"Always affectionately William James": Letters to a young lady

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“Always Affectionately William James”
Letters to a Young Lady

*Bernice Grohskopf*

In 1868 William James, a twenty-six-year-old medical school drop-out, was traveling in Europe when he met an American music teacher named Catherine Havens. Both were abroad for their health, staying at the same *pension* in Dresden, and their friendship quickly developed. After they returned to the United States, they continued to correspond; James sent her gifts, and visited her, and their friendship continued for ten years, even after he’d met and declared his love for Alice Gibbens.

The years of his correspondence with Miss Havens were troubled years, years of uncertainty about his future and bouts of depression. Some of James’s letters to Miss Havens from June 1868 to Christmas 1877 survive because of her generosity. In 1913, three years after William’s death, in response to a request from James’s son, who was preparing an edition of his father’s correspondence, Havens sent a packet of James’s letters. With it she wrote a letter to his son in which she warmly recalled her friendship with his father, requesting that the original letters be returned. The drastic cuts, however, made by James’s widow in the existing letters, leave many unanswered questions.

When young William James sailed for Europe on April 16, 1867, he had been going through a period of emotional depression, compounded by physical problems: back pain, weak eyes, digestive disorders, insomnia and extreme fatigue, unrelieved by the various “cures” he tried. As his son wrote in the edition of his father’s letters (1920) published after James’s death: “A feeling of the purposelessness of his own particular existence, his philosophic doubts . . . all these combined to plunge him into a state of morbid depression.” Conflict over a career-choice was one source of his emotional distress. Even as a boy he was uncertain about his future profession and in early letters to a friend he deliberated over whether to please himself by becoming an artist, or please his father by choosing science. When he reached his mid-twenties, he was still undecided, a dilemma made more troubling as he watched his brother Henry, his two younger siblings, become successful career-wise.

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I am grateful to Bay James, the James family executor, for permission to quote from the James Papers, and to the Houghton Library at Harvard University for permission to quote from unpublished material in the James Family Papers. All quotations from William James’s letters and those of his friends are from Volumes 1 and 4 of *The Correspondence of William James* edited by Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, published by the University Press of Virginia. I am grateful to the Press for permission to quote from letters in *The Correspondence of William James*. 

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brothers, and his friends, set forth on their paths in life, leaving him behind to brood. He had been studying at Harvard Medical school without much enthusiasm, when, in 1867, he decided to drop out and travel to Europe where he would try the baths, consult specialists in the hope of finding a cure for his back pain, spend time reading, visit art galleries, study German, and attend classes.

The following May 1868, while still abroad searching for a cure, he met Catherine Havens, a "fellow pensionnaire" at Frau Spengenberg's on Dohna Platz in Dresden. The day after his meeting, May 14, he wrote to his sister Alice: "She has an extraordinary musical talent and is a peculiar and agreeable person in every way... She seems fm. my short acquaintance of 24 hours to be very intelligent, a quality all the more charming fm. this child like and spontaneous manner... "[She] is decidedly not a commonplace personage."
To his friend Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.: “The day before yesterday, I made the acquaintance of a young female fr. New York who is here in the house, and suddenly noticed that an old long forgotten element was present. (I mean in her way of accepting the world.)"

A week later, on May 24, he wrote his old friend, Tom Ward, expressing impatience with his progress, but noting there had been a few “random gleams of light,” one of which was: “The friendship of a young american lady here in the house, who has stirred chords in this desiccated heart wh. I long thought had turned to dust. . . . First let me disclaim sincerely anything like flirtation. I soar in a region above that, I think. The young woman is a prey to her nerves . . . but her mind is perfectly free from sentimentality and disorder of any sort—and she has really a genius for music. I never heard a piano speak as she makes it. Now what is beautiful and so to speak absolute and finished about her has struck into me so deeply as quite to rejuvenate my feeling.” Although he was “skeptical,” he confessed that meeting her had awakened him to “the hideous waste of life that I was wallowing in.”

Lest Ward be amused and think he’d been too carried away, James filled many pages with lofty intellectual ramblings, until he was interrupted by a message from the young lady inviting him to go for a drive. “I naturally accepted. The young Lady has many foibles—but the spirit of Goethe . . . forbids any impatient rejection of a whole on account of defectiveness in the parts. . . . As for me I shall never give up the young lady.”

James’s diary entry, May 22, 1868: “To night while listening to Miss H’s magic playing . . . my feelings came to a sort of crisis. The intuition of something herein a measure absolute gave me such an unspeakable disquiet for the dead drifting of my own life for some time past. . . .” Five days later, he was still examining his feelings in his diary, musing over loving “emotions . . . where one cannot expect to gain exclusive possession of the loved person.” Further along in that entry, he pondered the distinction between love and friendship, as though to intellectualize his emotions out of existence.

He wrote his brother Henry on June 4, 1868: “There was a very nice young lady in the house fr. New York, an invalid, who went away a couple of days ago to Schwalbach much to my sorrow, for I took several Droschke rides with her and after tea we used to sit out on the garden steps gossiping in a life-like & American manner which brought back my youth again.”

After Miss Havens left Dresden, James wrote her on June 17, 1868. This first extant letter to Havens was drastically cut by his widow, Alice James. The omission is tantalizing. “Begin at page 6,” Alice wrote, although she did not omit William’s telling admission: “I often wonder how you manage to pass your time. . . . I would give anything to see you if only for half an hour, . . . ” He commented on her modesty, her “exquisite toilet,” and closed with these words: “The insipidity of my life for the last 5 months (except for the two weeks with you) has thrown me off the rails entirely and I need to come into direct contact with . . .”

There the fragment ends. Alice noted “(Miss Havens sends no more.)”

How much did Alice Gibbons James know of her husband’s friendship with Catherine Havens? It appears that in this letter William expressed more of his feelings than Miss Havens wanted to reveal. And in editing the letters, Alice may have tried to minimize any expressions of his feelings for Miss Havens.
Two months later, on August 29, James wrote from a health spa in Divonne, France, to answer Havens' letter of August 20 from Wiesbaden, in which she must have admitted she was lonely. Having found the treatment at Schwalbach, a health resort, harmful, she was on her way to Scotland. It's evident that both were having difficulty expressing themselves. James wrote: "You say that you have been tempted to write at length and communicate explanations and 'regret'—I too have more than once ... actually written you a quantity of nonsense which I am happy not to have sent. I don't know what subject you have as yet for regret. I have felt since we parted as if I had exhibited myself to you in a very partial way, my chief occupation having been attempting to 'do you good' by delivering all sorts of moral advice, and 'posing' myself as a sort of model of calm cheerfulness and heroism. ... So my luxuriant conscientiousness has been betrayed into putting down a few facts showing the obverse side of the miserable 'cuss' that I am, so that you might know to what a feeble egotistical, cowardly, hollow you had given the name of 'friend.' ... But as I said, I'm glad the stuff was never sent, and I'm glad you have not written yours."

James's tactful allusions to Miss Havens' admission of restraint, and his own admission to a letter he'd written but did not send present blanks that his widow further compounded by her drastic cuts. But from his enthusiastic comments
about Miss Havens in letters he wrote to friends and family immediately after he
met her, there is no doubt that she had made a profound impression on him.

To mask his feelings James resorted to teasing her with exaggerated spoiling:
“In our forced separation,” he wrote, “the gentle Havens have sent me a sort
of substitute in the shape of a young lady here, who reminds me so vividly of
you. . . . I can’t keep my eyes off her at the distant table where she sits and feeds.”
He described her prodigious appetite, how he watched her eat while he sent his
plate away untouched . . . noting her habit “of using her beauteous finger nails
instead of the toothpicks.” He wondered how to make her acquaintance, what
he could possibly say to a ‘jeune fille.’ “I have it!!—I’ll talk to her about you & tell
her all sorts of comic anecdotes about your Wankelmuth (inconstancy) etc. etc. etc.”

The following morning, after reading over Miss Havens’ letter, he added that
he’d noted a “tone of sadness.” But the “silliness” of his own letter, he admitted,
was only because he’d written one “immediately on receiving yours, but
which I decided wisely not to send, as its contents would probably not strike you
pleasantly and it was of no practical use, for the present at least.”

How might Miss Havens have interpreted the implications of that last
sentence, and what hopes did it raise in her heart? Forty-five years later, she
explained in a letter to his son, that since she and James were “the only English
speaking persons in Mme S’s household . . . there could not well be a middle
ground of mere conversational civility—but we must either have taken a cordial
dislike to each other, or developed an intimate friendship.”

She reported that soon after her arrival at the pension, James left for the baths
at Teplitz, but returned within a week, because, quoting James, he wanted to
“go back to the grandmotherly roof & see what that young lady was like.”
He used to read aloud to her in the afternoons as she rested on the sofa in the
drawing room, and shared her Droschke with her, although such unchaperoned
rides were not “allowed,” Mme Spangenberg warned them. But she looked
kindly upon their friendship and assured Miss Havens that it was alright only
with Herr James.

In the same letter that Havens wrote to James’s son in 1913, she quoted from
one of William’s notes: “In writing to my friend Wendell Holmes the other day,
I said I had not met any one since I left home possessed of Reason, until lately I
had met a young lady from New York, who represents to me that nameless
quality which disuse had almost made me forget.” Thus did James convey his
feelings to her, if only indirectly, by quoting from a letter he wrote to a friend.

Shortly before James returned to the United States in November 1868, he
wrote her from Paris on October 20, expressing concern that his previous letter
to her had been returned. He was leaving Europe because the “vagabond life”
made him worse. He didn’t know when their next meeting would take place,
but he assured her that “some day it must take place. . . . Ever your faithful friend
Wm. James.”

On Christmas day 1868, from his home in Cambridge, James wrote to wish
her a merry Christmas. He had returned to medical school at Harvard, and was
enjoying “a more luxurious” life as well as “a more reputable” one with friends
and family, so that he felt as if he “had some moorings in the world” compared
to “that isolated and egotistical existence” he had lived in Europe. Then in his
high-spirited manner he commented on what he termed the ‘woman-question’:
“Once they have the vote, he warned, they would “lead off in all the professions,”
so in order to rescue the "innocent babies" who, without mothers, would be neglected, he planned "a mammoth baby tending machine wh. will do everything for a thousand of them at once until they are able to provide for themselves." With the patent for his invention, he would become a billionaire and share his wealth with all his friends.

Two months later, on February 24, 1869, James wrote again. He made no reference to having heard from her, but expressed concern over her health, and reported that he was still an invalid, but was growing stronger. His tone was detached: he commented on current events, the vegetation of Europe compared with that "at home," and quoted literary passages, following their "practice of communicating elegant extracts to each other." After the chit-chat, he recalled "those peaceful old days at grandmother Spangenberg . . . our discussions on the back piazza in the balmy evenings &c. &c. and wonder whether anything similar can ever take place again."

There is no evidence of a reply from Havens. But less than two months later, James received a letter from Frau Spangenberg, dated April 3, 1869, in which she warned him that if he intended to keep his relationship with Miss Havens on the level of mere friendship, "she would certainly become ill again, because in confidence, she wishes more than friendship."

There followed a three-year gap in the correspondence between James and Havens, from 1869 to 1872. Mme Spangenberg's dramatic warning, no doubt, distressed James who had been more comfortable in a long distant relationship, a distance that avoided intimacy and made it possible for him to disregard Miss Havens's feelings. But, however deeply he may have felt for her, he must have had doubts about the wisdom of a relationship with a woman who also had physical and psychological problems.

When Catherine Havens sent her packet of James's letters, she also wrote a letter to James's widow, explaining that when she met James she was "a great invalid," and because her "nervous weakness" continued, she "felt obliged to discontinue our correspondence from 1869 until 1872, when it was resumed, as he expressed it, 'with a calmer confidence.'"

While her health and James's indecision may explain the gap, Havens doubtless realized that whatever his feelings may have been, he was not ready for more than an epistolary relationship. It isn't clear under what circumstances they resumed their correspondence "with a calmer confidence," for that phrase has not been found in any of the extant letters. But it is significant that the opening, as well as the date of what appears to be James's first letter to her after the gap, had been cut by Alice.

The years during which the correspondence between James and Havens ceased coincided with the period when James was undergoing what some scholars have termed a "crisis." Biographers have tried to explain the reasons for his state of mind without noting a possible connection to his despair over the break in his relationship with Havens, the first woman with whom he had what James William Anderson called a "significant romantic relationship." Anderson, however, dated their friendship from their meeting in Dresden in May 1868, until 1869, when there was a break in the correspondence. He noted that James's

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“experience with Havens in 1869 could only have aggravated his isolation.” James’s son reported that the years of his father’s depression, although “outwardly uneventful,” were documented in various ways. Clues in his diary and letters to friends revealed, if obliquely, what was on his mind. In a letter to his friend Tom Ward, March, 1869: “I had a little while ago an experience of life wh. woke up the spiritual monad within me as has not happened more than once or twice before in my life.” Then he distanced himself from his own emotions, as he sometimes did, by switching to French, before continuing in English: “there is an inextinguishable spark which will when we least expect it flash out, and reveal the existence—at least—of something real—of reason at the bottom of things. I can’t tell you how it was now.” This vague, but revealing confession was written to Tom Ward one month before he received the warning from Frau Spangenburg.

“I feel melancholy as a whip-poor-will,” he wrote his brother Henry in Italy, in May 1870, adding that he longed to “talk things over” with him. In an October 1872 letter to his brother, he admitted his regret “that I did not stick to painting, and envy those like you to whom the aesthetic relations of things were the real world.”

Aside from the profound psychological and philosophical explanations for his depression, and aside from James’s intellectualizing and theorizing about the evil in the world, although valid, we can’t overlook the obvious external causes that explain James’s state of mind: He had long ago given up his studies to be a naturalist, had abandoned the study of art, probably to avoid further conflict with Henry Sr., and had gone through medical school with no intention of practicing medicine and without any inclination toward science, the direction in which his father had urged him. He was granted an MD in 1869, only because one of the examiners, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., was a family friend. James never practiced medicine. Having reached the age of twenty-seven without any definite vocational inclination, he watched his friends move forward in their careers, while he remained at home, an unemployed bachelor, supported by his father. To compound his depression, he had given up the only meaningful relationship he’d ever had with a woman. James was unable to commit himself either to a career or a person.

At last, in the summer of 1872 James had reason to feel renewed in both body and spirit. He received an invitation from Charles W. Eliot, formerly one of his instructors at the Lawrence Scientific School, now President of Harvard College, asking James to teach a course in physiology at Harvard, starting spring semester 1873. As William wrote his brother Henry on August 24, it was “a perfect godsend.”

He found teaching “interesting and stimulating,” he wrote Henry, was flattered by the position of authority, admitting it would be “not unpleasant as a permanent thing.” Nevertheless, when President Eliot offered him the tuition in physiology and anatomy for the following year, James turned him down, because, he wrote Henry in April, he preferred “to fight it out on the line of mental science.” The next month he wrote his brother that he’d changed his mind and had accepted the offer to teach for the following year at $600.

And then, unexpectedly, James resigned. Poor health was his reason; he hoped to regain his health by spending six months living and traveling with Henry in Italy. Still considering himself an invalid, he described his problem with his
customary vagueness, as "nervous weakness." Was he reluctant to remain in the academic world—in his case, the scientific world—because he was not yet ready to abandon his hopes of studying art? The unresolved conflict doubtless triggered his nervous restlessness, a restlessness that was characteristic and would propel him, throughout his life, to flee in search of peace of mind. All of the offspring of Henry James, Sr. suffered some degree of emotional instability, along with physical ailments.

In September 1873 he wrote Miss Havens that he planned to be in New York City, staying at 121 West 44th Street, while awaiting departure for Europe on October 11. She would be staying on the same street, number 203, and he hoped to see her. "I enclose a photograph I meant to have sent you last spring," he wrote. "I feel that I am far better looking, but it will serve to let you up gently to my personal apparition which might be too much for you if made ex abrupto."

They had not seen each other for five years, Miss Havens explained in her letter to James's son in 1913. But she was noncommittal, saying only that their meeting was in September or October 1873, and that "he came to see me in New York on two successive days, before sailing for Europe."

Renewing his relationship with Miss Havens seemed to have made the thirty-one-year-old James reflective. Soon after, on November 16, he wrote his newly married brother Willy from Florence confessing that "this state of single 'blessedness' is not just what it is cracked up to be." And less than a week later, on the 23rd, he wrote his sister Alice that he'd begun to realize "that at my time of life with such a set of desultory years behind, what a man most wants is to be settled."

After that meeting with Havens, during his five months abroad, there is only one known letter to her, written from Rome in December 1873, giving his impressions of Florence and Rome. After he'd been back in the United States for a week, he wrote Havens on March 23, 1874 to acknowledge her long letter to him; he summarized his itinerary in Europe, described his visit to "our dear old Grandmother" Frau Spangenburg, and before signing "affectionately your friend," he added that he'd bought her a souvenir in Dresden, some beads he had chosen, and apologized for his lack of imagination about gifts.

A few months later, on June 14, he wrote that he might visit her either in Stamford or in New York City. But James changed his mind, as he would do in the future.

Christmas of that year, 1874, James sent her a subscription to the Atlantic. "My brother [Henry] begins a 'Serial' in it which will run through the year." In early February 1875, he wrote that he planned a visit to New York City and would call on her. In a subsequent letter of February 20, he refers to his having left a copy of "Harry's book" at her house. But the weary tone of his letter, including such lines as: "I hardly know what more to say to you," and "I write to you today merely because I promised to do so soon," indicates that their meeting had not been a happy one.

Another planned visit to Havens in Stamford in summer of 1875 was postponed. His bizarre excuse this time was that he'd gone from Milwaukee to Niagara Falls where he'd "wavered between several ways of returning home, one of which was via N.Y. & Stamford. Finally for several cogent reasons I decided on the St. Lawrence, Montreal, & Vermont in which state my sister and aunt were spending their summer. On the way I bought a setter pup which rash act impoverished
me so that I had to sell the tickets I had already bought for Quebec and the Saquenay River.” He couldn’t afford to go to Stamford “this season.”

In each of his letters James made reference to one he’d received from her, often to her latest composition that she’d sent him. Aside from such phrases as, “I long to hear from you,” it appears that he revealed little of his feelings. But there is no way of knowing whether his detached tone is the result of Alice’s “editing” and selecting. It is clear from the surviving letters that James respected Havens’ intelligence, enjoyed their mutual interest in literature, and was genuinely concerned with her musical career and for her health. He complained of his own health and of his teaching duties; he was self-mocking, told her he felt old (he was thirty-three), and had hopes of a salary increase so that he would no longer be dependent on his father. He commented on what he was reading, suggested books for her to read, reported on his social life, and aired his opinions on current events. Christmas of 1875, once again wanting “to do something to show my friendship,” he sent her a subscription to the Atlantic. From the evidence his widow has left in his extant letters, it appears that he wanted only to remain her friend. Perhaps Frau Spangenberg’s blunt warning about Miss Haven’s feelings served to remind him to maintain a gentlemanly neutral distance. And possibly, after seven years, he remained uncertain about his own feelings.

He did not, however, show any such uncertainty about his feelings for Alice Gibbens, nor did he show any restraint in his letters to her. He would write her with an intensity, a charged urgency that may well have alarmed her just as his cool, non-committal detachment may have frustrated Miss Havens.

When William James and Alice Howe Gibbens were introduced at a meeting of the Radical Club in early 1876, he and the dark-eyed, dark-haired twenty-seven-year-old schoolteacher were immediately drawn to each other. William had attended the meeting of the Club, a group seeking a more liberal Christianity, for only one reason: his father, having met Alice at a previous gathering, had described her to his son as the future Mrs. William James. The thirty-four-year-old James, by then an assistant professor of physiology and anatomy at Harvard, earning $1200 a year, was soon in love. Despite his strong feelings, however, he was hesitant. Years of ill health and nervous disorders may have caused him to question his readiness for a close relationship. And, it’s possible that he may also have wondered about his long friendship with Miss Havens.

But Catherine Havens was an invalid whom he’d described to his sister as “capricious & unhappy.” Alice Gibbens, on the other hand, was a sturdy young woman, poised, intelligent and thoughtful, with a maturity that James must have found attractive. At age sixteen after her father died, she had no choice but to assume early responsibility, and with her mother and two sisters had moved to Germany where living expenses were lower. When they returned to the United States Alice taught school to help support the family. By the time she met William, she’d known not only the tragedy of her father’s early death, but how to manage on a limited income, something William did not know.

There are two extant letters from James to Havens written at about the time that he met Alice. The first he wrote from the examination room of University Hall on February 22, 1876 describing himself watching “38 unfortunate wretches” who were “biting their pencils, and scratching their heads and looking at the ceiling
for a glimpse of an answer.” He lamented that the “joys of the senses” were leaving him, be no longer derived pleasure from music: “capacity for emotion . . . departs with the youthful bloom of the cheek, and dry apathy takes its place.”

Less than a week later, on February 28, he wrote Havens to acknowledge her letter informing him of the death of “our poor old Grandmother” Frau Spangenberg. His note was uncharacteristically brief, saying little more than “God bless her! & that chapter in our lives is closed.” It was indeed closed, as he must have known, and his “capacity for emotion” had not at all departed.

Some of James’s extant courtship letters are the mere fragments that Alice copied. Many are complete, in his hand. Thus, just as we have a skewed picture of James’s long-term friendship with Miss Havens, we have only what his widow chose to preserve of James’s exhilaration, confusions, hesitations, and cryptic outcries. His ardent declaration of love, followed by a sequence of vacillations and self-serving rationalizations, would have driven a less stable young woman than Alice Gibbens flying in the opposite direction. How Alice responded to William’s missives is unknown, for her letters to him during their courtship have probably been destroyed along with an unknown number of family papers.

His first extant letter to Alice, March 14, 1876, was a brief note, returning a satirical poem she’d sent him about the Radical Club. On the outside of the envelope, in her girlish excitement, Alice Gibbens wrote, “My first letter!”

A month later, James was sympathetically responding to a letter from Miss Havens in which she told him that her musical manuscript had been rejected by the Atlantic: “Next summer when I visit you again, you will play it, and warble it into my ear, and my rapturous appreciation then will erase from your mind all memory of my stolid insensibility now.” He remarked that the “sad strain” in her letter went to his heart. To comfort her he reminded her that “indeed life is tamer as one grows old and the fringe grows smaller wherein all kinds of indefinite hopes abide when one is young. But somehow the seedy and dingy duties we find ourselves restricted to have a modest and honest reality about them wh. the gilded vision of inexperience lacked.”

If Catherine Havens had any “indefinite hopes” or “gilded visions” they would soon be shattered, as William James must have known when he described her warbling in his ear on his next visit. As promised, while on a ten-day summer holiday, he visited Miss Havens in Stamford, but after his return, more than a month passed before he wrote her on July 13, 1876: “I have many a time been on the point of writing to you since that brief conjunction at Stamford, but heat, work & fag each time induced procrastination.” After that flimsy excuse, he went on with his customary chatty comments about his holiday, his reading, current events. And then: “That ride we took together shall gleam eternally like an oasis in the withered waste of my life’s memory—I hope it will in yours in spite of my apparent impoliteness in being so sleepy. Through the veil of slumber which enveloped the apparent man, my soul was enjoying herself, & the company she was in, & the pleasure of finding you seeming in all respects so well.”

Such words might cause any young woman to question his sincerity, his inability to admit simply that he was tired. During what he inventively termed the ‘soul-restoring’ carriage ride with Miss Havens, James was either distracted, or more likely snoozing. The intention of his visit may have been more practical than sentimental: to check out Miss Havens one last time.
Later in the summer, he wrote Alice from Cambridge, a long, confused, incomprehensible letter (undated), the opening line of which indicates that they’d had a serious talk. “This expresses in a more orderly way than I was able to do it in the boat my way of feeling about the morality of marrying.” William’s pseudo-philosophical ramblings don’t make clear whether he was lamenting her refusal, or that he himself hadn’t made up his mind. The following day, he admitted in a P.S.: “On reading this over, it seems far from clear.”

Despite Alice’s cuts, we have glimpses of James’s confused state, hoping to “throw the responsibility of deciding on the other person.” But amidst his indecisions and emotional turmoil, he apparently declared his love for Alice regardless of her feelings. They’d known each other for about nine months. He’d known Miss Havens for eight years.

William didn’t neglect to send his customary Christmas-day (1876) letter to Miss Havens, admitting his mood was not merry. With apologies for being “absolutely incapable of choosing a Christmas token for anyone,” he’d renewed her subscription to the Atlantic, “for I shall always wish to send you some sentimental token of regard on this day. Be indulgest with the sterility of my imagination.” He had hoped, during his two week Christmas holiday, to be in New York City where he might “see a good deal of you. But I am obliged to conclude not to go . . . a visit to N.Y. is more of a fatigue than a rest . . . So now, my friend, we must postpone our meeting till next summer at least.” He’d been ill in the fall, he wrote, was overworked, “quite used up,” and hoping not to break down. “It is discouraging when one has a real appetite for work to find oneself such a lame duck.” He was still “Ever affectionately yours.” James didn’t state the nature of his ailments, but while he chose to maintain the invalid pose in relation to Miss Havens, it’s doubtful that he portrayed himself to Alice as man with such a delicate constitution. He felt insecure about the outcome of his shaky romance, but without any regard for Haven’s feelings, he was reluctant to let her go.

Just as Alice decided what letters to preserve, and of those, what passages to omit, Miss Havens may have selected the letters she loaned to James’s son and widow. In 1877 there are approximately three, perhaps four known letters to Miss Havens (James occasionally omitted the year), and a flurry of about twenty-one to Alice Gibbens, some of them dramatically frenzied. A close analysis of James’s letters to both women would be too lengthy, but a few quotes will serve to reveal his confusion and the resulting duplicity.

When he met Alice Gibbens in early 1877, they were immediately drawn to each other. But he continued to write Miss Havens, and in a letter on March 18, 1877, his excuse for not having written was not only because of the “absence of leisure,” but because he had been trying to find someone to sing the song she’d sent him. “I have been steadily grinding away at work—and feel at last pretty well fagged out in consequence.” He filled the pages with a rambling confusion of subjects: the weather, his father’s health, his brother Wilky’s business problems, his reading, his brother Henry’s novel The American. “Write when you can even if you write only a few lines.” Signed, “Yours always.”

A month later, however, on April 23, 1877, James was “bowed down with this solemn happiness.” He and Alice were engaged. The next week Alice sent him a photo; he sent a her photo, “taken of me the other day for the graduating class.” During April and May of 1877, William was sleepless with joy. He wrote
her daily from Newport where he was vacationing. They were, in effect, engaged. When his brother Bob visited him in May, the euphoric William showed him a photo of Alice. His letters to Alice written in May and June, with phrases such as, “Never have I felt so intimately near to you,” (May 29), and “craving to own you more & more, no matter what the consequences may be” (June 7) are essentially love letters.

But just a few days later, on June 12, James wrote Havens apologizing for not being able to visit her in Stamford or New York, because his brother Bob had arrived unexpectedly; and because of “work and parsimony.” He concluded by admitting he was “stupefied, muddled and beat by the events of the day and the perplexities of life.” He expressed his sorrow that their meeting had to be postponed, and instead he would send a new photo of himself, “taken for the graduating class,” no doubt the same one he sent Alice.

But by July the affair with Alice had begun to unravel, although the cause remains blurry. One fragment from James reads: “I renounce you! Let the eternal tides bear you where they will! In the end they’ll bear you round to where I wait for you. I’ll feed on death now, but I’ll buy the right to eternal life by it. If there is a life of any sort after this, there in sight of God and men I will lay my hand upon you and say ‘she’s mine.’ And you will yield.” It appears that some of William’s philosophic positions troubled Alice who decided that a separation would be healthiest for both of them; she would go to Canada with her sister.

He tried to persuade her to vacation in the Adirondacks where they might see each other. Twice, Alice refused, and through the summer of 1877 Alice and William fretted back and forth, until by September, he wrote his brother Bob that his love affair with his “angel incarnate” had “fallen through.”

As this drama continued to be played out, James, who by this time may have feared he’d lose both women, remained reluctant to give up his friendship with Miss Havens, and didn’t fail to send his customary Christmas letter on December 22, 1877, acknowledging her letter, blaming his long silence on the “state of my eyes.” He wanted to send her a Christmas greeting, but he would write a real letter “in good time.” This year he chose not to send “the tedious and threadbare device of the Atlantic monthly.” Instead, he was sending a “delicate trinket . . . a seltzer water bottle adorned . . . [with] poesies,” that he’d found at a fair. The bottle “seemed handsome” at the fair, but once he got it home, it seemed “a senseless thing.” He signed “always affectionately Wm. James.”

It was his last extant letter to Miss Havens. Less than five months later, on May 10, 1878, William James and Alice Gibbens were engaged. They were married on July 10th, 1878.

What was in William’s mind and heart in regard to Catherine Havens? From his diary entries at the time of their meeting, and his comments about her in letters to friends and family, there’s no doubt about his feelings. “I shall never give up the young lady,” he had written to his friend Tom Ward after he met Havens. Moreover, it is significant that a period of emotional crisis in his life, the cause of which has puzzled scholars, coincided with the temporary break in his correspondence with Miss Havens.

That period of crisis was the subject of a recent article in the New York Review of Books: “William James and the Case of the Epileptic Patient,” by Louis Menand (December 17, 1998). Menand, Professor of English at City University of New York, scholar and critic, author of The Future of Academic Freedom, examines at
length the period of James's life when, he claims, documentation is scarce (1869–1872). Some scholars have speculated that James, who was subject to occasional breakdowns, may have been a patient at McLean Asylum during that period, but efforts by several biographers to gain access to hospital records, have rightly been denied. (Who would trust a mental hospital that released a patient’s records?) In his essay, Menand discusses the basis for this assumption about James, focusing at length on a critical episode in James’s life, described by James himself, when, after having seen an epileptic patient in an asylum, he had a vision of himself as that patient. This is a simplification of Menand’s discussion, but any reader who wades through his detailed analysis of the episode, will be relieved to read his conclusion, that it is “biographical flotsam . . . unmoored to any known event in James’s life.”

Even if James did have a breakdown at some time during that period in his life and had to be hospitalized, it doesn’t diminish his exceptional academic career, nor his contribution to the development of American studies in philosophy and psychology. James himself never tried to conceal the fact that he had a fragile nervous system and bouts with depression. What can scholars hope to prove by finding out that, yes, he was a patient at McLean? Beyond that, they’ll learn no more.

A key point that Menand makes is that James’s diary, begun in April 1868, has “fairly regular” entries until February 1869. Menand notes that after that, “twenty-one pages (or as much as forty-two pages of James’s writing) have been cut out, apparently with scissors.” In the next dated entry, on December 2, 1869, James wrote, “Nature and life have unfitted me for any affectionate relations with other individuals.” Almost the entire diary for 1869 had been destroyed, Menand speculates, “either by James himself or his widow, Alice, who winnowed her husband’s papers with meticulous care.”

James’s last letter to Havens before the gap in their correspondence, was in February 1869. According to Menand, James claimed he had “an ‘annual collapse’ every February.”

It’s tempting to conclude that in those missing diary pages, James, with his compulsion for self-analysis, may have been trying to analyze his feelings for Havens. His lament in that December entry has the ring of a conclusion to thoughts he had expressed on the preceding pages.

Menand wrote: “All kinds of things may have happened to him between 1869 and 1872. We know only a few.” He makes references to some of James’s “fruitless passions in his youth,” and comments briefly on Catherine Havens: “He appears to have gotten involved, while he was in Germany, with an American woman, Catherine Havens, who was even more neurotic than he was,” a reference as dismissive as that of R. W. B. Lewis’s description of Havens in The James Family as “a nice little woman in her late twenties.”

James’s conflicted feelings over Havens were doubtless a source of torment for him, and contributed significantly to whatever crisis he suffered during the period for which Menand claims there is scant documentation. During that entire period, from 1869 through 1872, there exist seventy-two extant James letters, fifteen of which he wrote to Henry; (there is no extant letter to Henry in 1871). But it is useless to count letters. His brother Henry was as selective and efficient in destroying papers and letters as was wife Alice. Catherine Havens, however, had carefully saved her letters from James. How his son knew of their existence remains a mystery.
The larger question remains: why did James continue to mislead a woman he knew was of delicate sensibilities? Was he procrastinating just as he had over a choice of career? By resuming his correspondence with Havens, after the gap, continuing to send letters and gifts to her, planning visits, and ignoring Frau Spangenberg’s warning, James kept Havens ‘on a string,’ and despite the growing intensity of his feelings for Alice, continued to deceive her. Yet from all that we know of James, he was not a flirt, but not a deceiver of women, and as a sensitive human being, he must have felt remorse. While the origins of the melancholy James struggled with throughout his life were deep-rooted and existed long before he met Havens, it is not unlikely that a lingering guilt over his prolonged deception of a vulnerable human being haunted him. Menand quotes an observation by John Jay Chapman at the end of his essay: “There was, in spite of his playfulness, a deep sadness about James. You felt that he had just stepped out of this sadness in order to meet you, and was to go back into it the moment you left him.”

Why James’s ten-year friendship with Catherine Havens has been overlooked, or treated dismissively for all these years by so many scholars, is a puzzle. There are copies of twenty-seven extant letters James wrote to Catherine Havens, dating from June 17, 1868, soon after their first meeting, to the last, dated December 22, 1877, as well as her letters to his wife and son, recalling her friendship with James, letters that throw some light on ten years of his life.

William was thirty-six years old when he married. Little is known of his earlier friendships with women. In his twenties, he thought highly of Lizzie Boott, who became an artist; he flirted with Fanny Dixwell, who married his friend Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and he was charmed, as was Henry, by their cousin, Minny Temple, whose early death from tuberculous deeply affected both brothers. Although he and Henry shared intimate details with each other on the state of their health, their extant letters reveal that neither was forthcoming about personal relationships. William’s few comments to his brother about women were usually detached, occasionally critical, sometimes admiring, more often flippant and humorous.

Catherine Havens was the first woman with whom James had a long term serious relationship. But however much he admired her she was at that time a woman of delicate health and temperament, and James had grown accustomed to consider himself the one who needed to be cared for.

In Alice Gibbens, a woman chosen for him by his father, he sensed the strength, and stability that he needed in a wife; her willingness to put up with his immature outbursts during their courtship must have convinced him further. His instinctive feelings proved right, for according to an unpublished memoir by his eldest son, admitted “passion” at age fifty-three for Pauline Goldmark, a twenty-one-years-old Bryn Mawr student. In the surviving eighty-five letters he wrote to her his affection is evident. While there was no threat to his marriage, Alice did not take kindly to his occasional show of affection, especially when he was moved to kiss one of their servants. Perhaps Alice’s long-suffering endurance of his open, apparently innocent flirtations, accounts for her dramatic cuts in his letters to Havens, and to her disownment of family letters. It was dubious a role of William she preferred to forget, and above all, chose not to preserve.

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1. James’s biographers have avoided, or touched lightly on his susceptibility to women: Ralph Barton Perry, Gay Wilson Allen, Gerald E. Myers, Howard M. Frisono, Jacques Barzun, H. W. B. Lewis, have omitted that aspect of James, and his relationship with Catherine Havens is ignored. Kim Townsend in Method at Harvard (P.W. Norton 1996), mentions Havens’ profound effect on James, but claims erroneously that their friendship was brief. Linda Simon, however, the most recent biographer, has examined James’s attraction to several intelligent, talented women more thoroughly in Genuine Reality (Harcourt Brace & Co. 1998). One of his flirtations was an
William’s marriage transformed him; he shed the morbidity that had engulfed him during his latter twenties and early thirties. If his extant letters to Alice throughout their marriage are any guide, he was in love with her all his life.

Miss Havens may have been in love with William all her life. How or when she learned of William’s marriage, and how it affected her, isn’t known. In response to his widow’s and son’s request for letters, she wrote at length, recalling affectionate memories of William, freely expressing high regard for him without a shred of bitterness. James’s sixty-four-year-old widow took the trouble to return Miss Havens’ letters in person, perhaps because she was curious to meet the woman who had enchanted William before he met her.

Not one of the letters Miss Havens had kept for over 45 years and had generously loaned to James’s son was included in the two-volume edition of William’s letters, nor is she ever mentioned, except in a footnote in Volume I, where she is referred to as a “fellow pensionnaire” who “supplied a helpful memorandum.” Catherine Havens never married. Efforts to trace the original letters William wrote to her have failed. She died in Stamford, Connecticut, in February 1939 in her 100th year.