

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, November 20, 1881, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL Hotel Continental, Paris.

Tuesday, Nov. 20th, 1881. My darling wife:

I have just returned from dining with Du Moncel and his accomplished wife — thoroughly tired out — headachy and sick — so you need not expect much of a letter. I have been tiring myself out at the Exhibition — and have a slight return of heart trouble — and altogether feel so miserably that I must abandon acting upon your letter until we return here together. I quite agree with you that I ought to exhibit some interest in other people — and show that I am as anxious to receive others as friends — as many are to receive me. Look at the Mistakes I am making — I cannot write. I will promise to do all you want when you come here with me — but now that the Exhibition has closed I am only anxious to escape from Paris to be with you. I called yesterday on the Count du Moncel but found him out. I then went to the Exhibition to examine the construction of the Pond Indicator and could not get away again.

I was a free day — and all Paris seemed to be there to see the last of the Exhibition. In such a crowd there were many of course who recognized me, and I could not go many steps without hearing “Monsieur Bell” and without staying for five or ten minutes to chat with some one.

In the crowd I encountered the Count du Moncel and his wife — and took them to see my historical exhibit. The count was such pleased as he informed me that he was just bringing out a new edition of his work upon the telephone and wanted to notice these instruments. I was unable to escape from the Exhibition until the whole crowd was turned out by an organized army of officials to the cry of “*Il fermeil ferae.*”

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No one was allowed to loiter and I was turned out of my own exhibit with the Count and Countess who were taking notes. I had entered the building with the intention of remaining a few minutes and then continuing a round of calls. I had to pay my “Cocher” for waiting three hours, and then had only time for one call — namely M. Areengaud Jonne. After dinner I went with Johnson to the theatre to see the “Biche au Bois” which being translated I presume means “The fawn of the Woods.” It is a grand spectacular fairy story — very well put on the acted” — and with good music. I never saw anything to equal the cleverness of the transformations that were effected on the stage at the touch of the Magicians wand — or at the request of the person possessing the person possessing the talisman.

But in spite of my enjoyment of the piece — I could not sit it out — on account of headache and close air. My headache persisted this morning and after breakfast I again lay down until it was time to dress for dinner. I took with me this evening — a valise — full of books containing the evidence in the Telephone Lawsuits — and Patent Office Interferences — and we spent the whole evening until half-past ten upon the early history of the Telephone.

The Count du Moncel will incorporate what I told him in his forthcoming work which will appear simultaneously in French and English.

I enclose a letter received for you from Madame Hansen and one she sent to me. She is one of those to whom I owe some attention. She is composed of that warm-hearted stuff of which good friends are made — and I think we should try to reciprocate in some way.

I will try to call upon her tomorrow — but if not possible will at all events write to her.

An elderly gentleman, whose name I forget introduced himself to me at the Exhibition a few days ago — and was very anxious that I should see his nephew — a lad of sixteen or seventeen — who had some electrical ideas he wanted to submit to me. I speedily forced

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an idea of the condition of affairs from the conversation of the gentleman — and believe it to be as follows:-

Commercial family — Business father — business uncle — Don't know such about Science and Electricity. Young lad of sixteen — Science-mad — Electrical Ideas. Friends don't know whether he is mad or a genius — suspect the former. A crisis in the lad's life has come — Friends determine that if his ideas are sound — to let his pursue his indications and study Electricity and Science — and if not to tie his up on a business stool in some horrid office. The crisis approaches and they determine to submit the matter to some scientific man. If he pronounces the boy's Ideas sound — well and good — if not — to business with him!

This is the story as I have read it intuitively — It may, or may not be true — but I think it is. I felt sorry for the lad and made an appointment for the uncle and nephew to come to the hotel. The uncle could speak English very well — and the lad (whose name in Keenan) spoke French so that I could understand him especially when his cords were supplemented by drawings.

I could not help thinking of my interview with Prof. Henry of long ago — and remembered how much value his few words of encouragement had been to me. It seemed strange to have the positions reversed. Here I was the scientific man and this poor boy with hopes and fears choking his utterance was submitting to me ideas that made him appear crazy in the eyes of those who knew nothing of Science.

He was working on the problem of seeing by telegraph and had 4 evolved substantially the same idea upon which George Minchin is working — and also what Professors Perry and Ayrton proposed. Another invention he showed me was for measuring light by an Electrical Balance — and it was also the same sort of idea that has already been successfully worked out in America by Prof. Langley in his “Actinic Balance.”

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Of course the lad did not know of these and I felt that the independent development of these ideas in so young a brain did indicate considerable inventive power — and ingenuity — and determined to encourage him. I did not tell him therefore that his plan for seeing by telegraph had substantially been anticipated by others — but told him that his ideas were theoretically correct but that the realisation of them if it could be accomplished would be a work of great labour and great expense — and advised him to work away at his problem on paper in his leisure accents — as something good might grow out of it — but that the plan as he had it then — while very ingenious and perfectly correct theoretically — was impracticable.

In regard to the measurement of light by an Electrical Balance — I encouraged him to go on and make the apparatus — and told him about Langley's Actinic Balance and of its wonderful sensitiveness.

He went away quite encouraged and I think that the uncle locked upon the boy with higher estimation than before — especially when I told the boy I would be glad to hear from him if he wished to submit any more ideas to me. I wrote him a short note yesterday telling him where to find an account of Prof. Langley's Balance.

The Director of the Societe General des Telephones — button-holed me yesterday — and I really felt ashamed at having taken no notice of my bust in the Exhibition. I am afraid that I don't appreciate the honor that is done me — and my bust (1) — you would not recognise your 5 husband in the Frenchman on the pedestal. However I think that the Societe General des Telephone really do want to show me some honor — and I have accepted the invitation of the Director to visit the Central Office of the Company tomorrow. I must do something about that bust or I shall bust myself. I shall ask permission to buy it as a memento of the Exhibition and I shall then deliver it into your hands to do what you like with. By the by — the Count e du s Moncel wants to publish my photograph in his book — but I declined to give it for such a purpose. I am afraid you will cold but I cannot help it — if you want it done you can write to the Count yourself about it — and send him my

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photograph as I was when I invented the telephone. I acknowledge your ownership of my face but don't want you to part with it.

Your loving, Alec. P. S. Hope you have not been worried about the Half-moon hotel bill. Hope Charlie and Berts will arrive safely tomorrow. Du Moncel raves about Grace. She would blush if she could hear how enthusiastically he admires her. He hopes she will accompany us to Paris. I shall cultivate M. Louisville — the Deputee and President of the D.&D. Institution. I can get his to take me (or perhaps us) to the Chamber of Deputies and this may perhaps lead to an introduction to Gambetta Grevy and etc., all the political great guns you desire me to carry by storm. H. Lobriochen possibly might be induced to take us round to see the Artists Studios — and this may lead to the successful storming of the artistic great guns you want me to see.

Alec.