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 Introduction

I FIRST DISCOVERED ALICE HOWE GIBBENS JAMES, a vibrant woman who played a key role in the lives of two famous American geniuses, psychologist and philosopher William James and his younger brother writer Henry James, as a possible biographical subject when I transcribed her unpublished letters for my first book, *Dear Munificent Friends: Henry James's Letters to Four Women*. As I looked further into available archival sources, however, I discovered that while the remaining material was provocative, Alice and her descendants had destroyed most of her letters and diaries. In 1999 I abandoned the project.

During the course of my research for my two editions of Henry James's letters, I met Roberta A. Sheehan, a William James scholar, and learned that she had access to over three hundred letters written by Alice as well as Alice's father's 1859 shipboard diary from the William James III of Santa Fe Collection. When Dr. Sheehan learned of my interest in Alice, she allowed me to read these valuable documents, which are deposited at Harvard's Houghton Library. As I read over Alice's letters, I realized that while gaps still existed in the record I had more than enough material to write her biography.

Understanding her life reveals new insights into the Jameses, a frequently

analyzed family constellation. One way to understand an important historical figure (in this case, figures) is through the lens of a nearby observer. As Henry James claimed in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, an intelligent observer, the *ficelle*, provides the best narrative point of view. Alice is that ficelle for the Jameses.

According to a recent biography of William James, his wife, Alice Howe Gibbens, was central to his work.<sup>1</sup> William James believed that one cannot understand a philosophy unless one understands the philosopher's temperament. In his case, knowing his wife allows further understanding of who he was. His philosophical theories postulate an overflow both of empirical evidence and in the way we conceptualize reality. Part of the overflow in his life was his close relationship with Alice, a relationship that has not yet been fully explored. The couple's extant letters to one another, her many letters to her children, and Henry James's and sister Alice James's letters to her all show her key role in her marriage and in the James family. She spent long evenings with her husband taking dictation and reading aloud, steadied him emotionally, provided a lively family life that became a rich source for his renowned text *The Principles of Psychology*, and encouraged him to investigate spirituality and religion. William sometimes referred to her maturing intellect: she was always abreast of his evolving projects and a valued fellow reader. Current attention to him reveals the richness of his ideas, which Alice called his "Truth." She believed his work would someday change intellectual history, and her relentless drive for his success helped make that event come true.

Not only does she cast light on William's daily life and his evolving work, Alice holds a mirror up to the complex, brilliant James family. She played a key role in facilitating the relationship between William and Henry, working steadily to keep them in touch with one another. The triangular relationship involving Henry, William, and Alice evades traditional binary oppositions, but it provides a rich vein for a biographer. After her husband's death she became an important friend for Henry. She had a loving, rewarding relationship with the aging Henry James Sr., a minor public figure in his day, and she supported the talented but troubled youngest James brother, Robertson. Moreover, the letters between her and her sister-in-law Alice, today a feminist icon, suggest that the two women became valued friends, together illuminating William's character. Alice

Howe Gibbens James was a steadfast center for this idiosyncratic family, although sometimes she was nearly overwhelmed by its demands.

Some earlier biographies of James family members, most notably those of Henry, Alice, Garth, and Robertson, are psychoanalytic in nature, revealing important insights. While it is true that James family members were frequently ill and depressed, not the least of them William, the group also had strengths, including humor and a great sensitivity to their cultural milieu. In Alice's case it is not possible to write another psychoanalytic biography, given the wanton destruction of her and William's letters to one another. However, conclusions are possible concerning her character and her positioning within the family. She was so fundamentally sound that she brought out the group's healthier qualities.

Who was Alice Howe Gibbens, the woman who married William James? An idealistic and fundamentally serious young woman, she was uniquely suited to join this clan, as she brought psychological soundness and unshakeable personal convictions to her union with the Jameses. A bright woman who lacked formal education beyond high school, she welcomed the opportunity to expand her education through her immersion in William's philosophy and Henry's fiction. She possessed a highly developed ethical sense, derived from religious teachings (Congregational and Swedenborgian) and from antebellum America's antinomian, perfectionist credos. All her life she followed the natural arc of nineteenth-century humanitarian movements, many of them in support of have-nots. By age ten she was a devoted abolitionist; at age twenty-five a member of Boston's Radical Club; in her thirties a supporter of the labor union strikers and anarchists involved in the Haymarket Square Riot; in her forties a fan of liberal British prime minister William Gladstone; and during her final years a committed supporter of Italian anarchists and accused murderers Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, even visiting them in prison. Though over time she occasionally manifested elitist attitudes, she never completely gave up her commitment to social reform or her drive to educate herself. A voracious reader all her life, when she was nearly seventy she enrolled in nursing classes to prepare herself as an international humanitarian aid worker, a role she longed to assume. Her letters vividly illustrate her ongoing personal development and growth. While Alice Howe Gibbens James followed nineteenth-century traditional paths

of wife and mother, her story providing insights into what such roles entailed for upper-middle-class women, within those boundaries she kept her humanitarian beliefs, which evolved as she encountered experiences, finally acting upon them at the end of her life in pragmatic fashion.

This narrative focuses on Alice's daily life and her interactions with James family members, set against the backdrop of larger cultural and historical events: New England small-town life, the abolitionist movement, the Nicaragua passage, the California gold rush, Yankee occupation of the South during the Civil War and the subsequent cotton fraud scandal, expatriate life in Europe after the Civil War, the Haymarket Square Riot, the *Dreyfus* case, Queen Victoria's funeral, the San Francisco earthquake, World War I, the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, and other seminal events. This approach gives the James family and Alice greater historical resonance. At times the story Alice tells conflicts with other accounts of the Jameses, as for the most part I have presented events through her point of view. I mediate her view through other sources, however, including family correspondence and diaries, because many of her extant letters to her children present a generally optimistic view of events. Combining her insights with other sources and interpretations yields rich readings of Alice and this complex clan. Now that her letters are available to others, future scholars will be able to augment, verify, and further interpret these valuable primary documents.

Initially, I believed that Alice was victimized by the patriarchal values held by Henry James Sr. and by his eldest son, William. But as I learned more about her and the critical role she played within the family, I realized that she lost none of her own strength when she married. While a demanding husband and five children submerged her at times, she maintained her inner balance. By some lights she could be called an opportunist. She was relatively poor as a young woman, so marrying into an upper-middle-class family gave her greater opportunity. In addition, the marriage allowed her a wider scope for refining and developing her ethical understanding, because she knew that William was a man of principle. And her marriage, though often stormy, was fulfilling. William James loved her passionately.

Biographies, while factually based, are always stories, re-creations of what might have happened. There were stories all around Alice, stories of Jameses with blighted lives and Jameses whose genius revealed itself

in varied ways. Her story is one of moral conviction, work, renunciation, and passion, the fascinating tale of a woman sometimes nearly eclipsed by those around her who retained enough of her own identity to script her tale in letters. In the autumn of 1907 William James gave a talk at the Harvard Annex, Radcliffe College. Alice was in the audience that day, and she wrote to Henry, by then her confidant, of her feelings.

He [William] gave a most exquisite little address to the Association of College Alumnae at Radcliffe on the test of the higher education “The power to know a good man when you see him.” It was wise, impressive and exquisitely formed.

I thought as I listened to him that it was the only test which I have ever successfully passed—but perhaps I flatter myself and I was just born with a vocation for Jameses!<sup>2</sup>

 **I** Stirrings

ALICE HOWE GIBBENS WAS BORN ON 5 February 1849 in a beautifully proportioned Federalist Greek Revival home on King Oak Hill in Weymouth, Massachusetts. She was the first of Eliza Webb Gibbens and Dr. Daniel Lewis Gibbens's three daughters. Her mother came from a long, respectable line of Weymouth Whites and Webbs, her father from a Boston Irish Protestant family.

In 1849 Weymouth, formerly called Wessaguscus, was a patriarchal New England village thirteen miles southeast of Boston that was slowly being transformed by the shoe-manufacturing industry.<sup>1</sup> The community prided itself on having invented the town meeting, a particular form of New England local governance that has been viewed as the purest form of democracy. Alice's maternal ancestors played responsible roles in the town. One ancestor helped make the rules for managing swine running at large and for protecting the alewives, the small fish that swarmed the town's Back and Fore rivers, important matters in an economy based on farming and fishing. Her maternal grandfather, lawyer Christopher Webb, had been a fence viewer (making sure neighbors took care of their sides of a fence), a state senator, a representative to the Massachusetts General Court, and a selectman. Also, as overseer of the town almshouse he ensured that the poor had their daily ration of ale and cider.

Living and dying in the same Congregational parish, Alice's ancestors led narrow lives of service, piety, and rectitude. The faded tombstone in North Weymouth Cemetery to Alice's great-great-grandfather testifies to the beliefs that ruled the community:

In  
Memory of  
Capt. JAMES WHITE  
Who departed this life  
March the 1st 1793:  
As corn maturely ripe is gather'd home  
So his remains are brought into the tomb  
To sleep in silence till that glorious day,  
When Christ his light shall roll the front away.

Eliza Putnam Webb, Alice's mother, was a quiet, devout young woman who shunned public gatherings, attending only church functions and funerals. Somehow she met Bostonian Daniel Lewis Gibbens Jr., perhaps in neighboring Braintree, where Daniel's father had clerked in a retail store before moving to Boston to open his own establishment. Daniel Lewis Gibbens Sr. became a successful merchant, a pillar of Boston's First Congregational Church, a colonel in the Boston militia, and a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. His son Daniel Gibbens graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1847.

On 28 October of that same year Old North Congregational Church minister Joshua Emery married Daniel Gibbens and Eliza Putnam Webb. It was a union of polar opposites. A boisterous extrovert, Daniel was reputed to have been a wild, hard-drinking youth; he and his brothers caused their respectable parents considerable worry. Eliza, on the other hand, was grave and gentle, a woman ill suited to live with such a burly, excitable man. In 1848 Gibbens was admitted to the Massachusetts Medical Board. He became Weymouth's physician, and the couple established residence in North Weymouth in the home traditionally occupied by the town's doctor. The large, comfortable, post-and-beam house had an imposing front porch bordered by four two-story-high columns. It boasted many shuttered windows and four fireplaces, two up and two down. A white

marble mantel decorated with an ornate bow topped the parlor fireplace, and a narrow, steep, curving staircase led from the parlor to the upstairs bedrooms. At an elevation of 163 feet the house commanded an impressive view of the Fore River and Boston Harbor. The King Oak and Queen Oak, both hundreds of years old, dominated the property.

The Weymouth of Alice's childhood was densely wooded with oak, red cedar, hemlock, beech, wild cherry, buttonwood, and tupelo. Berry bushes and vines grew everywhere, and flowers bloomed through the mild springs and summers: orchid, lady's slipper, violet, saxifrage, aster, arbutus, and hepatica. Even the rocky ledges were colorful, painted with spreading lichen.

When she was old enough, Alice rode with her father in the doctor's coupé, a horse-drawn buggy, when he called on his patients. Nineteenth-century small-town doctors were an integral part of the community: there were no medical specialists. Dr. Gibbens was a diagnostician, internist, surgeon, gynecologist, obstetrician, oncologist, psychiatrist—the list was nearly endless. Mid-nineteenth-century doctors often prescribed blood-letting, cupping, purging, and herbal remedies, depending in part on the community's beliefs. Gibbens's success in treating patients rested largely in his ability to inspire confidence, as many rural people preferred folk-based treatments that had no basis in scientific fact.<sup>2</sup> His medical degree from Harvard provided his formal credentials, but that was not enough. He had to convince his patients he could cure them. Perhaps it helped to bring his pretty little daughter along with him.

Alice loved her trips with her father, inventing an imaginary playmate, "Johnny Greene," an engaging boy who accompanied them. As the township was long and narrow, about nine miles long and two and a half miles wide, their trips took hours. Through her father's work Alice became acquainted with illness and death early in life. At age five she went to a playmate's funeral. Eliza Gibbens wanted her daughter to see "how completely my little friend had gone away."<sup>3</sup> Both parents encouraged her to view life realistically, a trait that would serve her well.

Alice's father settled into Weymouth quickly, promising to follow the path of his wife's proper ancestors. His marriage to the daughter of the Webbs and Whites allowed him an entrée into the community. In 1849 he was appointed to a committee formed to petition the legislature for a

boundary division in the town. By 1850 he had taken a leading role in that civic group. In 1851 he was on the town school committee, chaired by Joshua Emery. Prominent community service could do nothing but help his medical practice. On 11 June of that same year Eliza Gibbens gave birth to a second daughter, Mary Sherwin. Gibbens seemed destined to a successful career and an agreeable small-town life. While the family attended Weymouth's Old North Congregational Church, Daniel Gibbens took both of his daughters to be baptized in his father's Boston church, Alice on 29 November 1849 and Mary on 19 April 1852, facilitating future ties for the girls with his own family.<sup>4</sup>

But despite her father's initial efforts to conform to Weymouth, Alice was not to have the predictable Yankee girlhood her mother had enjoyed. Not long after his arrival Dr. Gibbens resumed his former bad habits. Reportedly, he began to drink again. Although he was a sociable and intelligent man, his flaw was a damning one in antebellum America. Temperance was just one platform in the Evangelical United Front, but it sometimes aroused strong community feelings.<sup>5</sup> In 1826, at a meeting moderated by Alice's grandfather Christopher Webb, a strong advocate of the temperance movement, Weymouth passed an ordinance that the temperance committee should "admonish any persons in said town who are addicted to intemperance and endeavor to effect a reformation and if that shall prove ineffectual then to report such persons to the Selectmen that their names may be posted and all persons forbidden to sell them any spirituous liquors as the law directs."<sup>6</sup>

Evidently, Dr. Gibbens could not control his addiction, so in 1854 Eliza and Daniel Gibbens and their daughters were forced to leave King Oak Hill. Eliza and Daniel's marriage began to fall apart. Dr. Gibbens moved in with family members in Wrentham, Massachusetts, and left his wife and daughters behind in Weymouth with the Webbs and Whites.<sup>7</sup> Besides losing his wife's companionship, he lost two beautiful daughters. When Alice was five and Mary three and a half, Eliza took them to Wrentham to have a daguerreotype made. They held hands for their portrait, two little girls wearing calico dresses with pink fabric bows at the shoulders and red beaded necklaces.<sup>8</sup> Alice lost her rides in the doctor's coupé and her companionship with her father. Her only remaining intimate male companion was Johnny Greene.

In 1855 Alice's life changed dramatically again and, by her own account, for the better. The same bug—gold and the chance for a new life in the West—that had bitten so many New England men, including a Weymouth contingent, and lured them to California's gold fields bit Daniel Gibbens. Two of Eliza's brothers had already gone. The doctor decided to homestead in the Santa Clara Valley. Perhaps it was a way to reunite his family in a place where they could start over. He booked passage for all of them to California on a boat operated by Cornelius Vanderbilt's Accessory Transit Company from New York down the Atlantic Coast to San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua, and across Nicaragua, a twelve-mile stretch, in horse- or mule-drawn coaches. From there they traveled on another boat up the Pacific Coast to San Francisco Bay.

According to extant records, Alice may have sailed on the *Northern Light*.<sup>9</sup> The Vanderbilt ships, all large boats, were notorious for their deplorable conditions. Provisions were purchased in New York and packed in ice, so before long passengers were served spoiled meat. Ships frequently carried more passengers than were listed, so sometimes they slept on cabin floors or benches or on deck to escape the stench below. Passengers were advised to bring along six dozen cooked eggs, ten pounds of crackers, one pitcher, two tumblers, one chair or camp stool, one dozen towels, one or more cakes of soap, and one life preserver. A contemporary newspaper account described a similar Vanderbilt ship, the *Ariel*, as a “filthy, nasty, pigstie.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite the terrible physical conditions on the ship, Alice had the chance to see a tropical wilderness, a world very different from the world she had seen from the doctor's coupé. Large sea turtles swam along the coast, and during the passage across Nicaragua she could see trees and plants with bright green foliage, “oranges, lemons, limes, pineapples, cocoanuts, bananas, and bread fruit,” big aquanno (iguana) lizards, snakes, brilliant butterflies, bright-plumed birds, river sharks, and, best of all, monkeys swinging in the trees.<sup>11</sup> The Nicaraguans with their dark skin and straight black hair were altogether different from Weymouth natives.

One day the Vanderbilt boat anchored near Nicaragua's swampy marshes, and Alice witnessed a battle between filibusterer William Walker, an American desperado and profiteer, and his soldiers and the country's Legitimist forces.<sup>12</sup> The rest of her life she remembered her fear at seeing dead

bodies lying deserted in the heat. Soon after the Walker skirmish cholera broke out on the ship. Dr. Gibbens knew of the danger of cholera—it can lead quickly to severe dehydration and death. The doctor boiled his family’s drinking water and kept them inside until after sundown. No one was allowed to go ashore. One night Eliza went on deck to converse with a fellow passenger, huddling under her cloak to keep warm. That same night the woman died of cholera, only four hours after contracting the disease, and her body was slipped overboard. A few days later Eliza contracted the disease, the last passenger afflicted. She nearly died, but although her recovery was slow, it was complete.

After crossing Nicaragua the family set sail again, this time most likely on either the *Brother Jonathan*, the *Nevada*, the *SS Cortes*, or the *SS Sierra*.<sup>13</sup> The family reached San Francisco Bay with all alive. The Valley, as Alice called it, held countless riches, though none of them could be measured in gold. She thought she had found the paradise she had studied in Old North Sabbath school. Daniel Gibbens claimed a ranch in the Santa Clara Valley, just across the Arroyo San Antonio from Rancho San Antonio, south of the small settlement of Mountain View. Their homestead lay in a vale covered with coastal live oaks and sycamores, willows marking the streambeds. Deer, elk, and bears roamed the area.

Sometimes Alice and her sister Mary attended a little school not far from their home where Eliza’s sister, Nannie Webb, taught them briefly.<sup>14</sup> Often, though, her busy parents left Alice to her own devices. She made new friends, one of them Katharine “Kate” Putnam, who remained a friend all her life. The girls played about the huge coastal oaks, where they shared a playhouse furnished with wooden plates and toys. Some days Alice trapped western quail and tried to make them her pets. Crests with four distinct feathers adorned their heads, and their plumage sported a rich mix of color. Usually, they nested on the ground under bushes or trees. With as many as twenty-four babies hatched in one nest, the young birds made easy prey for a determined child.

Once Dr. A. Kellogg, who lived in San Francisco, took Alice up Telegraph Hill, a magical visit for her. He explained the sights and the names of the plants that grew there. Later he wrote her a long letter full of nature lore and “quite the kind of letter that a man who has time on his hands may write to a little girl of seven by whom he has been charmed and whom

he knows to be quick-minded and engagingly curious about everything around her.”<sup>15</sup> Alice’s years in California increased her natural eagerness to understand the world.

The Santa Clara Valley did not always seem like paradise to Daniel and Eliza. The rattlesnake that Eliza killed on her front doorstep sickened her. Moreover, Dr. Gibbens’s weakness overtook him, and he started drinking again. More than one night he came home drunk and depressed, and Eliza had to hide his pistol and razors from him. Some nights he did not come home at all. Another evening a gang of toughs and derelicts, driven from San Francisco by a vigilante committee, peered in her window. She ran for her errant husband’s pistol and placed it on the table beside her. Too afraid to go to bed, all night long she sat and sewed in her chair, her lamp burning.

On 23 January 1857, about a year after arriving in California, Eliza gave birth to her third daughter, Margaret Merrill. Some women pioneers had the help of Spanish midwives, and Dr. Gibbens could have helped his wife if he had been sober that day, but no record remains concerning the circumstances of Eliza’s delivery. Her second sister’s birth was a joyous event to Alice: it was as if an angel had come during the night.

But, like his doctoring, Daniel Gibbens’s ranching venture failed, and not only because of his personal weaknesses: western landownership proved more complicated than he had anticipated. Land litigation was common in the 1850s and 1860s, especially for the large Spanish land grants. Most of them had never been surveyed. Boulders, streams, and large trees designated the boundaries, but these features altered over the years. The original grantees’ lax methods of recording, transferring title, and selling land added to the confusion. Dr. Gibbens’s claim to the ranch proved useless. By 1860 a family named Murphy had acquired his land after the Gibbenses returned to New England.<sup>16</sup>

Before she left for Weymouth, Alice buried her little china dog beneath a live oak tree. Many years later the oak was felled in a storm, cracking and splintering to reveal a child’s toy in its heart.<sup>17</sup> Alice’s son Henry read her burial of the loved dog as emblematic of her “ever generous self-immolations,” but it may be that she simply wanted to leave part of herself behind. Alice immortalized her experience in a poem written in a childish hand entitled “The Valley.” Its last stanza frames her farewell:

And to the high mountains and the  
Low green vallies I must bid a last  
Fair well to the home I had loved so long fair well.

The next autumn Kate Putnam wrote to tell Alice that the only things left in their playhouse were their wooden plates.

While she must have felt the tension in her parents' relationship during her California years, Alice treasured her memories of Mountain View. Decades later, her daughter, her son-in-law, and her eldest son tried to find the Gibbens house but were unable to locate the site. Some of the great live oaks had been cleared, and the plain was dotted with orchards and market gardens. Nothing remained of Alice's heaven on earth.<sup>18</sup>

The return to Weymouth brought another breakup of Alice's family. The oppositions that had attracted Eliza Webb and Daniel Gibbens, her shy reserve and his uncontrollable conviviality, proved obstacles to marital compatibility. Not only was the marriage troubled, but the couple was nearly bankrupt after their California sojourn. Eliza and her daughters moved in with Eliza's mother, Susannah White Webb, in her one- and-a-half-story farmhouse near the Fore River, a house belonging to Great-grandmother Nancy White, who was still alive. It had a central chimney and brick ovens, and the railroad ran very close to their property.<sup>19</sup>

Temporarily, Daniel Gibbens went to Charlestown, the area near Boston where Bunker Hill is located. He wrote Alice letters about his neighbors, a goat, deer, a donkey, and a clever pony that would put its foot in a person's hand.<sup>20</sup> He urged his two older daughters to study botany and learn everything they could about plants by observing the shapes and textures of the leaves. While living in Charlestown he attended the Chauncey Street First Church with his mother, seeking solace from minister Rufus Ellis. Alice visited her father and her grandmother Mary Gibbens in Boston often during this separation. She remained deeply attached to her father despite his failings. During these separations Grandmother Gibbens adjured Alice and Mary to write to her son: "How often have you used your Pencils in notes to your Papa? I am certain, one hour once a fortnight devoted in writing to him would give your dear Father much pleasure, and like every other action of your lives, which affords another happiness,