

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, September 22, 1900

Volta Bureau, Sept. 22, 1900. My darling Mabel

Miss Safford has come to the rescue again. She has just arrived from Baddeck and I have taken her right up to the roof of the V. B. Before she has had time to make any arrangements as to where she is to stay, so that I may get off a letter to you. Events have moved with tremendous rapidity since I wrote you last. In Miss Safford's absence I have lost my right hand — in more ways than one, having had the misfortune to burn it in an attempt to save my father's house from fire at Colonial Beach. I tried to imitate Mr. McCurdy's exploit of carrying a blazing lamp out into the open air, but forgot that he threw it from him on to the ground, whereas I tried to place it gently on the ground with the result that I carry a reminder of the operation in the shape of quite an extensive burn. I had a doctor attend to it at once, and he thinks that I will escape without a scar. I have been nursing it for the last week, and I think it will be O.K., but I have not been able to do much writing, and Miss Safford's arrival is extremely welcome.

I must try to give you some consecutive account of what has happened, although I presume that much of it is old news since Elsie has her own special correspondent upon the scene.

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After writing you on Monday the 10th from Truro, I telegraphed Prof. Grosvenor that I was going right down to Washington to see what I could do for my boy, and letting him know that I would pass through Boston on Tuesday night, the 11th. He met me at the Parker House, and we had a long talk over plans, and he agreed with me that I should go right on to Washington, instead of writing, so as to learn the situation for myself before acting.

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On Wednesday the 12th I reached New York just in time to see your mother and Helen and Gipsej off. I was glad too to see Lucy with them. I didn't find I had any news to give them, as Master Bert had been ahead of me. I was very glad however to find that your mother and Grace, Charley, and all the other members of the family would give Bert a hearty welcome.

I found also that your mother and Grace and Charley had at last come to a decision about the site of the Hubbard Memorial Building, and that the lot corner of 16th and M had been secured.

Mr. Booth and Mr. Gruver met me in New York, and I had the opportunity of looking over all the proof for the Association Review. I mean proof of my articles.

In the evening we went out to the theater and I left for Washington by the midnight train.

Charley and Grace were upon the same train, but I didn't discover it until long afterwards.

Thursday the 13th. Reached Washington early in the morning and not having a home anywhere to which I could go, took a room at 3 the Riggs House.

I saw Bert soon after breakfast, and talked over matters with him, and decided to call a Board meeting next day. Charley approved, McGee approved, so the meeting was called for the Volta Bureau. I intended to hold a meeting on the roof, with cigars, beer, ginger ale and sandwiches as an accompaniment, but Friday,, the 14th turned out to be wet in the afternoon, so we met in the reading room down stairs, and I forgot all about the refreshments until the whole thing was over.

I first informed the Board of the purchase of a site lot 16th & M, so that now the time had come to consider plans for the building. We didn't want to go ahead and erect a building without consulting the Board, and so I suggested that a Committee of the Society should be appointed to confer with Mr. Charles Bell as the representative of the Hubbard heirs

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upon the whole matter of plans for the building. The Committee Messrs. Blount, Bernard Green, and one other, either McGee or Newell I think. Then came up the question of the relation of Mr. G. H. Grosvenor to the Society. I pointed out the fact that he had as yet received no recognition for the excellent work which he had performed for the Society, and suggested that he should be at once promoted to be an Associate Editor, instead of an employee of the Society, and that he should be made Managing Editor with a salary of \$2,000 for one year from the first of January, 1901.

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I thought, I said, that he had worked very faithfully in the interests of the Society, and had accomplished more than had been expected. The Editors had been enabled to get the Magazine out on time, and it had been very greatly improved owing to Mr. Grosvenor's connection with it, and we had been enabled through his agency to increase the membership of the Society in a remarkable degree, more than one thousand new members having joined during the last year. He had also saved the Society expense. We had paid \$1,200 for the salary of an Assistant Secretary: — Since Mr. Grosvenor's connection with the Society we had paid only \$600 for an assistant to the Secretary, and all this had been accomplished without one cent of expense to the Society on Mr. Grosvenor's account. My contribution to the Magazine having just sufficed to pay his salary. I thought it was due to Mr. Grosvenor that some recognition of his services should be made by the Board.

At the same time I felt a delicacy in bringing this matter to the attention of the Board because of the fact that Mr. Grosvenor was about to become my son-in-law, and my knowledge of the fact that there had been some criticism of him by members of the Board, based, I understood, upon the fact of his youth — a fault which would be easily remedied by time. I wished the Board to consider this matter entirely in relation to the good of the Society, and to do whatever they thought proper and just regarding the young man himself. I stated that my contribution to the Magazine would be continued quite independently of Mr. Grosvenor's connection with it. I paid a high compliment to Mr. Hyde,

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and suggested that after the first of January he should be continued as Editor-in-Chief with Mr. Grosvenor as "Associate Editor in charge of the Magazine".

In order that they might be perfectly free to discuss the matter without my presence, I asked Vice-President McGee to take the chair, and I retired to another room to smoke the pipe of peace, and hold my soul in patience. I thought it best to make no criticism of the action of the Executive Committee, and did not refer to their letter to Bert. At the same time Charlie had the letter in his pocket ready to bring it out and read it if any trouble manifested itself.

I was glad to find, however, that all the members of the Board felt that something was due to Bert, and after about twenty minutes I was called down to hear the results of the conference. Mr. Willis Moore proposed the following resolution, which was passed unanimously by the Board: —

RESOLUTION PASSED FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 1900.

RESOLVED: — That the Board of Managers of the National Geographic Society hereby express to Mr. Gilbert H. Grosvenor , Assistant Editor of the National Geographic Magazine, their appreciation of the excellent service that he has rendered the Society in the past, and that in recognition of such service and the confidence reposed in him by the Board, he is hereby tendered the position of Associate Editor — and also of Managing Editor — of the Magazine at a salary of \$2,000 per annum, beginning January 1, 1901; and that, in grateful recognition of the time, hard, labor, and marked literary ability contributed by Mr. John Hyde , without expense to the Society, he is hereby tendered the position of Editor in Chief of the Magazine, beginning with the first of January, 1901, it being understood that the passage of this resolution abrogates the office of Assistance Editor after the first of January next.

After this Resolution had been adopted, Mr. Charles Bell on behalf of Mr. Gilbert Grosvenor tendered his resignation as Assistant Editor, to take effect on October 1, 1900,

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on the ground that Mr. Grosvenor HAD AN IMPORTANT BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT IN EUROPE HE WISHED TO ATTEND TO:

The Board understood the nature of the engagement referred to and at once accepted the resignation, and placed the sum of \$300 (which would have been Bert's salary during October, November and December) at the disposal of Mr. John Hyde to provide a substitute.

I was then called in and told the nature of the action taken by the Board, and the Vice-President resigned the chair to me. We then passed a resolution to the effect that the Active Membership ticket for the next season should admit only one person to lectures, and that members should have the privilege to purchasing an additional season ticket for a friend for two dollars. I think this last was a mistake. I held out for three dollars, but finding no one to agree with me the sum was fixed at two.

It was also decided that some explanation of the change should be made to members at once, so that they might be prepared for it, and the Board voted to publish in the Magazine my address made last June, with such omissions or alterations as might be deemed best by the Editorial Committee and myself.

We also appointed a Committee of three (Marcus Baker, Mr. Newell, and Mr. Powell, I think) to prepare and submit to the Board a plan for providing lecture courses in other cities than Washington. The meeting then adjourned, and the members were just going away when the waiter employed reminded us that there were some refreshments that had not been passed, it was then six o'clock, however, so that only one or two remained to take anything.

During the whole meeting Bert was at Uncle David's house, trying to take a nap, which he needed, poor fellow, as he has been quite worn out by the anxieties and worries of the last few months Charlie and I constituted ourselves a Committee to wait upon him and inform

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him of the action of the Board. He seemed to be quite overcome, and I don't think he slept all that night.

Bert pointed out the fact that as the first number of the new volume of the National Geographic Magazine will be issued on the 1st of January, it would be necessary for him to be here early in December, and that therefore it would be advisable — if possible — to have the wedding earlier than we had proposed. This completely upset my plans, for it involves my giving up the personal supervision of the sheep experiments in Baddeck. This is a great disappointment to me, but I suppose I must give up something for Elsie and Bert. I told him to go ahead and see what accommodations could be secured on the steamers, and left early Saturday morning the 15th for Colonial Beach. I had to leave the hotel soon after six o'clock in the morning — too early for breakfast — just rushing into the Dairy Lunch place for a glass of milk. I secured a stateroom on the boat, and slept till after their dinner hour, so that I could get nothing to eat until I reached my father's house at half past seven in the evening. My father has been quite ill at Colonial Beach, but is now himself again, although I had not notified him of my visit he was expecting me, and was on the lookout from five o'clock for the arrival of the steamer. Duncan and Mr. Taylor met me, and the old horse succeeded in limping his way to my father's house without breaking the harness, which hung in shreds upon him. Patched up here and there in a most extraordinary fashion.

I really felt quite concerned at the thought of my father and mother driving in such a convenience with such rickety harness, but after observing the movements of the horse I came to the conclusion that there was not much danger of his running away if an accident did happen.

I stayed over Sunday and Monday (the 16th and 17th) at Colonial Beach, having a quiet, restful time, excepting for the episode of the burn, which occurred on Sunday evening.

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Duncan seemed at first, I understand, to chafe at the inaction of life at Colonial Beach, but my father got him a boat and he went out every evening to fish, and since a certain young lady named Rhoda has taken to the boat in his company he seems more reconciled to his lot there. Rhoda, by the by, has tamed a cat bird, bringing it up from the nest, the bird is at liberty in my father's house, and never goes far away. He is called Sandy and it really is quite remarkable to see how he answers to his name, flying from the bushes to light upon one's finger, but he never goes very far from Rhoda, excepting when she leaves him to take a moonlight paddle with her ever faithful Duncan.

The Doctor who bandaged my hand (Dr. Phelps) is a young man who has been located at Colonial Beach for about a year, and proposes making a change. The summer visitors have nearly all departed, and it is becoming quite dull there for him and his wife. My father had been telling him of my experiments with sheep, and he became quite interested. As a scientific man and as a medical man he is interested in the objects I have in view, and when I told him that I proposed going to the Agricultural Department to see if I could not get some young man there, some student of animal heredity, to go up to Baddeck and look after my experiments, he said he would like to go himself. This seemed to me a providential result of my burn. For a medical man will understand just the points I want to have observed, and a man who goes up to Baddeck especially for the purpose of making the observations would be more likely to attend properly to the subject than any local person I could secure.

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I thought you would not like to have strangers go into the house, and so I have arranged with him to go up and look after himself. He can make arrangements when he gets there. If he likes he can have Mr. Ellis's house. He may prefer to board somewhere on the other side of the bay — that is if he takes his wife with him, or if he goes alone he may prefer to rough it and camp out, anyway I have made an arrangement with him to be on Beinn Bhreagh from the first of October to the middle of November.

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On Tuesday morning, the 18th I returned to Washington, leaving at seven in the morning and arriving at seven at night. I telegraphed Miss Safford to come on here immediately or sooner, and I received a reply from her next morning (Wednesday 19th) that she would come on immediately. I telegraphed Mr. McInnis to close the house as soon as Miss Safford left.

Bert Grosvenor secured accommodations on the Cunard steamer leaving New York October 6. I called on Dr. Wines to see what they were doing about the census of the Deaf and the Blind, but did not find him in. Spent the afternoon and evening at the V.B. Upon my return to the Riggs House I found that Mr. Wines had telephoned two or three times for me and had called at the hotel. He seemed anxious to see me, and so on Thursday, the 20th I called early at the Census office, and found that he wanted to put the whole matter of the tabulation of the returns of the Deaf and Blind into my hands at once. We called on Director 11 Merriam, who asked me to take charge. I accepted, and this again upsets all my plans. I don't see how I can start by the 6th of October. I have to make out all my plans at once. A room is to be allotted to me in the Census Building where I shall have my office, with a staff of clerks to do my work. I shall practically have carte blanche to do what I like.

As Bert would like to have the wedding on October 23, the anniversary of his mother's wedding, and — if I mistake not — the anniversary of your mother's wedding also — it should be possible for us to leave by a later steamer. I have asked Bert to see whether we cannot change into a steamer of the same line that leaves October 13. This would give me time to have my plans fully made, make requisition upon Director Merriam for the supplies I shall need, put my office in order, start my force of clerks, and have a few days to get the whole machinery into running order, so that it can go on while I go over to the wedding — but I MUST RETURN IMMEDIATELY AFTERWARDS.

Friday the 21st I spent a good portion of the day at the Census Office in consultation with Dr. Wines. Left in the evening for a week's absence, but he is to return on Thursday, Sept. 27th, by which time I have agreed to have plans ready to submit to him. This is a great

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work, and will give me constant occupation in Washington for at least a year. I calculate that there are about 200,000 cases to be investigated, so that I have my 12 hands full, but it will be congenial work. Dr. Wines and I looked over a large number of the returns and we are both much pleased by the result. Dr. Wines had been skeptical concerning the value of the returns from the enumerators in pursuance of the letter of instructions which I prepared, but he is now convinced that the enumerators have done well, and that we may have a better census of the Deaf and the Blind than has ever been obtained before.

This is surely enough for one letter and poor Miss Safford has not had her dinner yet. Aileen has engaged a room for her somewhere here for the night, and I have not the heart to ask her to do any more typewriting this evening after her long journey from Baddeck.

With much love
Your Alec.
Mrs. A. Graham Bell, 9 Rue Scribe, Munroe & Co. Bankers,
Paris, France.