

John T. Patterson to Mattie Spangler, 15 January 1880

Lexington, Ky. Jany. 15th, 1880

Miss Mattie Spangler,
Orleans, France.

My dear little Mattie: –

It is a matter of no small gratification to me, to know that, although you are separated from country, home and kindred, you have not forgotten us. To say that I feel proud, to find there was a fountain of gratitude in your heart, expressing the thankfulness thereof, for our efforts to make you wiser and consequently better, is but feebly to present our thoughts, upon the reception of your letter. You know my admiration for a good girl, and knowing this, you can but make that knowledge give a satisfactory answer, as to the estimation in which I hold your dear little self. It looks like a cruel trick of fortune that sent you so suddenly away, and while it may have been for the best, yet I know you have been sadly missed. May I not hope however, that new friends, new scenes, new loves and new delights will more than compensate for the temporary loss of the old.

I am glad you had so nice a voyage. I am sure you enjoyed it inasmuch as you were spared the severe trial of sea-sickness. The blending of the sublime loveliness of the pathless ocean, with the glorious beauty of that sunset, to which you allude, must have made a picture from which your memory can never escape, and which must give wider scope for the adoration of your soul. Had I been with you, to help drink in this commingling of the sublime and beautiful, I am persuaded that both of us would have had richer enjoyment.

Your improvement from your visit, as I take it, will be largely from your sight-seeing, and what you may gain from contact. The first I am glad you have so good an opportunity to enjoy; and, by the second, I shall expect to see my dear little friend, should we ever meet again, to have acquired quite a foreign air, and to have developed into a noble womanhood. But, with that development, I shall still expect to see the warm, generous, noble impulses that ever characterized our little Mattie. You have a good heart, and I should, most assuredly, deprecate any influence that would tend to poison the fountain of that heart's purity, or make you less lovable.

The hearts of but few women are fortified against the attacks of flattery, and yet there are but few, who do not think themselves equal to every emergency, when such attacks are made. Trust not yourself to much just here. Keep yourself free from attack, by keeping yourself out of danger's way. I do not know how much you are allowed, in the way of company, nor what you may be permitted to do, in the way of visiting; be that as it may, your old president will be pardoned, I know, for the hint. You must not jump at a conclusion and infer from this, that I have a kind of chronic inclination to deliver a homily upon the subject of the proper mode of behavior for a young lady. Not so, I am your friend, and as such, I find myself interested in your welfare. Please pardon these, that which comes from a

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heart that cherishes for you, nothing but love and good wishes, and now, lest I find myself running away again, into a dissertation upon some subject that might as well be deferred for a better time, I turn to the writing about such subjects, as might be classed under the head of news, general and personal.

To begin then, we have had a most remarkable winter. There has been snow enough to cover the ground only once, and, for most of the time, the air has been as balmy as spring. For the most part, it has been remarkably dry; but recently there has been quite a rainy season. No ice has been gathered, and unless the weather greatly changes, there will be none obtained, as even the northern lakes are still open. The health of the country seems to be as good as usual. In our city, every thing goes on very much after the old style. The new Phoenix will soon be completed. But I am rather inclined to the opinion that Lexington has its growth. There have been no marriages or deaths in our town, among your acquaintances, as far as I remember. The school is a success. We have more young lady boarders than the Institution has ever had, since its foundation. Ours is now the largest female boarding-school in the state. We have fifteen girls from Texas. The routine of duty is very much as it was when you were here. We have just about as many up's and down's as when you were here. This will always be the case, while some good and some bad girls are found in the same class. There are those here, who take every advantage, and get into trouble just as often as there is an opportunity to do so, while, on the other hand, we have those who can be allured from the path of rectitude by no scheming. Our long column moves out to church, on Sunday morning just as in "days lang syne." Some, of course, go to see, others to be seen, and a few go to be profited by what is said. Some seem to be impressed with the idea that they were especially created as heart-smashing machines, and that Sunday is the day when the power of said machines is to be fully tested. Occasionally, material gets entangled in the machinery of these Sunday morning affairs, that can not be well manipulated, and then there is trouble. You know how it used to be. Just so it is yet, and will be, to the end of the chapter. Some turn out on Sundays, ostensibly to fulfill the injunction of Scripture, which says "neglect not the assembling of yourselves together," &c, while the real purpose is to see who has the newest style of hat, or to find out how much Johnie's mustache has grown, during the last week. By the way, it is surprising, how much interest some school-girls manifest in these hirsute appendages. They are better posted as to the precise shade of color these lip coverings have, than they are about any question that Dr. Sweeney can propound about the modified colors of the solar spectrum – important knowledge this, I suppose, but I could never tell why. Occasionally a girl gets exceedingly anxious to satisfy herself that main street has not been ploughed up, or that the establishment of Wallup & Son, especially the Son part, has not made an assignment. Nothing short of an absolute ocular demonstration, will satisfy her; and with the plausibleness of necessity, equal to that of an older sister, in asking for her wedding trousseau, she very blandly informs her ward teacher that a paper of pins is indispensably necessary to her happiness. She seems horrified, that a teacher should not be able to comprehend the pressing necessity of the occasion and retires only to make a renewed attack, under the cover of three eights of a yard of ribbon, one half inch wide – blue ribbon, yes, blue is the color, for blue is the winning shade in American prize contests, and she thinks the contest worthy of her best effort, when a boy is in the game. Denied again!

Horid thought! Now the heart throbs, and bumps, and beats, ever the “hope deferred”! Now the face grows elongated, as though it would stretch itself out till next Saturday, or a week long! How dreadful is the disappointment! Well, she says, If I can not get to see him, I’ll send him a sweet scented little billet-doux, so saying, she hastens to her room, locks the door, closes the bottom blinds, puts a shawl over the transom, and begins – yes, absolutely begins by calling somebody of the masculine persuasion, my dearest, and ends the same, by signing herself, “your lonesome and disconsolate Dulcina” What may make up the body of the little letter, had better not be made known, lest the aforesaid Dulcina may be thought worthy of a jury, to decide as to her being wholly “compos mentis,” for really I think some of the poor unfortunates, just a square or two to the west of us, would evince just as much good sense.

Will my little friend Mattie conclud that I have been seized with a fit of the “sours” while writing this letter? – I am rather afraid so, but really I am in the very best humor imaginable. I am writing on the old round table in the library. Four nice, sweet, good girls are upon the opposite side of the table consulting the poets, preparatory to their recitation in English Literature. Now and then, the eye of one will furtively cast a glance in this direction, as though she would ask, how much more I expected to write. Bless their dear hearts! If it were not for the fact, that the life of the poor time-worn teacher, was brightened by the smiles of such cheerful faces, the road would be long, lonesome, and dreary indeed. How glad I am, that the worst side of humanity is not always in sight, and how I deplore the fact that so much of its perverseness is constantly pushing itself into my notice. But such is life. The cup of happiness, from which we drink to day, is dashed by the bitterness of tomorrow. We accept the situation. We never expect to find it otherwise.

I am beginning to grow suspicious that [unless?] I turn my attention to the personal” part of my letter, I shall find myself short of room to present those in whom you would be interested. First then, my right bower – “Aunt Lou,” has not been well for some time. She is still, as ever, disposed to climb the hill before she gets to it. Wonders, as much as ever, if the girls as all get enough to eat – scolds me for liberties granted them, and has yet to learn how to say no – Wonders if Ike has driven the carriage around, and if Richard has cleaned up the chapel. Thus you will see that her ritualism is very little different from what it was in other days.

Miss Ware thinks she has one of the nicest set of girls on her ward that ever was in the school, but none better than Mattie proved to be. Quite a compliment, from so severe a critic as Miss Mary; don’t you think so? Miss Mary has been “courted” a little, during the the past year, and the result is she has grown a little tenderer hearted. I wonder if any poor school girl feels like making an offering to the gods for the happy circumstance. Whether Mr. Williams has been enabled to induce her to fathom the fountain of his heart’s affection or not I can not say, but one thing I’ll venture to guess. If it is through his influence that she has grown more pleasant and cheerful, her score of girls would be ready to say, “God bless his old soul.”

Our Katie moves around just as in days of yore. She has no special string to her bow among the youngsters here. Her little Doctor writes long letters however, and I suppose she reads them as special morsels, and nurses the thought that it is well he knows how to cure a heart as well as a tooth. Katie looks well. I do not wonder much,

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for a heart that palpitates in uncertainty is sure, sooner or later, to produce a telling effect upon the general physical frame.

Prof. St Clair has his "Ida" about things generally, but he keeps his own councils, and if there are any startling developments to be unfolded, in the near future, they are not, as yet, upon the bulletin board of the college. He still grinds the Mathematical and Latin mill. The girls say his mill grinds hard, but still they wince and bear it.

Miss Sue is still heart-whole and fancy free, as far as our little herd knows. She still cracks Logic and prattles Rhetoric about the ears of the girls, as though every member of her class had no other method of making a conquest, save through a regular eulogism, or in rhetorical figure. Well, she may succeed, in making this impression, but, from some of the indications, I am inclined to think that neither the one nor the other will be considered necessary to effect such a purpose. Both of these sciences appeal to the reason, the common sense of humanity, and as this is a rare commodity with some girls, I feel sure, that out of school, it will be net of mind.

Miss Anna Ragan walks as straight as though she had never done any thing wrong. She hums a melody through the halls, with just as much complacency as though Cupid had never been called to her aid in making a deep and ugly wound. What cruel creatures women are! Like the poor drunkard who has been bitten by the worm of the still, and only returns to be bitten again, her devoted admirer comes to have his heart chilled by the consciousness of unrequited love, and goes away, swearing eternal absence, only to recover, and come again to kneel at her feet. How cruel! How heartless! – Mr. Talbott was here, only a few days since, and I think she got "the last tag." Anna says she has a heart still, and I guess she has, for she has just been in, and bids me say to Mattie that she sends a kiss and many good wishes.

Miss Parker still rolls around among the paints, pictures, brushes, [? ware] &c, just as though by pulling a rope, the Bell would answer her summons every time. Her class is large, and even now, the study begins to fill up with the work of her pupils. It looks a little like she might be working, to carry off the palm, the present year, and be the Bell Mary, among all our Marys. Success to her say we; and if the Bell is won, may it never sing with any other than sweet music.

If Ida Curtis, Frankie Farra, Harlan, Ragland Campbell in fact, all the girls of your acquaintance, could be allowed to word what I was to write, I am sure my letter would have the appearance of a [?] patch work of complimentary declarations and loving messages. Frankie is the same sweet little, modest specimen of beauty and loveliness that graced her classes, one year ago. Maud is as shy, retiring, and lovely as ever. The embodiment of honesty, she grows in favor every day. George still seems to love her friends with deep devotion, and loves herself well enough to want to do right, and always be in the proper place. Mattie went to the country a short time since, and it has been whispered around that she actually saw a boy she liked. Who would have thought it! Don't tell that I said anything about it, however, for she is so timid, she would blush to the bottom of her feet. But why need I attempt to write about each and every one of my good girls. I shall surely always love them, and I am persuaded that every one else must, with whom they come in contact.

Allow me to close my letter, by saying I wish your stay to be all your ardent and loving nature may wish it to be, but at the same time assure you, that among all your new friends, I seriously doubt whether you will find a more loving friend than

Your old teacher,

J. T. Patterson.