. In fact he has pretty well every virtue except exalted antecedents; he is, for example, tall, good-looking, urbane, well-mannered, forthright, intelligent, thoughtful, considerate, persistent, good-natured, generous and rich. At their first meeting he conquers Claire sufficiently to be allowed to continue to visit her, instead of being shown the door. Actually, his dogged audacity is pretty amazing; he simply asks her to marry him after about the fifth meeting, because he wants everything to be above-board. She says No and he promises not to mention the matter for another six months. He then succeeds in making a bargain with her mother and brother, the most rigid and narrow dyed-in-the-wool aristocrats, that they will not stand in his way or say anything against him until she accepts his hand. Marquise and marquis make no secret of their dislike of him (a commercial person), nor of their horror and disgust at the entire proposition. These are two different worlds. Christopher is aware of it but is confident that their differences can be overcome; after all he is very rich and he knows this is important to them. He sees no reason why sensible individuals would not agree in time to a straightforward and sensible offer. Matters seem to proceed

well or better than can be expected, and when the six months are up Claire graciously accepts Christophers proposal. A dramatic turn of events, however, obstructs their happy plans. Henry James is a joy for those who like a sedate plot to unfold slowly, carefully and thoroughly. His psychological observations are minute; his characters drawn with deftest strokes, and one or two lighter subplots fill out the general late-Victorian picture. Bigoted aristocrats, unprincipled upstarts, impulsive young noblemen, impassive secret-keepers, loquacious duchesses, these and many other finely-drawn characters fill the pages of this enthralling story.

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