

Letter from Lionel James to Henry Rosher James  
Announcing his engagement to Ethel de Pearsall Clabburn  
8<sup>th</sup> August 1912

Transcribed and annotated by John Barnard  
(Updated 1 November 2010)

*In this wonderful letter, my grandfather describes to his elder brother the developing feelings that led to his marriage to my grandmother. Lionel ("Leo") James (1868-1948) was already 44, and had been Headmaster of Monmouth Grammar School for six years. Ethel de Pearsall Clabburn (1879-1960) was 33, and had been the School Matron for longer than that. Henry Rosher James (1862-1931) was Principal of Presidency College in Calcutta. Both brothers had been Queen's Scholars at Westminster School, and School Captains, and both had read Classics at Christ Church, Oxford.*

*The letter retains its original envelope, addressed to H. R. James, Esq., at the Grand Hotel, Calcutta, India. The envelope is postmarked at Monmouth at 7.30pm on the date the letter was written, and it is franked on the reverse at Calcutta on 25 August. It was evidently retained by Henry, and eventually passed to his younger son, Eric Trevenen James (1904-1989), spending nearly 60 years in the attic of his house in Tavistock, from where I retrieved it in August 2010.*

The School House  
Monmouth

August 8<sup>th</sup> 1912

My dear Bob<sup>1</sup>,

*βροτοῖσιν οὐδέν ἔστ' ἀπώμοτον.  
ψεύδει γὰρ ἡ ἴτινοια τὴν γνώμην*  
*[Against nothing should men pledge their word;  
for the after-thought belies the first intent.]<sup>2</sup>*

When I came to Monmouth<sup>3</sup>, and had to entrust the charge of the School House to a Lady Matron,<sup>4</sup> there was an obvious danger, and I registered mentally a solemn vow that I would be proof against it. It's taken six years to make me break it – but it's broken now. Destiny is too strong for mortal wills – *Greek quotation ["not even the gods can fight against necessity"]*.<sup>5</sup> And it's a very blessed Destiny that gives me such a wife. The wise will shake their heads, and say they foresaw it all; and perhaps they are right. Anyhow, I have come to it by very slow stages & deliberate conviction. And you have all helped. Ethel was so good to Mary and the children<sup>6</sup>, and so nice to all my visitors; and Mollie<sup>7</sup> liked her so much. It was Mollie who started a warm feeling when she mothered Ethel for her operation. And then came the little sisters<sup>8</sup> Ethel herself had mothered, & got honourably started in life out of wrecked fortunes<sup>9</sup>. I can tell you some day at leisure what a noble woman she has been. Then at Easter came Nunks' death<sup>10</sup>, & she was so tender and laid him out reverently on his last bed. It has all worked in an irresistible chain, and I am gloriously happy. Everyone in Monmouth is simply delighted, and the way gentle and simple<sup>11</sup> come in to offer congratulations is most touching. There is no doubt that Ethel has won the affection of Monmouth in a wonderful way.

Well, my wise Bobby, you have given us wise counsel – & wise admonition. The counsel to get married I am taking; the admonition to be cautious I have also taken; and it is on the deliberate conviction that I can meet no nobler woman or better mistress of the School House that I have plighted troth.

We talked of next Easter for wedding, & have had our heads nearly blown off. But wisest counsellors all urge the greater simplicity of this holidays, & we have practically settled now to be married in the first week in September<sup>12</sup> – which will be before I can get any answer to this from you.

Sorry to be longwinded - but this only happens once in a lifetime, & I thought you'd like to know all about it. I am very sorry to hear you have been so bothered with extra things, & that you have been seedy; but I hope you are quite right again. Anyhow this will make you so. Always your affect[ionate]

Kiddy<sup>13</sup>

- 1 For some reason I have not yet ascertained, Henry was known to his brother as "Bob" or "Bobby".
- 2 The quotation is from Sophocles' *Antigone*, lines 388-389, and the translation shown is from that by R.C. Jebb (*The Tragedies of Sophocles*, Cambridge University Press, 1917). I'm grateful to Leo and Ethel's classically-educated great-grand-daughters, Cassie and Jemima Cooper, and to Jemima's former Director of Studies, Dr Neil Hopkinson (Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge) for their efforts in identifying it.
- 3 Leo was appointed Headmaster at Monmouth Grammar School in 1906, having failed to secure the Headmastership of his *alma mater*, Westminster School.
- 4 Ethel was already in place as Matron when Leo arrived at Monmouth.
- 5 A proverb attributed to the sage Pittacus of Mytiline (c. 640-570 BC) and mentioned in the *Protagoras* of Plato (345d). Thanks to Jemima Cooper for the translation, and to Dr Hopkinson for identification of the source.
- 6 Henry's wife Mary (nee Hindle) (1864-1947) and their three children spent several months staying at Monmouth around 1907, after Henry had returned to his post in India following a period of leave.
- 7 Mary ("Mollie") Hindle James (later Mackinnon) (1899-1998) was the middle of Henry's three children, and was about 8 at the time of her stay at Monmouth. In her own memoirs (M.H. Mackinnon, *For All That Time Has Held*, privately published, NSW, Australia, 1993 ISBN 0 646 14825 7, pp 6-7) she specifically refers to her fondness for "Miss Clabon" [sic], and her delight at Ethel's eventual marriage to her bachelor uncle Leo. I do not know what "operation" is being referred to.
- 8 Ethel (1879-1960) largely took responsibility for bringing up her younger sisters Dorothy (1892-1970) and Viva (1895-c. 1933) after their father's death in 1901. (The third sister, Adele (1884-1923) had married in 1908, and emigrated to Australia, and their two brothers Charles (1881-1966) and Walter (1889-1951) emigrated to New Zealand and Australia respectively.) In 1916 Dorothy married Cyril Hearne Pearson (1886-1946), an assistant master at Monmouth, though their relationship had evidently already begun by the date of this letter, as both were present at the wedding in Brighton.
- 9 The Clabburn family had been left in severe financial difficulty by the death of Ethel's father (of stomach cancer aged 51) in 1901, and Ethel's mother Rosey (who seems to have been an alcoholic) was evidently unequal to the demands of single parenthood, leaving the 22-year-old Ethel to take responsibility for her younger siblings.
- 10 Leo's uncle Augustus Frederick James (known as "Nunks" or "Uncle Dick") (1842-1912) spent his last years at Monmouth with his nephew.
- 11 Although somewhat outdated by 1912, the lovely phrase "gentle and simple" refers to the highly stratified social order of early 20th-century Monmouth. As A.C. Fox-Davies notes in his *Complete Guide to Heraldry* (T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1909, page 19): "There were two qualitative terms: 'gentle' and 'simple' which were applied to the upper and lower classes respectively."
- 12 They were actually married on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1912 at Brighton (where Ethel's mother lived).
- 13 "Kiddy" seems to be the name by which Leo was known to Henry, who was nearly 6 years older than him.



August 8<sup>th</sup> 1912

THE SCHOOL HOUSE,  
MONMOUTH.

My dear Bob,

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κεῖθε γὰρ ἡ πείρα τὴν γράμην.

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of the School House to a lady teacher, there was an  
obvious danger, & I registered mentally a solemn  
vow that I would be proof against it. It's taken six

years to make me break it — but it's broken  
now. Xestiny is too strong for mortal wills —  
'Avayka d'oidé' Beoi méporaxi. And it's a very  
blessed Xestiny that gives us such a wife. The wise  
will shake their heads, & say they foresaw it all;  
and perhaps they are right. How I have come  
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little sister Ethel herself had no other, & got  
honestly started in life out of wrecked fortunes.  
I can tell you some day at leisure what a  
noble woman she has been. Then at last came  
Nancy's death, & she was so tender & laid him out

THE SCHOOL HOUSE,  
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THE SCHOOL HOUSE,  
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know all about it. I am very sorry to hear  
you have been so bothered with other things, & that  
you have been busy; but I hope you are quite right  
again. Anyway this will make you so! Always your affec-  
tionate  
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