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WASHINGTON SQUARE

HENRY JAMES

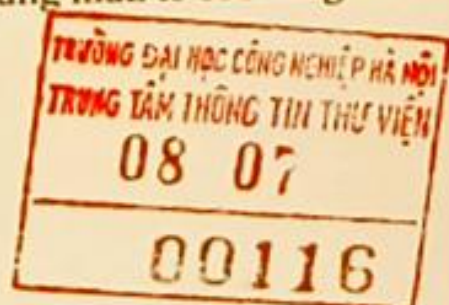


WASHINGTON SQUARE

To own a house in Washington Square is a sign of success in nineteenth-century New York, and Dr Austin Sloper is a successful man. He is also fashionable, interesting, amusing, and clever.

His daughter Catherine is none of those things. She is a good, simple girl, who loves and admires her father and always tries hard to please him, but she is a great disappointment to him. Dr Sloper does not expect any interest or excitement from Catherine.

But life in Washington Square does become rather exciting, after all. Romance arrives, in the shape of a handsome young man who comes to court Catherine. This pleases Catherine's foolish aunt, Mrs Penniman, very much; she thinks Morris Townsend is charming, and so of course does Catherine. Dr Sloper, however, looks at young Mr Townsend rather differently. The Doctor is a rich man, and is conscious that after his death Catherine will inherit a fortune of 30,000 dollars a year. He wonders why such a charming and handsome young man is courting his dull daughter . . .





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1

Poor Catherine

In the first half of the nineteenth century there lived in New York a very successful doctor. His success was for two reasons. He was, without doubt, a good doctor, intelligent and honest, but he also knew how to please his patients. He gave long, careful explanations about the illness, and always gave them some medicine to take. Indeed, his patients were fond of saying that they had the best doctor in the country.

By the time he was fifty, Doctor Austin Sloper was quite a famous person in New York. His conversation was clever and amusing, and no fashionable party in the city was complete without him.

He was also lucky. In 1820, at the age of twenty-seven, he had married, for love, a very charming girl, who had a fortune of ten thousand dollars a year. For about five years Doctor Sloper was a very happy husband; he continued to work as a doctor and each year became more experienced and more successful.

Some of the experience, however, was very unwelcome. His first child, a little boy of great promise, died at three years of age. Neither the mother's love nor the father's medicine could save him. Two years later Mrs Sloper had a second child, a little girl. This disappointed the Doctor, who had wished for another son to take the place of the first, but there was worse news to come. A week after the child was born, the

young mother fell ill, and before another week had passed, she was dead.

For a man whose profession was to keep people alive, Austin Sloper had certainly done badly in his own family, but the only person who blamed Doctor Sloper was Doctor Sloper himself. He felt that he had failed, and he carried this private blame for the rest of his life.

He still had his little girl, whom he named Catherine after her poor mother. She grew up a strong and healthy child, and her father knew that he would not lose her.

When the child was about ten years old, the Doctor invited his sister, Mrs Lavinia Penniman, to stay with him. He had two sisters and both of them had married early in life. The younger one, Mrs Almond, was the wife of a rich man and the mother of a large family. Elizabeth Almond was a comfortable, reasonable woman and Doctor Sloper preferred her to his sister Lavinia. However, Lavinia's husband had died at the age of thirty-three, leaving his wife without children or fortune, and so Doctor Sloper invited his sister to stay while she looked for rooms to rent. No one really knew if Mrs Penniman ever looked for rooms, but it is certain that she never found them.

After six months the Doctor accepted the fact that his sister was never going to leave. Mrs Penniman told everyone except her brother that she was Catherine's teacher. Doctor Sloper guessed that this was her explanation, and he found the idea laughable since he did not think his sister was very intelligent. In fact, he did not have a good opinion of women at all. The