

A profile portrait of Henry James, facing left, with a dark background and a subtle light source from the right, highlighting his features. The portrait is partially obscured by the large text below.

Henry James

Complete Stories 1864–1874

HENRY JAMES

COMPLETE STORIES
1864-1874



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Complete Stories of Henry James

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The Story of a Year	Gabrielle de Bergerac
A Landscape Painter	Travelling Companions
A Day of Days	A Passionate Pilgrim
My Friend Bingham	At Isella
Poor Richard	Master Eustace
The Story of a Masterpiece	Guest's Confession
The Romance of Certain Old Clothes	The Madonna of the Future
A Most Extraordinary Case	The Sweetheart of M. Briseux
A Problem	The Last of the Valerii
De Grey: A Romance	Madame de Mauves
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HENRY JAMES

JEAN STROUSE
WROTE THE NOTES FOR THIS VOLUME

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A Tragedy of Error

A LOW English phaeton was drawn up before the door of the post office of a French seaport town. In it was seated a lady, with her veil down and her parasol held closely over her face. My story begins with a gentleman coming out of the office and handing her a letter.

He stood beside the carriage a moment before getting in. She gave him her parasol to hold, and then lifted her veil, showing a very pretty face. This couple seemed to be full of interest for the passers by, most of whom stared hard and exchanged significant glances. Such persons as were looking on at the moment saw the lady turn very pale as her eyes fell on the direction of the letter. Her companion saw it too, and instantly stepping into the place beside her, took up the reins, and drove rapidly along the main street of the town, past the harbor, to an open road skirting the sea. Here he slackened pace. The lady was leaning back, with her veil down again, and the letter lying open in her lap. Her attitude was almost that of unconsciousness, and he could see that her eyes were closed. Having satisfied himself of this, he hastily possessed himself of the letter, and read as follows:

SOUTHAMPTON, *July 16th, 18—*

MY DEAR HORTENSE: You will see by my postmark that I am a thousand leagues nearer home than when I last wrote, but I have hardly time to explain the change. M. P—— has given me a most unlooked-for *congé*. After so many months of separation, we shall be able to spend a few weeks together. God be praised! We got in here from New York this morning, and I have had the good luck to find a vessel, the *Armorique*, which sails straight for H——. The mail leaves directly, but we shall probably be detained a few hours by the tide; so this will reach you a day before I arrive: the master calculates we shall get in early Thursday morning. Ah, Hortense! how the time drags! Three whole days. If I did not write from New York, it is because I was unwilling to torment you with an expectancy which, as it is, I venture to hope, you will find long enough. Farewell. To a warmer greeting!

Your devoted
C. B.

When the gentleman replaced the paper on his companion's lap, his face was almost as pale as hers. For a moment he gazed fixedly and vacantly before him, and a half-suppressed curse escaped his lips. Then his eyes reverted to his neighbor. After some hesitation, during which he allowed the reins to hang so loose that the horse lapsed into a walk, he touched her gently on the shoulder.

'Well, Hortense,' said he, in a very pleasant tone, 'what's the matter; have you fallen asleep?'

Hortense slowly opened her eyes, and, seeing that they had left the town behind them, raised her veil. Her features were stiffened with horror.

'Read that,' said she, holding out the open letter.

The gentleman took it, and pretended to read it again.

'Ah! M. Bernier returns. Delightful!' he exclaimed.

'How, delightful?' asked Hortense; 'we mustn't jest at so serious a crisis, my friend.'

'True,' said the other, 'it will be a solemn meeting. Two years of absence is a great deal.'

'O Heaven! I shall never dare to face him,' cried Hortense, bursting into tears.

Covering her face with one hand, she put out the other toward that of her friend. But he was plunged in so deep a reverie, that he did not perceive the movement. Suddenly he came to, aroused by her sobs.

'Come, come,' said he, in the tone of one who wishes to coax another into mistrust of a danger before which he does not himself feel so secure but that the sight of a companion's indifference will give him relief. 'What if he does come? He need learn nothing. He will stay but a short time, and sail away again as unsuspecting as he came.'

'Learn nothing! You surprise me. Every tongue that greets him, if only to say *bon jour*, will wag to the tune of a certain person's misconduct.'

'Bah! People don't think about us quite as much as you fancy. You and I, *n'est-ce pas?* we have little time to concern ourselves about our neighbors' failings. Very well, other people are in the same box, better or worse. When a ship goes to pieces on those rocks out at sea, the poor devils who are pushing their way to land on a floating spar, don't bestow

many glances on those who are battling with the waves beside them. Their eyes are fastened to the shore, and all their care is for their own safety. In life we are all afloat on a tumultuous sea; we are all struggling toward some *terra firma* of wealth or love or leisure. The roaring of the waves we kick up about us and the spray we dash into our eyes deafen and blind us to the sayings and doings of our fellows. Provided we climb high and dry, what do we care for them?’

‘Ay, but if we don’t? When we’ve lost hope ourselves, we want to make others sink. We hang weights about their necks, and dive down into the dirtiest pools for stones to cast at them. My friend, you don’t feel the shots which are not aimed at you. It isn’t of you the town talks, but of me: a poor woman throws herself off the pier yonder, and drowns before a kind hand has time to restrain her, and her corpse floats over the water for all the world to look at. When her husband comes up to see what the crowd means, is there any lack of kind friends to give him the good news of his wife’s death?’

‘As long as a woman is light enough to float, Hortense, she is not counted drowned. It’s only when she sinks out of sight that they give her up.’

Hortense was silent a moment, looking at the sea with swollen eyes.

‘Louis,’ she said at last, ‘we were speaking metaphorically: I have half a mind to drown myself literally.’

‘Nonsense!’ replied Louis; ‘an accused pleads “not guilty,” and hangs himself in prison. What do the papers say? People talk, do they? Can’t you talk as well as they? A woman is in the wrong from the moment she holds her tongue and refuses battle. And that you do too often. That pocket handkerchief is always more or less of a flag of truce.’

‘I’m sure I don’t know,’ said Hortense indifferently; ‘perhaps it is.’

There are moments of grief in which certain aspects of the subject of our distress seems as irrelevant as matters entirely foreign to it. Her eyes were still fastened on the sea. There was another silence. ‘O my poor Charles!’ she murmured, at length, ‘to what a hearth do you return!’

‘Hortense,’ said the gentleman, as if he had not heard her, although, to a third person, it would have appeared that it

was because he had done so that he spoke: 'I do not need to tell you that it will never happen to me to betray our secret. But I will answer for it that so long as M. Bernier is at home no mortal shall breathe a syllable of it.'

'What of that?' sighed Hortense. 'He will not be with me ten minutes without guessing it.'

'Oh, as for that,' said her companion, dryly, 'that's your own affair.'

'Monsieur de Meyrau!' cried the lady.

'It seems to me,' continued the other, 'that in making such a guarantee, I have done my part of the business.'

'Your part of the business!' sobbed Hortense.

M. de Meyrau made no reply, but with a great cut of the whip sent the horse bounding along the road. Nothing more was said. Hortense lay back in the carriage with her face buried in her handkerchief, moaning. Her companion sat upright, with contracted brows and firmly set teeth, looking straight before him, and by an occasional heavy lash keeping the horse at a furious pace. A wayfarer might have taken him for a ravisher escaping with a victim worn out with resistance. Travellers to whom they were known would perhaps have seen a deep meaning in this accidental analogy. So, by a *détour*, they returned to the town.

When Hortense reached home, she went straight up to a little boudoir on the second floor, and shut herself in. This room was at the back of the house, and her maid, who was at that moment walking in the long garden which stretched down to the water, where there was a landing place for small boats, saw her draw in the window blind and darken the room, still in her bonnet and cloak. She remained alone for a couple of hours. At five o'clock, some time after the hour at which she was usually summoned to dress her mistress for the evening, the maid knocked at Hortense's door, and offered her services. Madame called out, from within, that she had a *migraine*, and would not be dressed.

'Can I get anything for madame?' asked Josephine; 'a *tisane*, a warm drink, something?'

'Nothing, nothing.'

'Will madame dine?'

'No.'

‘Madame had better not go wholly without eating.’

‘Bring me a bottle of wine—of brandy.’

Josephine obeyed. When she returned, Hortense was standing in the doorway, and as one of the shutters had meanwhile been thrown open, the woman could see that, although her mistress’s hat had been tossed upon the sofa, her cloak had not been removed, and that her face was very pale. Josephine felt that she might not offer sympathy nor ask questions.

‘Will madame have nothing more?’ she ventured to say, as she handed her the tray.

Madame shook her head, and closed and locked the door.

Josephine stood a moment vexed, irresolute, listening. She heard no sound. At last she deliberately stooped down and applied her eye to the keyhole.

This is what she saw:

Her mistress had gone to the open window, and stood with her back to the door, looking out at the sea. She held the bottle by the neck in one hand, which hung listlessly by her side; the other was resting on a glass half filled with water, standing, together with an open letter, on a table beside her. She kept this position until Josephine began to grow tired of waiting. But just as she was about to arise in despair of gratifying her curiosity, madame raised the bottle and glass, and filled the latter full. Josephine looked more eagerly. Hortense held it a moment against the light, and then drained it down.

Josephine could not restrain an involuntary whistle. But her surprise became amazement when she saw her mistress prepare to take a second glass. Hortense put it down, however, before its contents were half gone, as if struck by a sudden thought, and hurried across the room. She stooped down before a cabinet, and took out a small opera glass. With this she returned to the window, put it to her eyes, and again spent some moments in looking seaward. The purpose of this proceeding Josephine could not make out. The only result visible to her was that her mistress suddenly dropped the lorgnette on the table, and sank down on an armchair, covering her face with her hands.

Josephine could contain her wonderment no longer. She hurried down to the kitchen.

‘Valentine,’ said she to the cook, ‘what on earth can be the matter with Madame? She will have no dinner, she is drinking brandy by the glassful, a moment ago she was looking out to sea with a lorgnette, and now she is crying dreadfully with an open letter in her lap.’

The cook looked up from her potato-peeling with a significant wink.

‘What can it be,’ said she, ‘but that monsieur returns?’

II.

At six o’clock, Josephine and Valentine were still sitting together, discussing the probable causes and consequences of the event hinted at by the latter. Suddenly Madame Bernier’s bell rang. Josephine was only too glad to answer it. She met her mistress descending the stairs, combed, cloaked, and veiled, with no traces of agitation, but a very pale face.

‘I am going out,’ said Madame Bernier; ‘if M. le Vicomte comes, tell him I am at my mother-in-law’s, and wish him to wait till I return.’

Josephine opened the door, and let her mistress pass; then stood watching her as she crossed the court.

‘Her mother-in-law’s,’ muttered the maid; ‘she has the face!’

When Hortense reached the street, she took her way, not through the town, to the ancient quarter where that ancient lady, her husband’s mother, lived, but in a very different direction. She followed the course of the quay, beside the harbor, till she entered a crowded region, chiefly the residence of fishermen and boatmen. Here she raised her veil. Dusk was beginning to fall. She walked as if desirous to attract as little observation as possible, and yet to examine narrowly the population in the midst of which she found herself. Her dress was so plain that there was nothing in her appearance to solicit attention; yet, if for any reason a passer by had happened to notice her, he could not have helped being struck by the contained intensity with which she scrutinized every figure she met. Her manner was that of a person seeking to recognize a long-lost friend, or perhaps, rather, a long-lost enemy, in a crowd. At last she stopped before a flight of steps, at the

foot of which was a landing place for half a dozen little boats, employed to carry passengers between the two sides of the port, at times when the drawbridge above was closed for the passage of vessels. While she stood she was witness of the following scene:

A man, in a red woollen fisherman's cap, was sitting on the top of the steps, smoking the short stump of a pipe, with his face to the water. Happening to turn about, his eye fell on a little child, hurrying along the quay toward a dingy tenement close at hand, with a jug in its arms.

'Hullo, youngster!' cried the man; 'what have you got there? Come here.'

The little child looked back, but, instead of obeying, only quickened its walk.

'The devil take you, come here!' repeated the man, angrily, 'or I'll wring your beggarly neck. You won't obey your own uncle, eh?'

The child stopped, and ruefully made its way to its relative, looking around several times toward the house, as if to appeal to some counter authority.

'Come, make haste!' pursued the man, 'or I shall go and fetch you. Move!'

The child advanced to within half a dozen paces of the steps, and then stood still, eyeing the man cautiously, and hugging the jug tight.

'Come on, you little beggar, come up close.'

The youngster kept a stolid silence, however, and did not budge. Suddenly its self-styled uncle leaned forward, swept out his arm, clutched hold of its little sunburnt wrist, and dragged it toward him.

'Why didn't you come when you were called?' he asked, running his disengaged hand into the infant's frowsy mop of hair, and shaking its head until it staggered. 'Why didn't you come, you unmannerly little brute, eh?—eh?—eh?' accompanying every interrogation with a renewed shake.

The child made no answer. It simply and vainly endeavored to twist its neck around under the man's gripe, and transmit some call for succor to the house.

'Come, keep your head straight. Look at me, and answer me. What's in that jug? Don't lie.'

‘Milk.’

‘Who for?’

‘Granny.’

‘Granny be hanged.’

The man disengaged his hands, lifted the jug from the child’s feeble grasp, tilted it toward the light, surveyed its contents, put it to his lips, and exhausted them. The child, although liberated, did not retreat. It stood watching its uncle drink until he lowered the jug. Then, as he met its eyes, it said:

‘It was for the baby.’

For a moment the man was irresolute. But the child seemed to have a foresight of the parental resentment, for it had hardly spoken when it darted backward and scampered off, just in time to elude a blow from the jug, which the man sent clattering at its heels. When it was out of sight, he faced about to the water again, and replaced the pipe between his teeth with a heavy scowl and a murmur that sounded to Madame Bernier very like—‘I wish the baby’d choke.’

‘Hortense was a mute spectator of this little drama. When it was over, she turned around, and retraced her steps twenty yards with her hand to her head. Then she walked straight back, and addressed the man.

‘My good man,’ she said, in a very pleasant voice, ‘are you the master of one of these boats?’

He looked up at her. In a moment the pipe was out of his mouth, and a broad grin in its place. He rose, with his hand to his cap.

‘I am, madame, at your service.’

‘Will you take me to the other side?’

‘You don’t need a boat; the bridge is closed,’ said one of his comrades at the foot of the steps, looking that way.

‘I know it,’ said Madame Bernier; ‘but I wish to go to the cemetery, and a boat will save me half a mile walking.’

‘The cemetery is shut at this hour.’

‘*Allons*, leave madame alone,’ said the man first spoken to. ‘This way, my lady.’

Hortense seated herself in the stern of the boat. The man took the sculls.

‘Straight across?’ he asked.

Hortense looked around her. 'It's a fine evening,' said she; 'suppose you row me out to the lighthouse, and leave me at the point nearest the cemetery on our way back.'

'Very well,' rejoined the boatman; 'fifteen sous,' and began to pull lustily.

'*Allez*, I'll pay you well,' said Madame.

'Fifteen sous is the fare,' insisted the man.

'Give me a pleasant row, and I'll give you a hundred,' said Hortense.

Her companion said nothing. He evidently wished to appear not to have heard her remark. Silence was probably the most dignified manner of receiving a promise too munificent to be anything but a jest.

For some time this silence was maintained, broken only by the trickling of the oars and the sounds from the neighboring shores and vessels. Madame Bernier was plunged in a sidelong scrutiny of her ferryman's countenance. He was a man of about thirty-five. His face was dogged, brutal, and sullen. These indications were perhaps exaggerated by the dull monotony of his exercise. The eyes lacked a certain rascally gleam which had appeared in them when he was so *empresé* with the offer of his services. The face was better then—that is, if vice is better than ignorance. We say a countenance is 'lit up' by a smile; and indeed that momentary flicker does the office of a candle in a dark room. It sheds a ray upon the dim upholstery of our souls. The visages of poor men, generally, know few alternations. There is a large class of human beings whom fortune restricts to a single change of expression, or, perhaps, rather to a single expression. Ah me! the faces which wear either nakedness or rags; whose repose is stagnation, whose activity vice; ignorant at their worst, infamous at their best!

'Don't pull too hard,' said Hortense at last. 'Hadn't you better take breath a moment?'

'Madame is very good,' said the man, leaning upon his oars. 'But if you had taken me by the hour,' he added, with a return of the vicious grin, 'you wouldn't catch me loitering.'

'I suppose you work very hard,' said Madame Bernier.

The man gave a little toss of his head, as if to intimate the inadequacy of any supposition to grasp the extent of his labors.