

**Letter from Mary Edith James (wife of Henry Rosher James)
to their son Harold Hindle James,
dated Tuesday 22 February and Sunday [27 February 1916]**

Transcript and annotations by John Barnard

Updated 28 Dec 2024

The letter was written in the aftermath of the assault on Professor Oaten at Presidency College, which led to the resignation of James as Principal of the College. It shows that James and his wife felt that the entire process was unfair to him, was controlled by his "enemies" (identifying P.C. Lyon, Hornell and Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee as the principal culprits) and failed to recognise James's achievements in improving discipline at the college.

The letter is written on six numbered sheets, each with four sides, and the transcript below is divided in the same way. The letter was clearly written under considerable emotional strain, while events were unfolding, and the handwriting is often unclear. Where possible I have used the context to identify illegible words (sometimes qualified with a [?]); in other cases I have left #####. I have added a few explanatory footnotes to give background. A scan of the original letter is appended for comparison.

[Sheet 1]

Grand Hotel
Calcutta
Tues Feb 22nd [1916]

My darling Boy

I am a little exhausted with the strain and worry of the times, so excuse if I seem stupid. It is difficult to write even to you darling & to know where to begin. The world seems in a whirl. And oh! it is such an utterly and unbelievably unfair world. Mr Oaten & some

10 or 15 students, out of 1000, create this turmoil & your poor hard working honest & just father has all the brunt of it. Oaten has been making all the mischief he can, & as you know Government ##### Lyon, in the Education Dept, seizes this great opportunity to humiliate, isolate[?] & utterly do for your father has told you that a Committee has been

formed to enquire into the discipline of the Pres[idency] Coll[ege]. The one college which has stood so high in discipline, as well as every thing else, since your father took it over. The discipline is as good as it possibly can be, your father has made very good ##### & sees to the best of his ability that they are carried out. But in

India, where neither the student nor the Indian professor nor in fact any of the best educated natives, seem to have any sense of discipline in practice and it is an almost impossible task but it has been done, under your father ##### incredibly[?] proud[?]. Any one who was at Pres[idency] College before your father came [three words deleted] or knows anything about

[Sheet 2]

the conditions of the college before, and since his time, says the change is wonderful. A late professor who has for some time been assistant to P[ublic] I[nstruction] wrote to your father about 8 weeks ago before this disturbance & said that the "improvement in Pres[idency] College since his time was beyond words". Can you imagine what this ##### means. To begin with

two of the people on the Committee[?] are his sworn enemies, one Hornell & the other the late Vice Chancellor, who is acknowledged to be his enemy[?] & everyone knows that he is jealous of Pres[idency] college, ##### Vice C[hancellor] did it all the harm he could. This man is President of the Committee[?]. ##### Lyon has chosen[?] this ##### he will do all the harm possible

to your father. Oh is it brutal. And then to appoint your father himself[?] on the Committee[?]. He has refused to sit & if they had insisted would have resigned at once. We don't know yet what the out come of his refusal may be, he may be asked to resign. Anyway we shall have to go now. Dad can't stay on now after this, but of course unless

he is made to resign, we shall take the two years leave due to your father on half pay, from April next, when the session ends. He has survived[?] a great deal but he can't stand this. It is the last straw. I only hope we may break Lyon over it, even as he has broken us. He is a serpent. He pretended to be very friendly over this business at first & then suddenly springs this on your father.

[Sheet 3]

Just imagine the humiliation of this enquiry, Professors, English & Indian & students are to come and give evidence. Dad is like a criminal in a Court of Law. If our poor dad can stand it. There is a good article in the "Statesman" this morning on the affair which I will send you. Lyon has got his opportunity to humble your father to the very dust, but he will find it difficult I believe, even with the help of Hornell & Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee,

late Vice-C[hancellor]. This is his last opportunity, for Lyon himself has to retire in Nov[ember] next. He wants to take every shred of honour & credit from your Father & to ruin his life's work. He has never missed a chance of doing him an injury. Keeping that allowance from him was his last, before this, but only small compared to this. ##### darling

there are two great consolations in this. One that we shall I hope & trust, see you now quite comparatively soon. If we are allowed & you would like us to, we should be able to stay a week anyway at Ismailia¹ on our way home & see you darling, that thought keeps us up. But I so fear[?] also that we shall not be allowed. Then also

1 Ismailia is a town on the Suez canal in Egypt, which would have been a stopping point on the voyage from India to England. Harold James was at the time serving in Egypt as an Observer in the Royal Flying Corps, and was probably based at the British airbase there. Later in 1916 he returned to England to train as a pilot.

we shall get back to our little family soon. But it is not nice to return in this way, instead of crowned with honour. As your father, if any man in Gvt [Government] service deserves honours, deserves it. It is shameful[?] why this thing should be so. We had a horrid shock on hearing last night that those bombers[?] had been dropping bombs in Walmer² on Sunday. I wonder if it was near

[Sheet 4]

our church. Two men & a boy killed. ##### is very anxious about our little party, and it will have given them a great shock. I wonder if they will go to #####. I cannot write any more today darling. Our next mail does not reach Bombay until Thursday coming[?], so I suppose our letters will eventually[?] arrive here on Saturday night or Sunday morning. I hope there will be news from you.

Sun [27 Feb 1916]. Fortunately this week the mail is going out two days later, for we have not had much heart for writing nor time. The worst has happened as your father has told you, so I will not. This painful ##### old boy, we feel so sorry, it makes[?] my heart very sore[?] to have to write this sad news to you, but never seem to cheer you, but you cheer us, we have

gone through an awful time, but are recovering. They say all private opinion in Calcutta, among those who count, civilians[?] & high court judges ## ## our side & they say it is disgraceful. And the great blazing ##### government statement[?] to be published is spiteful. We[?] have just had a high court judge & his wife to see us to offer sympathy and they say that

the government is so vile & scandalously wicked that any one can see at once that it is purely vindictive and malicious. I am not sending it because it is so hateful. But there is a chance of it getting into the papers in Egypt so you might see a copy of an Indian paper. Don't worry if you do darling. Your father has not done what it says.

[Sheet 5]

There is just the surface of truth, but oh so magnified, so if you see it, be just amazed[?] at such accusation. As many are here saying[?] it is government that is disgraced and not your father. Most of the papers this time are against us, nearly all except the Statesman. Government has evidently bought[?] them over and they accuse the "Statesman" of supporting your father for family

reasons. They imagine it is said that I am a sister to the editor's son's ##### community and only given them money. For if they can say such a thing as that, it shows that all else they say is ##### false. Of course it is not truth what the papers say & only for every one #####, who counts, about your father

& his work out here. Now darling no more on this unpleasant subject. We had our wire from you yesterday, it was ### ## of cheer & it was such a relief to have had word from you for we had not

2 Walmer is a town on the south coast of England, near Dover, where the James family home was. At the time, Mary James's sister Lilian was living there with the James's two younger children, Mollie (Mary) and "Bob" (Eric).

had one for weeks. I am sorry this "#####" for now. I am afraid that means we shall not see you on our way home & that darling seems too cruel to think of.

Surely fate will not be so unkind. We have also had yesterday, at last, a little note from you. I have two ##### messages from you any way since to reassure us. But we long for news. We think there should be one letter before ##### then and one since. I wonder why they don't come. #####'s letters from home are not as cheery as usual this mail. We hope when this reaches you that things will have

[Sheet 6]

become less trying & that we shall have had our leave granted ##### probably they will not give it. Just to torture your father a little more. But we don't lie low nor hide ourselves but ##### boldly with the diary. It all ##### the ##### with a bad #####. For we know we have right on our side, what was happiness, & we are not disgraced. And I know how brave

you are and you know we are not disgraced. I am so sorry for you darling. I should have held a high position for our children's sake, but while there is life there is hope. We only really mind that you will ##### safe & sound, my own dear boy, and that our dear ##### in England may be kept safe. There is probably

good in this which seems ##### bad. It has been a very trying time. I am a little cross[?] so I will not try to write more, though there is more I might say. God bless you my darling boy, your loving mother. Are we down hearted[?] No! But we are very heavy hearted to have to send you this. We have had so much sympathy from so many.

[Postscript on sheet 1, sideways]

I wonder if we are ##### to #####. You can still write Pres. College as before but don't address letter to Principal Pres. College now.

HRJ-25-2

Letter from Mary Edith James (wife of Henry Rosher James) to their son Harold Hindle James, dated Tuesday 22 February [1916]
Discusses aftermath of assault on Professor Oaten at Presidency College

I wonder if we are
known to
Calcutta.
You can still
write the college
in Calcutta. but
don't as to the
Principal. The
Hindle
Calcutta
Feb 22nd
My darling
I am a little exhausted
with the strain & worry
of the time, so excuse
if I seem stupid. It's
difficult to write even
to you darling. To know
where to begin. The world
runs in a wheel. And
oh! it is such an utterly
unbelievable an unfair
world. Mr Oaten & some

10 or 15 students, out of
1000, create this terminal
your poor hard working
honest & just Father,
has all the benefit of it.
Father has been making
all the mischief he can,
as you know Govern-
ment, - which means
Lyon, in the Education
Dept., gives the great
opportunity to humil-
-late, insult & utterly
do, for your Father,
and has too you that
a Committee has been

formed to require into
the discipline of the
Pres Coll: The one College
which has stood so
high in discipline, as
well as every thing
else, since your Father
took it over. The dis-
cipline is as good as
it possibly can be,
your Father has made
very good rules - & he,
to the best of his
ability that they are
carried out: But in

Indians, where neither the
student nor the Indian
professor was in part
any of the best educa-
ted natives, save to him
any sense of discipline
or justice, it is an
all most unpropitious
task, but it has been
done, under your Father's
almost incredible
power. Any one who
was at Bow College
before your Father came
was a miser or knew
any thing about the

2

the condition of the
College before, & since,
his time, says the
change is wonderful
~~to state~~ A late professor
who has for some years
been assistant to P. I
wrote to your Father
about 8 weeks ago
before this disturbance
saw that, the "improvement
in Prov: College
since his time was
beyond words". Can you
imagine what this
expression means, to begin
with

Two of the people on the
Council are his sworn
enemies, one Cornell &
the other the late
Rice, Chancellor, who is
acknowledged to be his
enemy & every one knows
that he is jealous of
Pres College, & wishes
that C did it all the
harm he could. This
man is President of
the Council. O'paine,
Lyon has done the
sneaking he will do
all the harm possible

by our Father. Oh it
brutal. And then to
appoint your Father
himself on to the Council.
He has refused to sit
if they had insisted
would have resigned
at once. We don't

know yet what the
out come of his refusal
may be, he may be
asked to resign. Any
way we shall have
him now, but can't
stay on now after
this, but of course
unless

he is made to resign, we
shall take the two years
leave due by our Father
an half pay, from
April next; when the
commission ends. He has
shined a great deal
but he can't stand
this. It is the best thing
I only hope we may
break Lyon over it.
even as he has broken
us, he is a serpent.
He pretended to be very
friendly over this business
at first, then suddenly
springs this on your Father

Just imagine the humil-
 -iation of this inquiry,
 Professors, English & Indian
 & students are to come &
 give evidence. And is
 this a criminal in a
 Court of law. How poor
 our country can stand it—
 There is a good article
 in the "Nation" this
 morning on the affair
 which I will send you.
 Lyon has got his oppor-
 tunity to humble your
 father by ^{the} being sent, but
 how is good it diffi-
 cult I believe, even with
 the help of Hornell &
 Dr Arthur Muckes

but Mr C. This is his
last opportunity, for
Lyon himself has to
retire in two next.
He wants to take very
good of honour & credit
from your Father & to
win his life work.
He has never missed
a chance of doing him
an injury. Keeping
that allowance from
him, was his last,
before this, but only
small compared to
this. Will surely

time are too great com-
-parisons in this, one
that we shall I hope
obtain, as you now
quite comparatively
soon. If we are allowed
you would like us
to, we should like to
stay awhile, any
way at, I remember
on our way home.
as you during, that
thought keeps us up.
but I so fine also,
that we shall not
be allowed. I am also

we shall get back to
our little family soon.
But it is not nice to be
return in this way,
instead of crowned
with honour, as you
fellow, if any man
in God's service deserves
honour, deserves it.
It is strange why these
things should be so.
We had a horrid shock
on hearing last night
that those brutes had
been dropping bombs
on Valenciennes on Sunday.
I wonder if it was near

our church. Two men &
 a boy killed. It makes
^{us} ~~us~~ very anxious about
 our little party, and
 it will have given them
 a great shock. I wonder
 if they will go to Mon-
 mouth. I cannot write
 any more today darling,
 but next mail does not
 reach Bombay, until
 Thursday evening, so I
 suppose our letters will
 only arrive here on
 Saturday night or Sunday
 morning. I hope there
 will be news from you.

Sun: Fortunately, this week
the mail is going out
two days late, for we
have not had much
heart for writing nor
time. The worst has
happened as your Father
has told you, so I will
not. This painful tetter
upon old boy, we feel
so sorry, it makes my
heart very sore to have
to write this and news
to you, but news sums
it cheer you, but you
cheer us, we have

gone through an awful
time, but are recovering,
They say all private
opinion in California,
among those who count,
civilian & high court,
judges, all are on our
side, & they say this
disgraceful. And the
great blazing Commu-
-nistic Government must
not be published,
is shameful. We have
just had a high Court
judge & his wife to see
us, he offers 25,000
and they say, that

The Communique is so
vile & scandalously
wronged, that any one
can see at once that
it is purely vindictive
& malicious. I am
not sending it, because
it is so hateful. But
there is a chance of its
getting into The Paper
in Egypt or you might
see a copy of an Indian
paper, but worry
if you do anything.
your Father has not
done what it says

There is not the surface
of truth, but oh so
magnified, so if you
see it; be not alarmed
at such accusation
as every one here says,
his government that
it disowned not your
father. Most of the
papers this time are
against us, nearly all
except the Stationer
government has said
-ently bought them out
and they accuse the
"Stationer" of supporting
your father, for joining

seasons, They imagine
it is said, that I ^{am} ~~was~~
a subscriber to the Edition
Insulting cursing.
and only gave them
away. for if they can
say such a thing as
that, it shows that
all else they say is
equally false. Of course
it does not matter
what the papers say
really for every one
knows, who counts,
about your Father

this work out here.
how darling no more
on this unpleasant sub-
-ject. We had our wire
from you yesterday, &
was one ray of cheer,
it was such a relief
to have one word from
you for we had not
had one for weeks.
I am sorry this "maddis-
able," for now I am
opined that means
we shall not see you
on our way home, &
that darling seems too
coiled to think of.

swifty fate will not be so
unkind. We have also
had yesterday, at last,
a little note from you.
I have two little messages
from you - any way
serve to reassure us,
but we long for news.
We think time should
be one little ^{while} before this
ours since. I wonder
why they don't come.
Our letters from home are
not as cheery as usual
this week. We hope when
this reaches you, that
things will have

become less trying & then
we shall have had our
have grants, this ^{promise}
they will not give it.
I don't like to torture your
patience a little more.
But we don't ~~hide~~
lie low, nor hide our
selves, but march
boldly into the dining
hall & face the world
with a good front;
For we know we have
right on our side, what
ever happens, & we are
not disgraced. And
I know how brave

you are, my son know we
are not disappointed.

I am so sorry for you
dearling, I should have
liked a high position
for our children sake.
But while there is life
there is hope. We only
truly wish, that you
come back to us safe
& sound, my own little
boy, & that our dear
ones in England may
be kept safe.
There is probably

good in this which ^{sure}
very bad. It has been a
very trying time & I am
quite done, so I will
not try to write more,
though there is more
I might say.

God bless you my
darling boy.

your loving
mother.

~~but~~ we are down
hearted ho! but we
are very heavy hearts
to have to send you
this. We had had so
much sympathy
from so many.