

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, October 26, 1875, with transcript

Letter written by Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel (Hubbard) Bell. 18 Beacon Street, Boston, October 26th, 1875. Dear Miss Mabel:

I have just learned that you have lately been making enquiries concerning my past life — and that you have especially expressed the wish to find out the exact circumstances that led me to come to Boston and to settle myself permanently in this neighborhood. From what I heard yesterday — I fear it is not improbable that revelations may be made to you shortly concerning me — for which you are quite unprepared.

As I do not want you to receive a one-sided account of what transpired during a certain period of my career — I think it the wisest plan to anticipate such reports by telling you at once of circumstances in my life with which you are unacquainted. I wish to give you what I believe to be the true version of the affair that you will probably hear about. I think you will then pity me and be willing to believe that I at least was not to blame for conduct that ultimately led to my arrest and imprisonment in a foreign country. My life has indeed been a strange and eventful one! I was seized and thrown into prison without even the privilege of a trial — and lay hidden from the world in a dark dungeon for nearly a whole year before my sad condition was discovered by a friend. He hunted me out and at least obtained my release upon the ground that I was illegally detained. An examination was made - 2 the facts of the case were made clear — and I received an honourable discharge.

Still — the fact of my imprisonment — and the attachment I have formed for America (my adopted country) — will probably prevent me from ever returning to England — or of resuming the use of the title which I possessed there.

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You will understand — when you know all — how it is that I have been so reticent upon matters that must be of interest to you. It is probably a great surprise to you to know that I am possessed of a title — and that Queen Victoria — at one time — evinced quite a personal interest in my welfare. I have been received into the very best society in England — and I am well-known throughout all Europe by my title. When I tell you what it is — I think it is not improbable that you may recollect hearing of me when you were abroad.

I know at least that on one occasion your father met me in Europe, when I was much younger than I am now. I have a distinct recollection of his face, and of some remarks that he made about me. I have however changed somewhat in appearance since then, and it is unlikely that he can remember the circumstances without some clue to the name by which I went.

There is also another matter that gives me a disinclination to return to aristocratic England (where blood is considered above all things in the world) — and that is — that the mysterious circumstances attending my first appearance in the world are known all over the country — and there is good ground for believing or suspecting my plebeian origin. I fear myself that my origin must have been a very humble one.

I trust you will not be startled when I tell you that no person has yet been able to discover where I was born nor who my real parents are !

It is an old saying that “Fact is stranger than Fiction” — and I think you will acknowledge it is so in my case.

Still — I am almost afraid to tell you of the circumstances of my earliest childhood — for fear you may not believe what I say for I must confess that the story will not fit in with what you know of my life — without much explanation.

Let me assure you however that, to the best of my knowledge, the circumstances I am about to relate to you are true — strictly and literally true — however romantic and unlikely

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they may appear to you. As far back as I can remember I have never known a father or mother. I was adopted at an early age by the gentleman who now acknowledges me to the world as his offspring.

He christened me — and he is indeed the author of all that is good and precious in me — and I am proud to bear his name.

All that I know concerning my origin is this: — One cold winter's day many years ago — one of the workmen in a Paper Factory in the neighborhood of Edinburgh — discovered in the basement of the building — a large bundle wrapped up in an old shawl.

4

When the package was opened — I was found inside apparently dead and in such disarray that I seemed a mere bundle of rags! A more forlorn looking object could not possibly be conceived!

I lay there — cold — senseless — and to all appearances perfectly dead. The man who found me — after trying many expedients unsuccessfully — determined as a last resort to try the effect of a warm bath.

But will you believe what he did! He put me into one of the large copper boilers in the establishment, poured in a little cold water, and lighted a fire underneath while he went off to obtain assistance.

What the cause of the delay was I cannot tell — but certain it is that it was more than half-an-hour before the man made his appearance again accompanied by the overseer — by which time the water had begun to boil!

They rushed to the side of the boiler and looked in. There I was floundering about in absolutely scalding water. They took me out at once intending to plunge me into cold

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water. My agony was so great that I could not even cry! The very intensity of my sufferings rendered me silent.

But alas! it is sad to think of what follies men are sometimes guilty in moments of excitement!

In the hurry and confusion of the moment — instead of placing me in cold water — I was plunged headlong into a tub containing a strong solution of sulphuric acid used in the manufacture of paper!

I only know of these things by hearsay as I was too young to carry away any personal recollections of the scene — and besides — kind nature at last rendered me insensible to further cruelties — and it was fortunate for me that she did so.

The men saw their mistake at a glance — when they saw me turned yellow by the action of the acid. In a moment I was lifted out and put into a vat containing Chloride of Lime and various alkaline and bleaching ingredients — which in a measure neutralized the effect of the acid.

But greater trials were yet to come! The men were agitated — and — in lifting me out — let me fall.

Instantly I rolled down a slanting board right into a machine used for tearing linen rags to pieces and reducing them to a pulp!

I will spare you the description of what followed. Suffice it to say that before the machine could be stopped I was pounded and crushed almost to pieces — and when I came out bore no resemblance at all to the being that had gone in — nor indeed to a human being at all. I was more a mass of inanimate jelly than anything else!

Little did those who saw me then suspect that I should ever live to be of any use in the world. The incidents related effected a complete change in my constitution. For months

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I lay 6 hovering between life and death — existence and annihilation. Again and again have I heard the remark made that I could never live to be of any use in the world — and it would be kinder to put me out of the way at once! How I ever lived to go safely through all these sufferings — and at last to occupy the position in the world that I now do is to me inexplicable.

I grew up so delicate and so pale that all traces of colour faded from my cheeks and I became as white as the whitest of white paper.

I stayed for a long time in this establishment — useless to myself and to every person around me — unable indeed to move far less to play. And so I spent my childhood. At last a printer made his appearance who offered to take care of me. He said I might just as well stay with him as be doing nothing there. If I ever turned out to be good for anything — he said — I might come handy in his office — and if not — well! It was no great matter — as it could not cost him much to keep me. And so I was carried to my new quarters.

And indeed it did not cost much to keep me. I was showed up onto a rude wooden shelf in his office which served me for a bed — and I can tell you that the sheets about me were not over dry! My great fear used to be that I should fall off this shelf and be killed. Somehow or other my master got the same idea — and as I was helpless — placed heavy weights on the top of me to prevent me from rolling over! This was certainly effectual — but it was not 7 very comfortable! However I could not help myself and had to resign myself to my fate.

But my story has already become longer than I had intended. I must hurry over this portion of my history and come to a conclusion.

I was adopted. Upon my youthful mind was impressed all the precepts and all the wisdom that had been acquired by my foster-father during a long and useful life. I gained health and strength. I grew larger and taller than the majority of my kind — and at last I was declared fitted to go out into the world alone. My foster-father looked at me with tears in

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his eyes. Fondness, Pride, Admiration, and Love were blended in his glance. He said that I should ever be called his son — that I should bear his name — and that the world need never know of my ignoble origin unless I chose to reveal it myself.

There was only one thing that he regretted and that was my lack of personal beauty. He warned me that people generally were more attracted by the outside than by the inside. Although he believed that intrinsic worth would always make its own way in the world, still he thought it would do so sooner if it were associated with a pleasing exterior. He added that if I desired it he would spare no pains to have me made as beautiful as outside adornment could make me. I consented, but alas! I did not know what I was expected to submit to!

8

I was sent to an establishment in London. The man who was to “make me beautiful” showed me some iron instruments which he intended to employ — but what was my horror to see him commence by heating them red-hot! Oh! That I could have run away! But no — my very fear paralyzed me, and I dropped senseless upon the floor.

When I came to myself I found myself bound — and the man just beginning to apply the red-hot irons to my face! Even my sides and back did not escape burning. I was scarred and burned in various sorts of ways with no more mercy than if I had been a block of wood.

I was afterwards “made beautiful” by the application of gold-leaf to my wounds! But we shall pass over these terrible ordeals until the time when I was hired by a shop-keeper for the purpose of attracting purchasers to his store. Ladies flocked to see me. “How handsome” — “How elegant” — “What a superb figure for a drawing-room” were the expressions of admiration elicited from them. At last your father came. He examined me attentively for some time without speaking and then declared that there seemed to be as much inside me as there was out — and that he thought I might be of assistance to you.

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Although I did not draw myself — it was evident that I knew a great deal about the art — otherwise I could not talk so well upon the subject of “ornamental design.” To make a long story short he engaged me to come to America to give instruction to you in the principles of Ornamental 9 Art.

I was much pleased with my new pupil — but what was my pain and anguish — on reaching New York — to be separated from you by means that I have not space to describe. Your uncle Mr. Richard McCurdy will probably forward you full details of my stay in New York for the past year — from which you will see that my absence has been an involuntary one. I have space for no more than just one line to thank Mr. Bell for writing my history for me. Without his assistance I do not know what I should have done. Please do not blame me for my involuntary detention in New York. The moment I received my freedom I followed you to Cambridge — and I hope that you will never part with me any more.

Your own Book of “Ornamental Art.” Miss Mabel Hubbard, Cambridge, Mass.