

[From James to his Father]

Charleston, Maryland, U.S.A., 1st May 1833

My Beloved Father & Mother:

I cannot describe my emotions at sitting down to write these magic words to which I used to appeal verbally only a few months past, when I required counsel or consolation, and which awakened so many bright recollections of Happy Home. Far distant though you be, you are not forgotten by that unfortunate scapegrace,¹ the subscriber. Though wild and wide are the waves that roll between us, thought traverses them daily and hourly, sometimes sharing in the joy of unexpected blessings when they alight upon you, or mingling in the hallowed enjoyment of affectionate intercourse and harmless conviviality to be found in my Father's house and then drooping over some sudden stroke of gloomy adversity inflicted by a cheerless world and probably the result of my own indiscretion.

A letter from a far country is expected to be full of news and unless I give you an account of my wanderings to and fro in this land of my exile, I have little to communicate. Mr. Smith's son came to us on the first of June when I was teaching one of the Government schools. The local disadvantages of the situation obliged me to leave it in Sept. I had to walk 4 miles to school every day and as the schools here open at 8 o'clock, I found it too fatiguing. Besides, I was under the immediate surveillance of three trustees, two of them ignorant esquires, the other, Gen. Ridgely, a perfect gentleman and the owner of 1200 acres of land. He strongly urged me to stay, but I refused. The salary was little more than 60 Pounds per annum. I thought I could do better and so left Ellicott's Mills and proceeded to Baltimore, which was somehow always an unfortunate place for me.²

Here I had not remained three days when I took ship for Philadelphia, bag and baggage, determined there to try my chance in the most beautiful and most wealthy city in the United States. But all the disadvantages I had hitherto to encounter were mere playthings to those I met with here. I had no friends, no money, no trade. I made every effort to obtain employment, but in vain, and how I managed to support my little family must remain a secret until I see you. Of all my expeditions since the Creator gave me birth, none were so unfortunate as this. It seemed as if the Almighty was now punishing me at once for all the sins of willful extravagance, shameful dissipation and beastly drunkenness that I had been formerly addicted to. I tried to humble myself and pray, but found it most impossible! At last, as a "dernier ressort,"³ I began to collect subscribers for some new publications, but all the money I made would not have kept body and soul together had it not been for Mary Jane's⁴ very great exertions. She supported me under every embarrassment and earned considerably more than could have been expected by her

¹ - Sic; this appears to be a family or perhaps local Irish dialectic variation of "scapegrace" ("a roguish character"), as other family members use it with the same spelling.

² - SLH note: I have broken a long paragraph into smaller chunks, hopefully improving readability and cohesion.

³ - French: "last resort." An unusual phrase for James to know and another indication of the liberal education that the Lanktree children had received. I rather doubt he could speak fluent French, however, as that would have provided an immediate source of employment in 1830s Philadelphia, I would think.

⁴ - James's wife, Mary Jane White, married 16 Sep 1827 in Newtownards, County Down, Ireland (now Northern Ireland).

needle. Still the Devil, for I can attribute it to no less an influential agency, seemed not to have done with me.

My very worthy friend, Mr. Armstrong, of Baltimore, offered me a loan of 60 or 100 Pounds Sterling if I wanted it, to commence in Balto. He exerted himself to the utmost to procure us a suitable house to commence a Female Boarding and Day School in Baltimore, and in that case, our fortune was made, as he had vast interests. The arrangements of every kind were about to be completed and the house taken, when some cursed "Busybody" told him I was a tippler. All my plans of advancement were dissipated in a moment as he refused to take any more interest in me until he had evidence of my inflexible sobriety. He wept abundantly as he told me what he had heard and expressed his disappointment in most unequivocal terms. He had heard of my Father's goodness and worth and respected me for his sake, and from some evidences I had given him of my own cleverness. I urged him to tell me the name of this snake in the grass that had thus injured my reputation, but he refused. I now thank God that he did, as under the feelings of fierce revenge by which I was then actuated, I would have thought as little of sending him to his long and last account as I would of decapitating a goose.

In the meantime, I industriously concealed from John Smith's son all my privations. Hitherto he had only been a burden without any prospect of ever being anything else while he remained with us. We found, even now, that his coming had been anything but advantageous. The miserable 18 Pounds which he sent did not, by any means, recompense me for the trouble and anxiety I had on his account. However, you must not mention this. I bound him to a printer in Philadelphia, and for further information I refer you to his Father's letters, which I send by the ship that conveys this to you. Mr. Smith raised my expectations very much of sending a handsome sum and though I am determined to pay every attention to his son, and to write frequently home respecting him. I care very little for his future favors when such mean evidences are given of his present generosity. His son who came to us, is a perfect liar, and many a severe lecture have I given him when I detected his falsehoods. As he is now acting on his own account, he may communicate false statements to his father respecting us, though I do not believe he has ever yet written home. I have thus been explicit in my detail that you may entertain no false notions of my prosperity. The people in Ireland imagine that the moment they reach the American shores, they are in possession of wealth and independence. This is a sad mistake. If immigrants could manage to bring a little money with them, they might here dispose of it to great advantage, but otherwise they will have to struggle and strive as much as at home.

The place where I am now teaching is right on the Chesapeake Bay at the mouth of the Susquehanna River, so that if you can trace that river on a map of North America, you will have a very good idea of my present location. It is a most beautiful place though not by any means a rich neighborhood, but the people support the school pretty well.

I wish sincerely that some of my younger brothers were here. At home they can get nothing to do, but here they can get immediate employment if they only be steady and avoid strong drink (I now avoid it). They can earn from 60 to 70 Pounds per year. In the large towns they have no chance without powerful recommendations or a mechanical employment. I have tried it and lost my way so often that I will never try it again until I am invited to a situation by some responsible merchant. There are great numbers of idle clerks in Baltimore and Philadelphia. The newspapers teem with supplicating advertisements, and to get a situation in towns is a mere chance, as in Belfast or Dublin. George can obtain immediate employment as a printer and can

earn from a Pound to thirty shillings a week at once. I think you should lose no time in sending him here unless he is well employed at home. I highly approve of Jos.⁵ going to sea and could get him either in Philadelphia or Baltimore a situation as sailor, but I fear he could not endure the fatigue. If Caleb is contented to be a teacher, he would do well to come here at once.

In the immediate neighborhood where I live there are several situations vacant. If I had contented myself with being a teacher or schoolmaster, I would have done famously here, but I had high notions and nothing would do me but the great towns till I found under the humbling hand of God a sufficient punishment for discontent and impatience. Let my fate be their example. Let them lose no time when they come here looking for clerkships, or drinking brandy (which one can get for a shilling⁶ a quart) and there is no fear of them. I have now a fine house and ground in a beautiful situation where Mary Jane and I live very happily. A brother's house or a pound or two if they want it, shall always be ready to assist and encourage them. No class of men is more respected here than schoolmasters. In the Southern States they are better paid though the climate is more dangerous.

I am more anxious, my Dear Parents, about the state in which I left things at home than you can well conceive. My removal from the sight or correspondence of my creditors does not absent me from that anguish of mind at all times acute, at particular seasons insupportable. I have a prospect of soon being able to pay part, and I will not lose a moment in making a remittance when I have the means within my grasp.

I think that Miss Hodgkinson should in all honor have sent Mary Jane 25 Pounds of the money she received from India. She had no right whatsoever to retain a halfpenny of it. Mary Jane will write to her by this post. If she pays the passage of any of the boys with it, I will consider it the same as if we had received it.

I am awfully vexed about Hughe's bill, but what is the use of words? Every night when I lie down, the phantoms of my injured creditors disturb my imagination and my constant prayer is that God will open a door of deliverance for me and I know that He will do it in His own good time if I be faithful to Him.

I wish My Dear Parents that you were all in America and away from the troubled and beggarly hole you are in. I am certain, you My Father, would get immediately a most respectable congregation among the Methodists who are very numerous and influential here, though I have not joined the Society. The people come from far and near to preaching and it is no uncommon thing to see two or three hundred horses tied to the trees around the preaching house, and on an ordinary occasion I have counted 90 to 100, brought there by the hearers. The Preachers are not only venerated, but idolized. They have 25 Pounds per annum and the wife the same, with an allowance for board and the support of a horse, but they are mostly a set of bawlers and jumpers.

We have peace and plenty here and are not bothered with political trials. I see by the papers how Ireland is getting on. God grant it may not end in bloodshed.

⁵ - Joshua, James's younger brother, who later immigrated to the U.S. and was the founder of a strong line of Langtrees, from whom these letters and a trove of other genealogical materials came.

⁶ - More than £4 today.

It is now nine months since I have heard from home and I am getting uneasy. If any of my brothers should come in the spring ships, I have left word with the Adairs where they will find me. I wonder that John does not think of emigration.⁷ The money he could raise would buy him an elegant farm with a mill site where he could make ten times as much as in Ireland. I am greatly gratified to hear from him. His letters are so full of news and affection, I hope he will get over his embarrassments about Henry's affairs.⁸

And now I believe I have told you everything I can think of about my misfortunes and my progress. Thank God I am now, once more, in a prosperous state and I think the Almighty will help our endeavors. I have been alternately sick and well this long time. Mary Jane has had uniformly good health. Our little son Johnny⁹ is a fine healthy, rosy, playful, prattling cherub and a perfect Lanktree in his disposition. He is two years old this day, but there is no prospect of any more youngsters.¹⁰ He is great company for Mary Jane and me.

I wish we had Catharine or Martha here to live with us.¹¹ We could make them very happy. I feel very much interested in their welfare and will never be happy until I see them and you all here, or in some other place in America. The assistance of some of my brothers is indispensable toward forming a good settlement in this country for the rest of the family.

I am waiting for an opportunity of sending by hand a copious letter to the little girls, containing an account of the zoology, ornithology, botany etc. of the States I have visited. If I do not hear from home in less than three months I will write again about the coming of the boys. I hope that Matthew is perfectly recovered and that Jane is well. Remember us affectionately to them both.

I have seen some people in Philadelphia who know the Hills well and have seen them lately. To John and all his family present our kindest love. I will write largely to him immediately telling him all my plans and requesting his cooperation in them. To all the rest of the boys as if I had named them, particularly poor George, whose letter gave me abundant amusement, Jos. and Caleb, I am longing to see you. To the little girls I send a thousand kisses apiece, also Mary Jane and Johnny. It is a consolation to us both to talk about you although far distant. I must not forget my dear Aunt to whom we both send the most ardent affection. As for Arabella and C. I will write direct to them.

And now my Dear Parents, I will conclude by telling you that I have abandoned every evil practice in the fear of God. I am now a member of the Abstinent Society¹² and since I forsook the bottle, God has blessed me. I am now striving to serve Him and am determined to take up

⁷ - John immigrated to Australia in 1852.

⁸ - Henry was Matthew Lanktree's second son and second oldest child. We have no idea the meaning of "Henry's affairs." Henry married in 1827 and so far is known remained in Ireland or England. Some records give his year of death as 1836, but with no primary authority that I know of.

⁹ - John W. Langtree, born Belfast 1 May 1831.

¹⁰ - James and Mary Jane had no additional children until 1838, but then had seven children 1838-48, all born in Indiana.

¹¹ - Catharine died in Ireland in 1850; Martha immigrated to Australia.

¹² - This is a reference without historical basis that I can find. The "Teetotal [or Total] Abstinence Society" was not formed until 1838, in Ireland. A movement called "teetotalism," an extreme form of temperance, originated in England in 1833. The American Temperance Society was formed in 1826. I find no historical reference to an "Abstinent Society" in America.

my cross and follow Him till He calls me hence. I have often thought I have met with you both at the Throne of Grace and that your prayers are answered on my behalf. God grant that I may be enabled to continue faithful.

I have prepared a little work for the press entitled "Midnight and Other Poems,"¹³ consisting of John's "Midnight" and every minor production of my own and my brothers. Mr. Armstrong will publish it. More of this in John's letter.

That God may bless you both and spare you to see many happy days in the society of your sons and daughters and their sons and daughters, and comfort you with every needful blessing is the constant prayer of your affectionate daughter Mary Jane and

Your affectionate scrapegrace

James H. Lanktree¹⁴

When you write, direct as before to the care of Messrs. Armstrong & Plaskitts,¹⁵ Market Street, Baltimore, Maryland.

¹³ - No reference found in Google.

¹⁴ - Note he spells his last name "Lanktree." Apparently, for some years following arrival in the U.S., James continued to use his father's surname (including another letter, undated, reproduced as #14 in this series), but later changed it to "Langtree." He is referred to as "Langtree" in the 1938 naturalization record, and in the 1850 and 1860 Censuses.

¹⁵ - A Baltimore book publisher.