

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Alexander Melville Bell and Eliza Symonds Bell, January 25, 1882, with transcript

Letter written by Alexander Graham Bell to his Parents. (Elsie's sickness). Hotel Costanzi, Rome, January 25, 1882. My dear Father and Mother:

I am afraid you must think me a very undutiful son to write so seldom and then only when business obliges me to take up my pen — or rather obliges Mr. Johnson to do it! — but you know that my heart is all right and that if I write seldom I think of you often. I wish you could be with us here. Mama's artist-eye would delight in the beauties of Rome and I wish indeed you could both go with us through the studies of the artists and sculptors. We have been nearly buying statues and pictures by the wholesale — indeed we would have ruined ourselves long ago had we not determined at first that we should see everything before buying anything and then buy little but the best. We made our final decision in regard to statues yesterday. We have purchased two magnificent statues both the work of the Italian sculptor Rossetti.

One is a tinted statue of a Veiled Cupid about the size of Elsie or perhaps a little smaller — a perfectly exquisite thing and indescribable in its loveliness. As you look at it you can hardly realize that it is made in cold marble and you feel an indefinite impulse to take the little thing up in your arms and kiss it through the semi-transparent veil that half conceals its features.

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The other statue the “Vestal Virgin” is a most masterly piece of work executed in the finest white marble. It is a life size figure of a women — a Vestal Virgin — draped in the traditional Grecian style — the whole body covered modestly as becomes a Vestal Virgin

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and yet the drapery does not conceal the form. Indeed to my mind the beautiful outlines of the figure are brought out much more suggestively than they could have been in the nude. She carries on her right shoulder a little cupid in the shape of a beautiful butterfly-winged baby. He half hovers over her and half supports himself by embracing her head with his left arm and resting one little dimpled foot against her back and conceals the arrow he holds in his right hand behind his back. He leans forward over her right shoulder and attempts to kiss her cheek. She of course is bound by her vow to have nothing to do with love — Death is the penalty that she should pay for compliance. Upon an altar beside her burns the never dying flame to whose care alone her life is dedicated. The whole pose of the figure is magnificent — she draws herself up to her full height with her face resolutely turned from the little pouting lips that almost touch her cheek.

Her hands are clasped and her arms stretched downwards to their full extent. Every line of the figure and face speaks of the struggle of conflicting emotions — the longing for love and the resolute determination to adhere to her vow.

Altogether I consider it one of the most wonderful creations of modern times and well worth the large amount we have agreed to pay for it.

These statues are to be sent immediately to you and you are to pay the balance of the purchase money upon receipt of the statues in good condition. The price asked for the Vestal Virgin was 9000 francs and the price of the tinted Cupid was 4000 francs. We found however that there will be a duty of 10 per cent to pay in America so M. Rossetti agreed to charge us 12,000 francs for the two. I to pay 4000 francs down leaving 8000 francs to be collected from you. You are also to pay the duty and transportation. I enclose a note from Mabel to Charlie authorizing him to advance you whatever sums may be required. I also enclose the memorandum of agreement with Sigr. Rossetti and Sigr. Rossetti's receipt for 4000 francs.

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It seems wonderful to me that travelling as we do with two little children we have been able to retain a clean bill of health. The health of the whole party seems to increase in the direct proportion of the square of the distance from foggy London. The first symptom of anything like sickness that has yet appeared is a slight feverish attack that Grace now has. We hope it may pass off in the course of a day or two but we are quite troubled because Grace fancies she was chilled in driving through the Villa Borghese (a place noted for its malarial atmosphere) however there is nothing to show that it is not an ordinary feverish attack that may pass off after a good days rest. Of course you 4 will not allude to this to the Hubbards as it would only worry them and the chances are that Grace will be quite well again by the time I write next.

Elsie and Daisy are quite well and seem to enjoy Rome very much.

The nurse we have now gives great satisfaction and I hope she will return with us to America.

Mabel seems now to have perfectly recovered but of course I am careful not to let her tire herself out too much.

Johnson was quite ill for a long time in Paris but has been steadily gaining ever since we came south and he now passes for an average American instead of a ghost. He has just given up cigarette smoking and now smokes nothing but cigars — and of these only three per day. One would naturally think that strong cigars would be more hurtful than mild cigarettes — but as Johnson has formed the habit of inhaling the smoke of cigarettes the change undoubtedly will be a beneficial one.

It is really horrible to think of the amount of tobacco dust and oil that must have been deposited in his lungs during the last few months. Johnson objects to act further as my amanuensis in the matter so I better change the subject. I haven't said a word about my own health.

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You will be sorry to hear that I am in a fever too — a terribly high fever — but it may be some comfort for you to learn that it is mental and not physical.

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As the result of the latest observation upon myself I may report pulse and temperature normal — appetite enormous. Respiration alone defective, for I do not expire at all while I have a great many inspirations in the course of the day.

Rome — January 28th, 1882. Dear Papa and Mama:

Since writing the above we find ourselves in great trouble — and I cannot report a “clean bill of health” any longer. Grace's “feverish attack” turns out to be typhoid fever which she has brought with her from Florence lurking in her system. The disease is in such a mild form that it had gone on for 8 or 9 days without attracting attention. Grace had felt unwell but it was set down to other causes and no one felt any anxiety. So far everything goes on favourably. Grace is very good and patient and the doctor gives every hope of a speedy convalescence. Misfortunes never come singly and poor little Elsie is the next sufferer. There seemed to be no cause for anxiety in regard to infection for Elsie and Daisy — but we had determined to remove them to another part of the hotel. Both children have lately been showing signs of disturbance by bowels being out of order. Last night nurse called attention to certain motions Elsie made during her sleep and to the grinding of the teeth — and thought she was going to have the measles. It is fortunate we have a doctor living in the hotel and he was called at once but could not see any signs of great disturbance. To-day however about noon the nurse called me suddenly and I found poor little Elsie in convulsions. Face quite purple. She was asleep when the attack came on. The muscles of her face and eyes twitched terribly. Her whole body worked about. It seemed as if all the muscles of the body and limbs were working. Her face was drawn frequently to one side like a person who had been paralyzed. Poor Mabel was terribly frightened — but bore up bravely. The doctor was out and we telephoned right and left for one. While we were undressing her she became unconscious and remained so for a long time. We gave her

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a warm bath at once and cooled her head — and she then gave signs of reviving. Most fortunately the telephone caught Dr. Thompson not far from the hotel and he came at once.

He said what we had done was quite right. When she first showed signs of returning consciousness her eyes half opened and we saw the poor little eyeballs turned horribly inwards.

Poor Mabel thought she was dying — but bore up most bravely. I cannot tell you how thankful we felt when in about a quarter of an hour the little eyes opened intelligently upon us — without a particle of squint in them and our little Elsie called us by name. I fear other trials are in store for us for the doctor thinks this the preliminary of scarlet fever or some other eruptive disease and he says that if so Daisy will also take it. We have taken every precaution to prevent it — by sending Daisy into a different part of the hotel with her nurse with Mr. Johnson close by to give us the alarm if anything happens. Daisy at the 7 present time appears perfectly well and I hope indeed she may escape. Elsie has slept at intervals all the afternoon and evening at first her sleep appeared to be half-stupor and half natural sleep — broken occasionally by the wailing cry characteristic of a sick child — which is so inexpressibly touching. To our great delight late this evening she woke up smiling — and seemed quite well. The fever had subsided and she only wanted to hug and kiss Papa and Mama before going to sleep. I made Mabel lie down in the parlour all the afternoon to gain strength for any emergency that might arise, but when Elsie smiled so sweetly and seemed so well I could not resist the temptation of disturbing May that she might see the change and take fresh heart. We both of us feel much encouraged — and begin to hope that that dread enemy of childhood — scarlet fever — has not yet attacked our child. We now have two extra nurses — one for Grace and one for Elsie. Maris is in another part of the hotel with Daisy. Mabel is quite well but I am very fearful upon her account. Grace has a very mild form of Typhoid — but Mabel would probably have it much more severely if she took it. I am full of anxiety on her account. Grace has not had scarlet fever — so I intend tomorrow — if Elsie's illness develops into that disease to place Mabel in charge

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with the nurse for I think poor May is surely safe from the disease. This will give me the reason I want to forbid her entering Grace's room. I am perfectly well and strong — and superintend the nurse with Grace. I have locked the communicating doors in our suite of 8 rooms to eliminate all chance of infection as much as possible.

Will add a postscript before posting.

Your loving son, Alec. Prof. A. M. Bell, Georgetown, D. C.