

Henry James, Sr., to Henry James, 4 March [1873], from Cambridge

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1 Cambridge March 4

2 My darling Harry:

3 Snow, snow, nothing but snow! We have had a very old fashioned winter,
4 and on the whole we are very glad of spring, though yesterday, after a couple of days of
5 really vernal weather, we had another snow fall renewing the sleighing indefinitely.
6 However we have had a charming winter overhead, bright sunny skies and glorious
7 sunsets day after day. We live moreover very comfortably in doors; do not entertain
8 largely but sufficiently to keep up the circulation, visit sociably and receive visits. Mother
9 entertained Charles Grinnell last week and Rev Mr Alger. This week she purposes to do
10 the same by Mr & Mrs Aldrich and Mr & Mrs Lathrop; Mr & Mrs Child and Mr
11 Bradford and Ann Ashburner next week & so forth. Mr Alger is writing a biography of
12 Forrest, and I am afraid is going to give him a Bowery appreciation. He says his hero was
13 a very fine talker. For example he told Alger of old Gilbert Stuart when in a state of
14 dilapidation asking him to let him paint his portrait. "I consented, said F. and went to his
15 studio. He was an old white lion, so blind that he had to ask me the colour of my eyes and
16 my hair. But ~~th~~ he threw his brush at the canvass, and every stroke was life." Alger talks
17 freely, about his insanity, and has a good many suggestions to make about the rationale of
18 the disease & its mode of treatment which he himself sets great store by. I believe he
19 interested Willy somewhat, who talked a good deal with him about Somerville. Charles
20 Grinnell has become a great reader & admirer of my books; Alger aussi. I read my lecture

21 last evening on Emerson before the N. E. Women's Club at their ^Club's[^] request, and
22 according to their testimony much to their delight. Mrs Howe was critical and
23 complimentary, Mrs Lodge & Mrs Cheney enthusiastic and all the rest ditto. No out-door
24 news, save that Sarah Sedgwick does n't grow stronger as we hoped, though she does
25 grow sweeter, if that be possible. Every one hopes that Jno Gray has not caught a
26 Rosamond Vincy in Miss Mason. I don't know whether this hope means affection to John
27 or disaffection to Mrs Jno. who is to be.

28 I have written to Gail Hamilton to send me your tale; but she does it not as yet. I
29 will renew my invitation to her in a day or two if necessary. I went to see Osgood about
30 publishing a selection from your Tales. He repeated what he told you: that he would give
31 you fifteen per cent, do all the advertising &c, you paying for the plates; or he would pay
32 everything and give you ten per ct. on every copy ^sold[^] after the first thousand. I shall
33 be willing (in case you would like to publish, and I think it is time for you to do so) to
34 bear the expense of stereotyping, and if you will pick out what you would like to be
35 included, we shall set to work at once, and have the book ready by next Autumn. I have
36 got the materials of a story for you which I was telling Willy of the other day as a regular
37 Tourgenieff subject, and he told me to send it off to you at once, he was so struck with it.
38 Matthew Henry Webster was a very cultivated and accomplished young man in Albany,
39 at the time I was growing up. He belonged to a respectable family, (of booksellers &
40 publishers) was himself bred to the law, but had such a love of literature and, especially,
41 of the natural sciences, that he never devoted himself very strictly to his profession. He
42 was the intimate friend of Professor Henry & other distinguished men of science,
43 corresponded with foreign scientific bodies, and his contributions to science were of so
44 original a cast as to suggest great hopes of his future eminence. He was a polished

45 gentleman, of perfect address, brave as Caesar, utterly unegotistic, and one's wonder was
46 how he ever grew up in Albany or reconciled himself to living in the place. One day he
47 invested some money in a scheme much favoured by the ~~cashier~~ [^]President[^] of the
48 Bank in which he deposited, and his adventure proved a fortune.

49 There lived also a family in Albany of the name of Kane (Mary Post's stepmother
50 being of its members) and this family reckoned upon a great social sensation in bringing
51 out their youngest daughter, (Lydia Sibyl Kane) who had never been seen by mortal eye
52 outside of her own family, except that of a physician, who reported that she was
53 fabulously beautiful. She was the most beautiful girl I think I ever saw, at a little distance.
54 Well, she made her sensation, and brought Mr Webster incontinently to her feet. Her
55 family wanted wealth above all things for her; but here was wealth and something more,
56 very much more, and they smiled upon his suit. Every thing went merrily for a while.
57 Webster was profoundly intoxicated with his prize. Never was man so enamoured, and
58 never was beauty better fitted to receive adoration. She was of an exquisite Grecian
59 outline as to face, with a countenance like the tender dawn, and form and manners
60 ravishingly graceful. But Webster was not content with his adventure—embarked again
61 & lost all he owned almost. Mr Oliver Kane (or Mrs, for she was the ruler of the family
62 and as hard as the nether world in heart) gave the cue to her daughter, & my friend was
63 dismissed. He couldn't believe his senses. He raved and cursed his fate. But it was
64 inexorable. What was to be done? With a bitterness of heart inconceivable he plucked his
65 revenge by marrying instantly a stout and blooming jade who in respect to Miss Kane
66 was a paeony to a violet, & who was absolutely nothing but flesh & blood. Her he bore
67 upon his arm at fashionable hours through the streets; her he took to church, preserving
68 his exquisite ease and courtesy to every one, as if absolutely nothing had occurred; and

69 her he pretended to take to his bosom in private, with what a shudder one can imagine.
70 Every body stood aghast. He went daily about his affairs, as serene and unconscious as
71 the moon in the heavens. Soon his poverty showed itself in ~~an economy~~ [^]certain[^]
72 economies of his wardrobe which had always been very recherché. Soon again he broke
73 his leg, and went about ~~in~~ on crutches, but neither poverty nor accident had the least
74 power to ruffle his perfect repose. He was always superior to his circumstances, met you
75 exactly as he had always done, impressed you invariably as the best bred man you ever
76 saw, and left you wondering what a heart and what a brain lay behind such a fortune. One
77 morning we all read in the paper at breakfast that Mr Henry Webster had appealed the
78 day before to the protection of the police against his wife, who had beaten him, and
79 whom as a woman he could not degrade by striking in return: and the police responded
80 properly to his appeal. He went about his affairs as usual that day & every day, never
81 saying a word to any one of his trouble, nor even indirectly asking sympathy, but
82 compelling you to feel that here if anywhere was a novel height of manhood, a self-
83 respect so eminent as to look down ~~upon~~ with scorn upon every refuge open to ordinary
84 human infirmity. This lasted for five or six years. He never drank, had no vice, in fact of
85 any kind, and lived a life of such decorum, so far as his own action was concerned, a life
86 of such interest in science and literature as to be the most delightful & unconscious of
87 companions even when his coat was shabby beyond compare, and you dare not look at
88 him for fear of betraying your own vulgar misintelligence.

89 Finally Sybil Kane died smitten with small pox, and all her beauty gone to
90 hideousness. He lingered awhile, his beautiful manners undismayed still, his eye as
91 undaunted as at the beginning, & then he suddenly died. I never knew his equal in
92 manhood, sheer, thorough, manly force, competent to itself in every emergency, and

93 seeking none of the ordinary subterfuges which men seek in order to hide their own
94 imbecility. I think it a good basis for a novel.

95 I enclose a slip from Beechers paper about Miss Blagden, and a scrap from the
96 Independent about your M of the F. which is every where very much lauded in private &
97 which I will send you further notices of in the papers. Love to every one Your loving
98 Daddy.

Notes

10 Mr & Mrs Aldrich • Thomas Bailey Aldrich (1836-1907) and Lilian Woodman Aldrich; Aldrich was editor, then, of *Every Saturday*, and while they owned a house on Charles Street in Boston, the Aldriches resided from 1872 to 1874 at Elmwood, James Russell Lowell's house in Cambridge, off of Mt. Auburn Street

10 Mr & Mrs Lathrop • George Parson Lathrop and Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, who lived at the time at 20 Wendell Street in Cambridge

10 Mr & Mrs Child • Harvard professor Francis James Child (1825-1896) and Elizabeth Ellery Sedgwick Child (1824-98); they lived on Kirkland Street in Cambridge

10-11 Mr Bradford • George Partridge Bradford (1806?-1890), a lifelong friend of Emerson; he had run a school in Newport that Alice James had attended in the early 1860s

11-12 Mr Alger is writing a biography of Forrest • *The Life of Edwin Forrest: the American Tragedian* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1877), by William Rounseville Alger (1822-1905)

20-21 I read my lecture last evening on Emerson • Published posthumously as “Emerson,” *Atlantic Monthly* December 1904: 740-45

21 N. E. Women’s Club • The New England Women’s Club

28 I have written to Gail Hamilton to send me your tale • “The Sweetheart of M. Briseux,” which Gail Hamilton had solicited for possible publication in *Wood’s Household Magazine*, but which was eventually published in the *Galaxy*

29 Osgood • Boston publisher James Ripley Osgood (1836-1892)

36 the materials of a story for you • This account became the basis of James’s “Crawford’s Consistency,” *Scribner’s Monthly* August 1876: 569-84

42 Professor Henry • Joseph Henry, Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy at the Albany Academy when Henry James, Sr., was a student there and later a friend of James, Sr.

49 Mary Post’s stepmother • Mary Ann King (Mrs. Minturn) Post (1819-1892) was the daughter of Ellen James (Mrs. James) King (1800-1823), Henry James, Sr.’s half-sister. After Ellen King’s death, James King (1788-1841) married again, in 1826, to Harriet Clark Kane (1805-1854). Harriet Kane’s grandmother was named Sybil Kent, and as James King and she named their second daughter Harriet Sybil (1831-1891), it would seem like the name Sybil descended generations in the Kane family.

95 Miss Blagden • Florence-based poet Isabella Blagden (1816-1873)

96 your M of the F • “The Madonna of the Future”

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