

FIVE LETTERS OF HENRY JAMES

BY RUDOLF KIRK

THE former editor of the Journal, who has a special interest in Howells and James, has edited the following letters for first publication.

AMONG the manuscripts in the Symington Collection recently acquired by the Library are five letters written by Henry James.* Since these letters are to four different persons, on totally unrelated topics, and range over a period of twenty-eight years, it would be fruitless here to deal with them as a group. Two, however, are long enough to show pleasant pictures of James as he wrote to old literary friends, and the rest reveal something of his busy social life. The headnotes summarize information necessary for the reader.

I.

The recipient of the first letter was almost certainly Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm (1834-1890), who in 1885 had not yet received from Queen Victoria the baronetcy. He was a well-known sculptor of the day, an Academician, and one whom James might easily have met at the home of Sir John Everett Millais (1829-1896), for Millais, whom James mentions in the letter, was himself president of the Academy, and James had been acquainted with him for some years.

Henry James¹

NEW COURT,
TEMPLE.

Tuesday March 10. 1885

My dear Mr. Boehm

I assure you I am *most* annoyed at my forgetfulness. I can only ask you to pardon it. So many things have to pass through my mind that I cannot always trust my personal memory. Our conversation at Millais' was simply forgotten. Will you kindly write me a line

* Printed here with the kind permission of Paul R. Reynolds & Son, literary agents for the Henry James estate.

¹ These words "Henry James" appear to be in James's handwriting.

saying the day (a Sunday) and the hour which will suit *you* and you may be sure I will not fail to keep such appointment

Again most sincerely
expressing my regret
I am Dear Mr. Boehm
Yours very truly
Henry James

II.

William Barclay Squire (1855-1927) was for many years in charge of Printed Music and Deputy Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum. The letter to him bears no year-date, but since James lived at 34 De Vere Gardens, W., from 1886 or 1887 to 1898 and since he accepted an invitation for dinner on Friday, December 8th, which within this stretch of years fell only in 1893, we may with certainty place the letter in that year.

34, De Vere Gardens,
W.

Dear W. Barclay Squire

Your hospitality is more profuse than I deserve; but in spite of my undeservingness I shall be very happy to dine with you on Friday Dec. 8th at 8. Believe me yours very truly

Henry James

Nov. 26th [1893]

III.

Sir Edmund Gosse (1849-1928) and Henry James exchanged many letters over a period of thirty years or more. When the present letter was composed, James was living at Rye, whence he had moved in 1897. He writes to thank Gosse for *The Challenge of the Brontës*, a small privately printed volume containing an address delivered before the Brontë Society, 28 March 1903. James invites Gosse to visit him for a Sunday and to tell him of his and Mrs. Gosse's recent trip to France, which the Gosses had so much enjoyed, if we may judge by a published letter Gosse wrote to a friend from Marvejols, Lozère. The reference to Sylvia is, of course, to the youngest Gosse daughter.² I do not understand the postscript.

² Evan Charteris, *The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse*, 1931, pp. 288-289.

The letter is bound with a typescript. It is preceded by a note of T. J. Wise headed "The Brontës": "A fine unpublished holograph Letter from Henry James to Sir Edmund Gosse regarding his 'A Challenge of the Brontës.'" "

LAMB HOUSE,
 RYE,
 SUSSEX.

June 12th 1903

My dear Gosse.

I greatly appreciate the graceful present from you of the Brontë booklet, which undermines even my *malaise* in the presence of very tiny volumes. This one is of a charming form—which indeed is their general case. What is more to the point is that the matter seems to me of the happiest—the thing is a beautiful little *talk*, which is what it should be, and what your auditors could have had few (or none) but you to gaily give them. It was time the Fatal Sisters *should* have a smile play over them—sullen as I yet figure their "psychic" response. Thanks, truly, for the bibliographic pearl. Won't you come down some time (for some Sunday next month) and tell me where & what of wondrous you have been & seen: plucking it, I mean, from the deep heart of France. May I some day have a small word from you as to when you "leave town" for the final go?—so that I may make sure of you for a date well before that? Where is Sylvia, meanwhile—where is *she*? Tell her with my love, that I haunt the station in the hope of her train, & that I have just "saved" out of an empty pocket a bit of the rococo here in order that Rye may [not?] be (what it tends so swiftly & horridly to become) unworthy of a maiden's faith or of an artist's brush. I hope Mrs. Edmund travelled to her profit; I crowd myself on her remembrance & I am yours always

Henry James

P.S. How refreshing to an artist in a passionless pictureless age, the flare of the Byzantine Belgrade [!]³

³ This exclamation point is in the typescript of the letter which is bound in with it, but the binder pasted the letter in such a way as to cover up the original punctuation.

IV.

Matilda Barbara Betham-Edwards (1836-1919) was a well-known poet, novelist, and writer on French life. When James wrote her the first letter here printed, she was an old woman, and, from what he says, we may judge unable to get about. This typewritten letter has a charm which may be associated with two old literary people suffering various infirmities and being comforted by letters and occasional visits. The journey from London to Hastings, Sussex, where Miss Betham-Edwards lived, was not long by train, but the climb from the town to her "castled-turret" was almost too much for James. In her essay "Henry James," Miss Betham-Edwards relates the story of his first visit to her and tells how James walked the last hundred yards or so in order to spare the cabhorse. When he had "regained breath," the conversation began.⁴ The second letter here printed James wrote to Miss Betham-Edwards almost a year after the first. It indicates the continuing difficulties attendant upon their friendly association and the obstacle to a visit he found the climb to her "pinnacle." The two letters nicely enlarge the sketch which Miss Betham-Edwards gives in her essay on James.

Dictated⁵

Lamb House,
Rye,
Sussex
October 9th., 1912.

Dear Miss Betham-Edwards.

If I have been silent for so long it is because things were very ill with me all the summer—I was in no physical case either for planning and plotting out and putting through excursions, or for the always heavy business of explaining why such efforts were impossible; just as if I now have to address you only by the aid of this brutal machinery it is because I got up from the effect of a most tiresome, in fact most odious and excruciating, visitation but yesterday, and am still sick and sore and weak and unable to dabble at first-hand in the inkpot. A mountain of arrears of correspondence has piled itself

⁴ Matilda Betham-Edwards, *Mid-Victorian Memories, with a personal sketch* by Mrs. Sarah Grand, New York, 1919, pp. 101ff.

⁵ This word, typed on the upper left hand corner of the sheet, indicates James's disgust with the "brutal machinery" as he termed the typewriter.

in my path, and I can deal with it for the present only in this way. What I have had *last* is this fell attack of "Shingles," from which I am slowly emerging, and which is a detestable sort of thing that I hope you have never exchanged (as I thus lately did) a comfortably dim conception of for the definite damnation of a real acquaintance with. But, as I have said, I was really in no sort of state, all the summer, for braving the detestable conditions of our communication, at that season, with your tripper-smothered, disjointed, belated, infested, and in every way aggravated Hastings Station. Going forth so little as you probably do you are unaware of the devil's tricks that the "holidays" (deplorable superstition!) play the South-Eastern Line, and that that at best scarcely tolerable institution plays, in its turn, upon the trustful traveller. Safe and serene in your empyrean you shake over the scene the rosy mantle of your optimism—even as your good companion probably shakes out from your castled turret your breakfast-cloth and its crumbs; and I shall have to choose, when I next see you, between wooing you back to reality again and respecting the mature bloom of your illusions! I do very much hope to achieve my pilgrimage before very long, after letting you know; and I shall then tell you a little more of what I mean by such a sorry report of myself—in spite of which, after all, I feel that I am emerging and shall get back to firm ground, *Your* ground has, from the first, struck me as so firm that I don't permit myself to doubt that you have been well and hearty. I shall hope at any rate to find you so, and am yours all faithfully

Henry James

Lamb House

Rye

Sussex

September 26th

1913

Dear Miss Betham Edwards.

I thank you kindly for your little note of appreciation; but this is only a stopgap till I can really climb to your pinnacle. I shall undertake that pilgrimage on some *early* day of next month, letting you know in advance, & am all faithfully

Yours

Henry James.