

Annotated Highlights from the Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells

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A Summary

It is perhaps because Ida B. Wells's accomplishments were so numerous and various, that she has largely faded from American cultural consciousness today. Her contributions to the early civil rights movement and the women's suffrage movement made her, during her time, an internationally famous figure. Born into slavery in Mississippi in 1862, Wells began working as a schoolteacher. In 1883, Wells was commuting to school via train and took her usual seat in the ladies' car when she was ordered to move; though trains did not yet have official "Jim Crow" cars for passengers of color, Black passengers were expected to sit in the dirty smoking car. When Wells refused to move, she was dragged from the car by the conductor and several other men while white passengers applauded. Wells successfully sued the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in the circuit court, but railroad successfully appealed the verdict in the state supreme court.

Wells's accounts of the incident sparked her career in journalism and activism. She continued teaching while writing as a regular correspondent for numerous Black newspapers throughout the country. Eventually, she became co-owner of the Memphis Free Speech newspaper. Wells embarked on an investigative journalism tour of the South in the 1890s; her outspoken, honest reporting led an enraged white mob to burn down her newspaper office, but it also culminated in her famous Red Record, a collection of accounts and statistics regarding post-Civil-War lynchings. Wells's anti-lynching lecture tours in Britain forced America's racist brutality onto the world stage. She ultimately settled in Chicago, where she founded the Chicago chapter of the NAACP, collaborated with Frederick Douglass to organize a boycott of the 1893

World's Columbian Exposition, formed the first women's civic club for Black women in Chicago, and created the Alpha Suffrage Club to fight for Black women's suffrage. As a Black American, Wells and her organizations faced discrimination from white women's suffragists; simultaneously, as a woman, Wells was criticized by some Black civil rights activists for taking a traditionally male leadership role in the movement.

Wells's Memphis diary, currently housed in the Regenstein Library's Special Collections, spans what one might assume to be the least interesting part of Wells's life narrative: the period when Wells was a schoolteacher first entering the world of publishing. Her Memphis diary begins on December 29, 1885, during a visit to her birthplace of Holly Springs, Mississippi, and ends on September 12, 1887 in Woodstock, Tennessee. Notably, this timespan includes the Supreme Court case in which Wells's victory against the railroad was reversed — on April 11, 1887, a distraught Wells writes, “The Supreme Court reversed the decision of the lower court in my behalf, last week. Went to see Judge G. this afternoon and he tells me four of them cast their personal prejudice in the scale of justice and decided in the face of all the evidence to the contrary that the smoking car was a first class coach for colored people as provided for by that statute that calls for separate coaches but first class, for the races. I felt so disappointed, because I had hoped such great things from my suit for my people generally.” Prior to this entry, Wells describes the sluggish progress of her case to the Supreme Court, and throughout the diary, Wells records numerous secondhand accounts of recent violence and miscarriages of justice toward Black Americans, about which she has heard or read. The majority of the diary, however, is not dedicated to philosophy or race relations, just as the personal diary of an average American writing today might include firsthand stories of micro-aggressions or descriptions of recent news

stories that particularly sparked anger or concern in the writer, but would largely focus on the microcosmic events of the writer's daily life.

Wells began her Memphis diary when she was twenty-three, and filled it when she was twenty-five. What strikes me most in reading her words is how similar she sounds to modern women in their twenties — a “millennial” or “Gen-Z-er,” like myself and my fellows. Young Wells plays checkers and parcheesi, reads novels, goes to the theater, and forms a Dramatic Club with her friends where she performs as Lady Macbeth. She gets her picture taken often, but frequently notes that they seem worse the more she looks at them. She uses her diary to air her own judgments, often as bitingly witty as they are poetic, on novels (she is “disappointed in *Vashti*” by Augusta Evans Wilson), people (she calls the Hon. J. Pennoyer “a gas bag if not worse”), and events (upon hearing rumors that an acquaintance has been married, she proclaims, “If so, and to the woman they say, I pity him from the depths of my heart”). She is devoutly religious, unlike most young people today, but like many modern believers, she prefers an earnest, simple view of Jesus rather than “a far-away God”; she is interested in discourse from other religions, such as the Jewish and Mormon faiths; and she questions the church's acceptance of caste distinctions. Much of young Wells's daily life was dedicated to partaking in cultural activities, spending time with friends, and “networking” with different newspapers and influential figures in activism and publishing.

While Wells experienced many of the same joyful memories as women entering the adult world today, she also faced similar struggles. A huge quantity of young Wells's writing focuses on money; she fears that she may “never be out of debt,” rebukes herself for buying things like clothes that seem frivolous in hindsight, and laments that she cannot afford to see a doctor when

she is sick. She bounces from boarding-house to boarding-house at a dizzying pace near the diary's end. As a woman just starting out in her field, she struggles to be taken seriously; a male newspaper editor publicly proclaims that she does not know what she is talking about and does not "really write" anything. Wells, evidently taking some of this criticism to heart, vacillates between being self-deprecating about her own writing abilities and recognizing that she deserves more respect than she often receives.

Wells's emergence into professional life unfortunately also has much to offer to the contemporary conversation around consent, coercion, and the "Me Too" movement. As a woman in the worlds of publishing, teaching, and activism, Wells mostly meets male friends, but is distraught to find out that practically all of them desire more than friendship. Wells writes, "I do not wish to be married but I do wish for the society of the gentlemen"; however, her suitors, once attracted to her, refuse to remain her friends, demanding, as she says, "either love or nothing." It seems that nineteenth-century men, like modern men, were taught to abhor "the friend-zone." Once rejected, Wells's former friends turn on her immediately. They call her heartless, accuse her of being a "flirty" who lures men in just for the fun of breaking their hearts, tell her she is incapable of love, and spread rumors to sabotage her relationships with other men. Some of them even try to get Wells fired from her teaching job; they write letters to her boss, saying that Wells's youngest sister is actually her illegitimate daughter, and that Wells had been dismissed from a previous job for immoral conduct with another teacher — all, of course, false. Wells begins taking the men's accusations of heartlessness to heart; when one suitor asks if she loves him, she writes, "I fear I don't but then I also fear I shall never love anybody." Wells loses so many friends as rejected suitors that she eventually tells one man that she "was not conscious of

an absorbing feeling for him but I thought it would grow,” exclusively because “I feel so lonely and isolated and the temptation of a lover is irresistible.” One rejected suitor forcibly kisses Wells, causing her to feel “humiliated” and unable to “look anyone straight in the face,” but Wells blames the incident on her own indecision and fear, writing, “I feel that I have degraded myself in that I had not the courage to repulse the one [suitor] or the other.” Young Ida B. Wells’s experiences indicate striking similarities in nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century cultural notions surrounding gender and relationships. How far, one must ask, has American culture really progressed in its treatments of women and its teachings of men, and how can women find solace in Wells’s fiery prayers of anger and mercy until these behaviors are no longer perpetuated?

These interactions with men are some of the many moments, interspersed between mirth and boredom, when twenty-three-year-old Wells is forced to grow up far too fast. Her younger siblings, whom she is raising with her Aunt Fannie’s help after their parents’ deaths, incline toward theft and gambling, and Wells earnestly prays that she might guide them well. Her prayers after the failure of her lawsuit — she writes, “O God is there no redress, no peace, no justice in this land for us? Thou hast always fought the battles of the weak and oppressed. Come to my aid at this moment and teach me what to do, for I am sorely, bitterly disappointed” — and her accounts of new stories regarding racist violence seem to foreshadow her later writings, including her investigative journalism on lynchings. However, she also directly encounters micro-aggressions, which she typically downplays. While traveling by train with friends, Wells off-handedly mentions experiencing the “usual trouble about the first-class coach”; similarly, in recounting a church service, she writes, “Visited Miss Rosa Sheppard Thanksgiving, also heard a

good sermon and witnessed practical evidence of ‘white folks’ Christianity,’ in the haste with which they passed us by when choosing a seat.” Wells’s takes note of these instances when they occur, as a means of silently voicing her frustration, but her narration always mentions them so casually that a reader could blink and miss them — they are almost second nature, part of the minutia of daily life, an undercurrent which Wells never allows to drag her under despite its subtle but constant insistence on her inferiority. Wells’s diary is thus not entirely composed of her activism, but provides insight into the conditions — both from Wells’s time and from her own analytic and moral tendencies — which cultivated her activism. It shows her to be a truly human woman in her twenties — one who was capable enough to handle herself in a virulent time and wise enough to channel her outrage into her writing.

What follows is a transcript of what I view to be the most salient parts of Wells’s diary. These excerpts reflect the larger thematic findings I’ve expressed here, but also notably include specific names and titles of the people, places, publications, and media with which Wells engaged. I have also provided footnotes to clarify and analyze specific references Wells makes to such people, places, and media.

-Hope Campbell Gundlah

Annotated Highlights from the Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells

Holly Springs, Miss.¹, Tuesday Dec. 29th: I am this day seated in a room of the first university building in the land of my birth, the home of my nativity. How strange everything seems! Nearly 4 years ago since I last set foot here and then there was only the foundation of this magnificent 4 story building they call Rust University². I could not get to K.C. [Kansas City] so started here Sunday but got left. Yesterday morning started from home to the depot; met Mr. Fulton the manager of the Little Rock Sun³, who promised to send me his paper. Received a letter from Mr. M in which he excuses his delay in writing by saying he had lost my letter, but receiving the Bee⁴ that I asked L. M. B.⁵ to mail him he wrote again in care of the Living Way⁶ office. The letter had been there a week when I got there... Will wait till I go home at any rate,

¹ *Ida B. Wells was born on July 16, 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi. She was born before the Civil War; and was therefore born a slave, since her parents were both slaves. Her father, Jim Wells, was the son of his master and a female slave; he was apprenticed to a contractor and builder, and married Elizabeth Warrenton, who was the contractor's cook. Ida was the oldest of eight children.*

² *Wells's father was one of the first trustees of Rust College, originally Shaw University. The school was established for former slaves by the Freedmen's Aid in 1866. Ida attended Rust throughout her childhood.*

³ *The Little Rock Sun is one of the many newspapers for which Wells wrote after the fame she gained in the Living Way.*

⁴ *This is likely the Washington Bee, a Black newspaper based in Washington D.C.. The Chicago Bee, for which Ida B. Wells was later an editor, was not founded until 1925.*

⁵ *L.M.B. is mentioned throughout Wells's diary. Based on his acquaintance with the Bee and its editor Chase, he may have worked for the Bee. Wells exhibits vacillating feelings for him — she criticizes his attitude heavily, but also reports the occasional "very pleasant walk" and says she "would be glad to see him" when he comes to town.*

⁶ *The Reverend R.N. Countee, whom Wells met at the Memphis lyceum she joined after becoming a teacher, invited Wells to write for his religious Black weekly, the Living Way. Wells's weekly articles, signed "Iola," were soon copied and circulated by editors of other Black newspapers, many of whom wrote to Wells inviting her to write for them. In her diary entry for February 23rd, 1887, Wells describes going "to Countee's church for morning service."*

before I answer, then possibly until I receive the paper. Mr. Fortune⁷ sent me 10 copies of the paper with my article entitled “Woman’s Mission” in it, characterizing it: “a beautiful essay”... Heard from Miss King that Mr. Davis was married; if so, and to the woman they say, I pity him from the depths of my heart.⁸ Left of the 4 o’clock train and arrived here at night about 8; came on to the college building where Mr. and Mrs. Hall greeted me. Today have been all over the building, inspected everything with the eager eyes of curiosity. Mr. Miller⁹ came to see me and we had a very long talk. Then we all went out for a walk; strolled around town, meeting many I knew in the days of “auld lang syne”, greeting some pleasantly, passing others indifferently, unconcernedly, and making the acquaintance of many who were children when I was here but are grown up now and almost out of knowledge. Visited the cemetery and found my father’s and possibly my mother’s grave, and was present at a burying¹⁰. Came home very tired... The day had been a trying one to me; seeing old enemies, visiting old scenes, recalling the most painful memories of my life, talking them over with those who were prominent actors during my darkest

⁷ *American orator and civil rights leader Timothy Thomas Fortune was a writer for the New York Age. Wells, a.k.a. Iola, was a correspondent for the New York Age. Fortune did not meet Wells in person until the National Afro-American Press Convention in Louisville in 1897, at which Wells was elected assistant secretary.*

⁸ *Wells’s sometimes sassy brand of humor comes through in many parts of her diary.*

⁹ *Mr. Hall and Mr. Miller, both Masonic brothers of Ida’s father, were appointed by the Masons to act as the Wells children’s guardians after their parents’ deaths. Mr. Wells was a master Mason. Bob Miller and James Hall advised Ida to apply for a teaching job at a country school to support her siblings.*

¹⁰ *Wells’s father, mother, and infant brother Stanley died during the yellow fever epidemic that hit Holly Springs in 1878. Wells’s brother Eddie had died from meningitis a few years earlier, and her sister Eugenia, who was partly paralyzed, died a few years later. Sixteen-year-old Ida insisted upon keeping the family together, so she cared for the surviving children — Eugenia, James (a.k.a. Jim), George, Annie, and Lily — herself, with the help of their father’s Masonic brothers. Eventually their mother’s sister, their aunt Belle, offered to take Eugenia, and Jim and George went to work on Belle’s family farm, leaving Wells with only Annie and Lily in Memphis. In 1885 — earlier in the same year as this first entry — the Wells children’s Aunt Fannie accepted an opportunity to go to California, and took Annie and Lily to live with her in California. At the time of writing, therefore, Wells lives alone, though she is visited by Jim and George.*

days.¹¹ They counsel me to forget, to cast the dark shadows out and exorcise the spirit that haunts me, but I — forgetting the vows that I had taken on myself to forget, and the awareness I have made that I was glad because my Father saw fit to send these trials to fit me for His kingdom — clenched my hands darkly and proudly declared I would never forget! O My Father, forgive me, forgive me and take away the remembrance of those hateful words, uttered for the satisfaction of self. Humble the pride exhibited and make me Thy child...

...Found not a single letter when I got home from any source and of course was annoyed and disappointed at this proof of my friends' remembrance. I fully expected a missive from L. M. B., anyhow. He has no right to affect dignified anger or silence as my reply was forced by his request to state the offensive fact of his letter. Curiosity as to the tone he would adopt was what animated me as much as any other...My interval of the day was filled up with reading Walter Scott's "Ivanhoe." It is the second of his novels I have read and the simple language yet strong portraiture of the characters, invest them with a peculiar charm in my eyesight. Borrowed "Vashti" of Mr. T. and have been reading it all day. It is another of Miss Evans' pedantic novels¹², that have — in spite of their being a printed advertisement of her acquaintance with lore and skill in literature, ancient as well as modern, poetic and historical, mythological and biblical — in spite of which they have a peculiar charm to me. I had not read this one in so long — it seemed

¹¹ *This may be the rumor to which Wells refers in Crusade for Justice. After her parents passed away, townspeople overheard the doctor promising her money; though he was actually giving her the money her own father had stored away for safekeeping, the townspeople "spread the rumor that already, as young as I was, I had been heard asking white men for money and that was the reason I wanted to live there by myself with the children" (17). It seems some of the townspeople spread a rumor that Wells was a prostitute who slept with white men.*

¹² *Vashti; or, Until Death Us Do Part, was a novel by Augusta Evans Wilson.*

like a new story to me altogether. The authoress has skillfully grouped her characters, there are different addenda, different surroundings to all, but she loves to deal with the weird, the — I had almost said inhuman and the same principal elements run through and compose all her creations — inflexible sternness, haughtiness, independence, unyielding pride indomitable steadfastness of purpose throughout all trials, sacrifices of self; and there has in all her books to be found a doubting, scoffing, jeering, sneering, infidel devil sometimes man, sometimes woman, so much so that it has almost grown monotonous. Her different characters change sex in different books. And the women have an exorbitant ambition that they feed, and trample everything and every body under their feet — to accomplish.¹³ I especially admire her novels tho' for the beautiful, if labored, finish of every thing; the description of the least minutiae of person, surroundings, nature, pictures are beautiful word-pictures garnished by analogies and similes that are chaste, beautiful but many times unmeaning to an ordinary reader. Her references, quotations, and general language and especially her dialogue — are all elegant, the language chaste and the thought pure and elevating, the dialogue cutting, witty masterpieces. From reading her books I should like to know something of the authoress. I should judge her to be an exquisitely refined creature, passionately devoted to music, art, literature, flowers with all the useless panoply and luxury money can provide — added. She could hardly be otherwise than pure who writes so purely and she must be possessed of a mighty intellect. I am disappointed in “Vashti.” The idea that Ulpian Grey could never love Salome Owen and yet be with her constantly makes him more of a god than a natural human being with heart and soul, to me¹⁴; and I cannot fathom that nature

¹³ *This stereotypical character of the heartless, driven, independent woman who cares for no one but herself is precisely the image that many of Wells's rejected suitors use to insult her.*

¹⁴ *This view particularly makes sense given that Wells's own male friends almost always became interested in being more than friends.*

that could willingly leave such a creature, knowing she loved him dearly, and go thro' life without one spark of affection for her, ever — and yet retaining its sweetness without having ties to call it forth. And the idea of her never marrying because of her hopeless love seems unnatural.

...Mr. F was up last evening and loaned me the \$3 I asked. M sent in a bill of \$78, and I've no money to pay it. Looking back at my debts I am thankful I could not accomplish my purpose and borrow money to get away — I would have been more deeply in debt and I am very sorry I did not resist the impulse to buy that cloak; I would have been \$15 richer. Paid Mrs. P. \$3 according to promise on her rent yesterday. She wishes to raise my board but I cannot do it. George¹⁵ came at 10 this evening but I did not admit him. Am sorry I was so hasty.

Tuesday Jan 5th: —

School reassembled yesterday all right — I now have 3 classes. No letters or papers yesterday and no papers today. Perhaps the editors are taking a holiday. The Living Way came out Saturday with half my letter in it; don't know if they print the other next week or no. Mr. Marcus came out last night for the first time. His talk did not altogether suit me but I could not resent it as I wished — this being his first time here. I guess he finds I'm not so silly as I seemed. Taught today, feeling worse than I have for some time; my chest and head have been in an uproar all day and I feel very badly tonight. The winter of my discontent is made more so by Mrs. P's determination to hire out at the end of the week. I ought to have the money to pay her for my board and she would not have to go. I am so sorry I bought that sacque when I could have done without it. I asked a loan of Mr. G. today; don't know what his answer will be. I hated very badly

¹⁵ *George, who is mentioned frequently as a visitor of Wells, is her younger brother George.*

to do it — but was compelled. I want to pay her even if I go. I will hate to go as the weather is very cold just now and I feel like I am going to be sick. I promised to pay him 10 per cent interest...

Wednesday Jan. 13th;—

Have been very sick since I last wrote, but kept at school, I am thankful to say and because I was not able to receive visitors I had them in abundance all last week. Was reduced to such direful extremity that I wrote a note to G.¹⁶ to lend me some money at 10 per cent int., but he came by last Wednesday afternoon after school to say he had it not. He expressed his agreeable surprise at receiving the set and we would have “made it up” if I had been willing to answer a question he asked¹⁷ — but I thought it was conceding too much, considering he had never told me anything and would not. I would like to be friends but shall do nothing more to make it so, nor will I submit to “conditions” in order to compass it. Mr. N. sent me some medicine by G. which I took that night. Mr. M. came shortly after dark the same afternoon and stayed till 10 o’clock! I was so worried and sick and thought he would never go.

Thursday was city election day; I was not interested in anything but the School Board and both colored men were beaten; we now have an entirely white board. As Mr. S. could not be elected I was heartily glad the other one could not be, for I believe him to be a toady and could unknowingly be used by the white men¹⁸. Then he boasted so and conducted himself generally in

¹⁶ This G. is Mr. G., as Wells states in her January 5th entry, rather than Wells’s brother George.

¹⁷ It is unclear what this question is, though, given Mr. G.’s actions in subsequent entries, it is likely of a romantic nature.

¹⁸ It is not surprising that Wells would be suspicious of such a possibility, given that her original lawyer in her court case against the railroad company was a Black man who was paid off by the railroad company.

such an obnoxious manner that it completely disgusted me with him...Jim¹⁹ came to the school to see me the same day and wanted money, of course. He has gotten into trouble and can't go back where he was. I have no money and told him so, but gave him a note to Mr. F.²⁰ who, I knew, would help him if he could and told him to come back that night and tell me the result but he came not and sick as I was, I waited up for him till ten o'clock. During the night, it turned bitterly cold and I was very much surprised on opening the blinds next morning to find snow. It was very cold all day but I went with George to see Mr. F. that afternoon about J. He had given him a note and sent him to a friend of his and the prospects were that everything would be all right only he did not like the idea of J's companion (of whom I know nothing)...

... L.M.B....sent me a letter in answer to mine of before Christmas, early in the week, in which, while he did not beg pardon he requested a cessation of hostilities assured we can become the dear friends he addresses me as and closes asking me to be his little sister. I told him I would have respected him more if he had owned up his sins and begged pardon honestly instead of beating the bush and trying to excuse his ungentlemanly letter behind my sins. He deeply insulted me by assuming it necessary to tell me he was capable of a feeling no higher than friendship, and expect me to forget the enormity of his crime without even an apology. He is one who never likes to acknowledge himself in the wrong and wishes to smooth things over without such humiliation.

¹⁹ "Jim" appears to be Wells's younger brother James.

²⁰ This "Mr. F." is referred to several times as Wells's surrogate father, and is likely a Mr. Froman. On March 23rd, Wells writes "Had a long talk with 'Dad' this evening," and on May 9th, she writes, "Saw Mr. F. who told me of the dirty method Mr. Cummins is attempting to quash my case. He ordered him to stop it. I honor and respect 'my dad' highly." It therefore appears that Mr. F. is the man whom Wells views as her "dad." On August 4th, she asks Mr. Froman for advice about whether to stay in California with her Aunt Fannie, and she receives a reply from "'Pap' F" in her September 14th entry, suggesting that this paternal figure is Mr. Froman.

Mrs. Powell adhered to her determination to move and altho I had paid her \$4 on what I owned her and gave her a bill on [?] for \$2.50, she went, and I was forced to hunt another place. Went to carry some books home Monday and found her gone when I came. Went to F's [?] and stayed all night and last night too. Wrote to C.S.M.²¹ over a week ago and received an early reply on Monday. He is pleased to receive a letter from a "genuine woman" as he has hitherto been overflooded with schoolgirl notes. I think I scent a faint odor of patronage pervading his tone but I will not be so suspicious as to let it be known unless it develops itself more strongly. I answered that night before I went to F's. Received a letter...from Aunt F. and Annie today²²...

Sunday Jan. 24.

The month is rapidly drawing to a close; I am truly thankful I am spared to keep up so well this far, but my system is not in good order and I cannot consult a physician till I get some money. If I once get out of debt I hope this lesson will be remembered and profited by; to think I am in debt more than one month's salary and if any thing should happen I have not more than enough money coming to me to cancel my expenses. I earnestly pray the Board will pay for two months when next they meet.

²¹ C.S.M., also mentioned as "Mr. M" and "Charlie," appears to be Charles S. Morris. He features prominently in Wells's diary and seems to be a formative figure in her life and writing. However, he is mentioned only once in *Crusade for Justice*: he is noted as having married Frederick Douglass's granddaughter, and he comments on Wells's testimonial at Lyric Hall on October 5th, 1892. Given the sentiments Wells expresses regarding him, was he relegated to the periphery of *Crusade for Justice* because Wells had at one point hoped to marry him, before his eventual marriage to another woman? Perhaps it would have been viewed as taboo for her to mention interest in any suitors other than Ferdinand L. Barnett.

²² Wells's Aunt Fannie and younger sister Annie. After the death of Wells's parents, she sent her little sisters Annie and Lily to live with their Aunt Fannie in Visalia, California.

Thursday Jan. 28:

...Mr. M. returned my picture and repeated the word “boy” so often I fear it nettled him a little altho’ he claims it does not bother him. He urges me to write the book I spoke of; to make it classical, representative and standard and I shall make myself loved, honored and respected. He speaks so authoritatively about things and I could accept his calm reproof, superior criticism and logic if he were not my junior; he is what I have long wished for as a correspondent, an interested, intellectual being who could lead and direct my wavering footsteps in intellectual paths. His youth, tho, prevents my asking any information of him as I would one who was my superior in as well as intellectually. I may overcome the feeling tho’ as there is not any pleasure without its alloy. He denominates my nose as my weakest feature but says it denotes war — petty war, perhaps. He phrenologizes my features minutely and unerringly, as well as amusingly. He writes a good letter and I feel my sceptre departing from me, before him as before no other and it is somewhat humiliating. He is progressing, his path is onward and upward while I — am drifting along with no visible improvement. Yet it is not altogether procrastination, I don’t know what books to read that will do the most good and know not where I am to obtain the knowledge. The stupendous idea of writing a work of fiction causes me to smile in derision of myself at daring to dream of such a thing — but his enthusiasm is catching.

...The last letter I received in yesterday’s mail was from — Mr. B. who thanks me earnestly for the picture and begs me to assure him I respect him as the assurance that I did not — rambles in his breast night and day. I don’t know what to say to him as I still have the feeling of pity and contempt for the man, who is not strong enough to rise superior to circumstances — that I had when I first wrote. I could not withhold a grain of comfort for revenge’s sake — but

can I truthfully say I respect him? He said not one word about his unreturned letters; he is far nobler than I am in that he trusts me more.

L.M.B. sent me a copy of “The Bee” in which there is a marked article from the pen of his very incapable editor²³, I suppose. The article in question speaks of “the star eyed goddess” as not knowing what she is talking about (as every body is accused who differs from the Bee) essays to be sarcastic and volunteers the information that the A.M.E. Church Review would pay me for my articles if I “really wrote” anything. He is contemptible and puerile in the extreme, and knows as much about what constitutes journalism as — as — Louis Brown! I would not write for him for great pay and I will write some thing some day that will make him wince. Chase (the editor) marries — why tonight is the time! Yes, he takes unto himself a bride this evening. I think he has good ideas about most things but he has no tact or ingenuity about how to express them in a way to gain attention or give weight to his words; he is either a fanatic or talks like one. I will outline my heroine’s character in my next entry.²⁴

Saturday Jan. 30.

Friday was a trying day in school. I know not what method to use to get my children to become more interested in their lessons. Had a talk with G.²⁵ who informed me that some one had reported me as saying any young man I went with ought to feel honored because of the “privilege” and that whenever any one was with me all the young men in town knew it and said

²³ *This editor was William Calvin Chase, editor of the Washington Bee.*

²⁴ *Unfortunately, Wells does not provide any such outline in her next entry.*

²⁵ *This “G.” is evidently the suitor “Mr. G.,” rather than Wells’s brother George who is also sometimes abbreviated “G..”*

of him that he was highly honored. He did not add (altho' I knew it must be so) that they hastened to tell such an one of the rumor and thus maliciously have been setting all the young men against me and by their cock and bull stories have kept them away, for a silly speech of mine — if, indeed, I really said it, of which I have not the slightest remembrance. This bit of information opens my eyes to some things, which while I did not understand them I attributed them to pique on his part; I now learn them to be premeditated and deliberate insults and my blood boils at the tame submission of them. I simply and calmly told him I had been misrepresented as I had too often been and betook myself off to think. I went in my room and wrote and asked him if he were in earnest when he asked me if I would try to love him; he replied that he was, indeed, I then said alright. I know it is unchristian-like to burn for revenge as I do, but a demon is tempting me to lead him on and fool him at last. When I think of how I could and can fool him and of his weak imaginings to the contrary, petty evidences of spite work, that he has been safe hitherto because I would not stoop to deceit — I grow wild almost and determined to pay him back. But I cannot do that; I will do the right as I know it — because it is right and not as for pay. I have never stooped to underhanded measures to accomplish an end and I will not begin at this late day by doing that my soul abhors; sugaring men, weak, deceitful creatures, with flattery to retain them as escorts or to gratify a revenge, and I earnestly pray My Father to show me the right and give me the strength to do it because it is right, despite temptations. I shall pray for Mr. G. and all the others who have formed themselves in a league against a defenseless girl, that they may see the light and the injustice done me and that I may bear it meekly, patiently...

Monday Feb. 1st.

Went to service yesterday morning and found a very slender, puerile-looking, small specimen of humanity occupying the pulpit²⁶...He was presented to me at the close of the meeting but said little; the predominant feeling then was that he had great enthusiasm for the work and that faculty alone would cover a multitude of defects and help resurrect the church. I went back last night to hear him preach in order to come to a decision and came away doubtful as to his holy zeal and fitness for the work. A constant arraignment of the Negro as compared to the whites, a burlesque of Negro worship, a repetition of what he did not believe in, and the telling of jokes together with a reiteration of his text “ye must be born again” made up his “sermon.” It was in style so closely allied to his “talk” of the morning that I detected little difference between the two²⁷...

Tuesday Feb. 2nd.

A snowstorm set in this morning and has raged all day. Have been very blue all day and G. was in trying to comfort but he makes a mess of it as always. Found a letter from my Louisville correspondent who thinks I said more than I intended when I spoke of the fact of my being his senior as “unpleasant,”²⁸ and objects to being patronized as the expression “my youthful friend” seems to imply. L.M.B. excuses his long silence in the fact that he has assisted in launching Mr. Chase on the matrimonial seas and seems to gloat over the fact of fighting back

²⁶ *This passage is describing Mr. Benjamin, a substitute preacher at her church.*

²⁷ *Here, Wells reveals a not only a preference for more traditional preaching styles, but also a disdain for Black Americans who too harshly judge their own race and unfairly compare them with white people.*

²⁸ *This “Louisville correspondent” is evidently C.S.M. (Charles Morris).*

against “Iola” “with a vengeance.”²⁹ I don’t know whether it is worth my while to try and make him understand my reasons for refraining an answer to “The Bee’s” squib...

Monday Feb. 8th;—

...This is my 4th week here and no letter from Aunt F. yet. If G.³⁰ had not received one from Eddie saying all were well I should be uneasy...

...I had intended retiring early in order to rise soon enough to attend the Moody and Sankey³¹ meeting Sunday morning. We came very near being late but got a front seat in the gallery. The singing was grand, but had we not gone to Avery Chapel to hear him also, I should have been disappointed because I could not hear very well from where we were in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. His style is so simple, plain and natural. He told the old, old story in an easy and conversational way that charms the listener ere he is aware and the secret of his success is, I think — that he does not preach a far-away God — a hard to be reconciled Savior but uses a natural earnest tone and tells in a natural way without any long drawn doctrine or finely spun theology or rhetoric the simple truth that Christ Jesus came on earth to seek and save that which was lost. Mr. Sankey’s singing is a sermon in itself...I intended writing Mr. Moody a letter asking him why ministers never touched on that phase of sin — the caste distinction — practiced even in the churches and among Christianity, but rather, tacitly,

²⁹ *The Bee’s reasons for attempting a war of words with Wells are unspecified. The editor Chase proclaimed that Wells neither “really wrote anything” nor knew what she was talking about, but his specific qualms with her message are never stated.*

³⁰ *This G. is, again, Wells’s brother George, rather than “Mr. G.” Eddie is another of Wells’s brothers.*

³¹ *Gospel singer Ira D. Sankey and preacher Dwight L. Moody were a famous gospel mission duo. They toured the U.S., Britain, and Canada. In the southern U.S., their evangelical rallies were required to be segregated; though both men were white, Sankey noted that Moody would have the Black side of the assembly hall “sing alone, sometimes just to show the white people how to sing.”*

conniving at it by assenting to their caste arrangements, and accepting it as a matter of course, instead of rectifying it — but I had no chance, and he left the city yesterday; so I know not where to address him...

...Found a letter from Mr. C.S.M. on my arrival home this afternoon instead of tomorrow as I expected. He understands and sympathizes with my position of almost complete isolation from my fellow-being on account of lack of congeniality — and I think he does so the more fully because his own experience coincides with mine. His fine humor and sarcasm are very refreshing and I believe I can say at last I have found a thoroughly congenial correspondent, and I sincerely hope the correspondence may not die the death of the others but may be the earnest and foundation of a lasting friendship increasing with the years, such as I read about, often, see very rarely and have experienced — never!...

...H went with Ella to the theater and Mrs. H. had to go too and as there was no one to stay with me, I went too — not that I wished so much to go, for I had seen “The Mikado”³² before. It is a delightful gimple of ridiculous and laughable; combination of songs, speeches, and actors and dress; for everything is represented as Japanese. It is very bright and sparkling, with no suggestion of the coarse or vulgar; the character of Ko-Ko is inimitable and it was acted to perfection. Yum-Yum is also a delightful, silly little creature. Lost my veil up there and came home wishing I had stayed when here.

³² *Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado had premiered in London in March of 1885, so it was a fairly new opera when Wells saw it, though many companies in both Europe and America were producing it by the end of 1885. While Gilbert and Sullivan portray a largely invented Japan primarily to create an “other” lens through which to view the peculiarities of British culture, the opera did perpetuate orientalist stereotypes. (Wells herself appears to have held some of these stereotypes, evidenced by her reference to “Heathen Chinees” in San Francisco.) Interestingly, two songs in the opera also use the “n”-slur, which Wells does not mention, perhaps because its usage in both songs refers to blackface minstrels rather than actual Black people.*

Sunday Feb. 14th.

No letters last week and few papers, except from Aunt F. who is well. Answered C.S.M.'s letter and explained fully my position. I hate the barren formality of our address to each other. I want to say "my dear Charlie": but I hesitate about breaking the ice, tho I know the advance ought and must come from me. Mr. G. and I had a bout last week; he took my hat and walked off with it in the rain and I had to come home bare headed. I took that all in good part till I saw my hat next morning and then I became very angry for it was utterly ruined by being held in the rain. I would not speak to him for two days when he wrote to ask for his umbrella and suggested that we stop playing as we could not do so without getting angry. I acquiesced and told him to come for his umbrella that evening. He did so and stood around like a mummy a long while but finally offered a dictated apology. He renewed his question of a former occasion as if I would tell him I "earned for him" without a like assertion on his part. He seems to think I ought to encourage him to speak by speaking first — but that I'll never do. It's conceding too much and I don't think I need buy any man's love. I blush to think I allowed him to caress me, that he would dare take such liberties and yet not make a declaration. He seems to not have confidence in my actions and were he to plead with me on his knee now, for no consideration would I consider his position. He had his opportunity and lost it thro' fear of being deceived and other timidity and it shall not occur again. He is too narrow and suspicious. Right here comes my temptation to flirt with him; to make him declare himself and forget all others, but I cannot — I will not consider it. I have preached and I must practice under all circumstances. I could not respect myself and do so and I will not exert any influence over him tho' he richly deserves to be punished...

...Saw an article from some Miss Eames of State Normal School of Miss. in "The Little Rock Sun" and took it upon myself to answer her erroneous views on "Women in Politics," partly because she seemed striking at me about "telling whether she is a Democrat or Republican" because I did such a thing in my article to the Freeman. Also wrote a comparatively short letter to L.M.B. in which I gave him my candid opinion of his petty mode of warfare, and asked him to procure me Guttman's Aesthetic Physical Self-culture and I would pay him for it.

Thursday Feb. 18th.

...Found a letter from "Charlie," who is as bright, enthusiastic, and witty as usual... Answered C.S.M.'s letter yesterday and sent him two different pictures to look at — so he might not forget me, but they are to be returned, and last night answered the nearly a month old letter of B.F.P's that I have. I told him respect did not come at the bidding but was called forth by action...

Mr. B. has told me an incident of Judge Greer's³³ court that for fear I will not remember it when I write my "novel" I will jot down now: It seems that a white and colored girl had been in the habit of passing and re-passing morning and evening, on a narrow path in the woods up the country, and there had never been manifested on the part of the white girl any desire to give half of the walk. One day they passed while the white girl's brother was with her and he pushed the girl from the path and abused her. The next day they met again when each were alone and the white girl attempted to imitate the example of her brother the day previous and they fought; the colored girl getting the best of the fight, and she was reported, a complaint lodged against her

³³ *Judge Greer was the white lawyer who brought Wells's case against the railroad to trial in the circuit court, after Wells discovered that her first lawyer, who was Black, had been paid off by the railroad.*

and in the trial the jury brought in a verdict of guilty but fixed no penalty and the judge carried it to the utmost of his power by giving her 11 months 29 days and a half in the workhouse! One half day more would have been a penitentiary offence and those are fixed by the jury.

I read of a case, or heard tell of one, where a white man could not get a license to marry a colored girl and he cut open her three fingers and sucked her blood and then told them he had Negro blood in his veins and therewith procured a license; the facts were brought out in his subsequent trial as his friends knew him to be of caucasian birth and parentage, and proved it.

George B. of this city and Mary Burton lived together 9 years there when they procured a license thro' a white friend they had to steal away like culprits to be married and then they tried to send them to penitentiary for legally doing what had been illegally suffered and nothing said or done about it. They had several children and he wished to legitimize his union and their parentage.

Monday March 1st —

“Charlie’s” letter was here when I came home Thursday afternoon; he did not send the pictures but promised to in his next. He did send me Blanton Duncan’s³⁴ notorious letter against the Negro and his own answer which is magnificent and comprehensive in its scope...

...Got a letter from L.M.B., Saturday and he as usual is on the warpath; he tells me again about his affections, and make use of the following ambiguous statement: “I could understand you better in another way.” I don’t know what construction to put on it and lest I should be charged with the wrong one I make none. I answered his letter Sunday and told him I would

³⁴ *Henry Blanton Duncan was the colonel of the First Kentucky Infantry during the Civil War.*

certainly cease correspondence if he ever again considered it necessary to let me know the state of his affections were not richening [?] toward myself. He did not send the picture...

...I also mailed a letter to Mr. Fulton yesterday endeavoring to seek employment as a representative of his paper to Washington to the Press Convention. George has gone out to Mr. Payne's to work as he could get nothing to do here. I hope he will do well. Mrs. Hill told me this morning she would have to move soon and as she goes farther out I, of course, will have to get another boarding place...

...I have found out that some one tattles to Collier³⁵ everything I do, and I have expressed myself pretty freely to Mr. B. this morning about it and he affects ignorance of it all. Yet I do not fear; God is over all and He will, so long as I am in the right, fight my battles, and give me what is my right. He tried to show me the folly of fighting against the tide and told me I already know of the enmity of the men in society against me for expressing my honest convictions. God help me to be on the watch and do the right; to harm no man but do my duty ever!

Thursday March 11th —

...Took the first lesson of a new month of Mrs. T. Saturday and read all day after going home, "Bricks Without Straw" by Judge Tourgee³⁶. It deals with the Reconstruction era of Negro

³⁵ This is likely "Mr. C.," aka "Capt. C.," Wells's boss at school.

³⁶ Albion W. Tourgee was an early civil rights activist and white ally of Black Americans. He founded Bennet College in North Carolina as a school for freedmen, fought against segregation, disenfranchisement, lynching, and racism. He helped the New Orleans Citizen's Committee to build the famous Plessy v. Ferguson case and acted as the attorney for Homer Plessy. Wells originally asked him to represent her in her libel suit against the Memphis Commercial after the paper accused her of inciting the Peoples Grocery lynching. Tourgee had mostly retired from law, and therefore refused, but he put Wells in touch with a friend who would take the case: Ferdinand Lee Barnett, who would later become Wells's husband. Tourgee's book Bricks Without Straw, published in 1880, portrayed the violence and racism of the postwar South from the perspective of freedmen.

freedom and American history, and I like it somewhat. The writer is activated by a noble purpose and tells some startling truths...Received a letter from Fortune notifying me of the end of my subscription for the Freeman and an invitation from Brother T. to a tea-party in Nashville. Mr. F. might afford to send me his paper, I think as I've sent him several subscribers. I'll not renew because I expect to leave shortly. His picture adorned the paper last week. My curiosity is satisfied but I am disappointed in him. With his long hair, curling about his forehead and his spectacles he looks more like the dude of the period than the strong, sensible, brainy man I have pictured him. But then, as I told Charlie M., one should not judge a person by the cut or rather uncut of his hair any more than by his clothes. The Sun unhesitatingly accepts my offer to go to Washington as its representative but remains pointedly mum about the money question...

...[C.S.M.] is a good writer and a good boy I believe. He understands how to steer his epistolary bark clear of the shoals and quicksands. He picks his way so deftly and skillfully out of the complicated labyrinth of woman's various moods and petty fancies. He wishes to know if I can stand examination in algebra, natural philosophy, etc. and I must confess my inability. I guess he means to do what he can for me there. I now begin to think of the golden moments wasted, the precious hours I should have treasured and used to store up knowledge for future use. It seems so hard to get at it (study) and I've made so many resolutions I am ashamed to make any more...Received a letter from "The Plaindealer Co," who wish to know what I will charge for 2 letters per month to their paper. Answered today and stated that I would do as he wished for \$2 per article. Don't know what they will say. Sent the article I have been writing on for some time

to Mr. Arneaux³⁷ today, entitled “Our Name.” Mr. M. says for me to write the plot of my novel and for us to write one in partnership.

Tuesday March 23rd.

...Got my pictures and I like them somewhat but the more I look at them the less I like them.

...Took the second lesson of the series in elocution Sat. but still have not learned all of Lady M’s role.³⁸

...Received an invitation this morning to the marriage of Mrs. Booth. I was greatly surprised for I’ve never had any faith in it, but the ticket says “Thursday March 25th, 1886.” Will go down if possible. Had a long talk with “Dad”³⁹ this evening who thinks my plan a faulty one and suggests for me to go to Louisville until the election is over.

Saturday April 3rd:—

...Bought a pair of gloves for 20cts. and gave Mr. Froman \$10 to pay Judge Greer for me. The case will come up in the Supreme Court some time this month and a tried friend of mine has

³⁷ John A. Arneaux was the editor and owner of the *New York Enterprise* from 1884 to 1886. During that time, it was the most popular Black newspaper in the country. He was also the leading black Shakespearean actor of his period, and the leader of the Astor Place Tragedy Company, a Black theatre troupe.

³⁸ According to her diary, Wells took classes in public speaking, and honed her skills by learning the part of Lady Macbeth. She later writes, “I like Lady Mac’s soliloquy and sleepwalking scene but it is almost impossible to arrange it.”

³⁹ It is unclear who this “Dad” figure is. This is the first time he is mentioned. He is mentioned again on Sunday April 11th, when Wells writes of her loneliness, “Will take it to my father.” (Wells capitalizes Father when referring to God, so she is certainly referring to her father figure here.) The third mention, on Sunday, May 9th, suggests he is “Mr. F.,” but it is unclear who this is.

unfolded a conspiracy to me that is on foot to quash the case. I will wait and watch and fear not. Judge G. charges that as traveling expenses. It is a painful fact that white men choose men of the race to accomplish the ruin of any young girl but that one would deliberately ask a man of reputation to encompass the ruin of one's reputation for the sake of gain is a startling commentary on the extenuation [?] in which our race is held. A younger man would have violently resented the imputation but the older blood is wiser as well as cooler and thus will use the knowledge gained to circumvent plots.

Sunday April 11th;—

...It seems as if I should never be out of debt...Had no visitors today. I am in as correspondingly low spirits tonight as I was cheerful this morning. I don't know what's the matter with me, I feel so dissatisfied with my life, so isolated from all my kind. I cannot or do not make friends and these fits of loneliness will come and I tire of everything. My life seems awry, the machinery out of gear and I feel there is something wrong. Will take it to my father. Have concluded not to take part in the entertainment being gotten up by the young ladies.

Thursday April 29th,

...Mr. Lawson came to the door and handed me a note. Little thinking of the contents I toyed carelessly with it — but on my utter surprise when opening it, I found it to be a notification that I had circulated a report that he wearied me with his attentions! He wrote to beg pardon for the one offence of having asked my company once assuring me it would not happen again. I was very angry and shocked; I racked my brain trying to remember anything I might have said that

could be so construed but could not, and wrote and told him so and repeated what I had said. I desired to know who of my friends (?)⁴⁰ had told him any such thing so requested him to call the next afternoon. He did so but would not tell me his author, but promised to do so at some future day. I can't conceive of any one trying to injure me maliciously but some one had and is continually doing so. I may be doing O.J.G.⁴¹ an injustice but I believe it was he. I hope not, but the mere thought has incensed me so against him that I cannot bear him...

Went to hear an address from Col. Keating on the opening of the school of manual training, and was agreeably surprised by a rare treat from Rabbi Samfield. It's the first time I ever heard Jewish intellectual discourse...

...In a subsequent conversation Mr. Lott made me very angry by declaring I only was amiable to men in order to repulse them and attributing every thing to me that is associated with a heartless flirty. It made me very angry and I left; I am strongly in doubt whether to ever go [to lessons] again. I have been so long misrepresented that I begin to rebel. I should not have allowed it to go so far without rebuke...

Thursday May 6th;—

I had no choice but to pay my assessment and go to the entertainment last week...

Borrowed Mrs. F's diamonds (?)⁴² for the occasion and wore my black silk. Enjoyed myself

⁴⁰ This, unlike "[?]", does not denote an uncertainty on the part of the transcriber. Here, Wells writes "friends ()," expressing either her lack of trust in all of her friends; her lack of surety as to whether it was a friend, enemy or stranger who told Mr. Lawson this rumor; or her belief that anyone who could spread such a rumor is not a true friend.

⁴¹ This may or may not be the same person as Mr. G., but given their animosity towards one another, it seems likely that they are the same man.

⁴² Wells is evidently unsure of whether Mrs. F's diamonds are real diamonds.

hugely and Mr. G. handed me a verse declaring he knew I loved him and he longed to sip the nectar from my curling lip. I received it in silence, but intended keeping it. Mr. M. attempted familiarity that I quickly resented. Was on the floor in a set for the first time in my life and got through better than I expected...

...Tuesday a letter from Mr. P. in answer to the note I sent with his letters over a week ago. He calls me the twin mate of his soul and I know not that he is telling the truth, and asks me to write again and let him know I received his letter which was sent to a new address. Had a talk with G. that day and requested that we be more civil in our treatment of each other especially in the presence of strangers. I told him I desired always to do right but failed sometimes, and I think I convinced him of my sincerity. He called that evening and remained till after Mr. S. had gone. He asked me to kiss him, but I gently but firmly refused. Another lost opportunity of his, for springing the question that evidently seems uppermost in his mind. I believe he loves me, but he is certainly very enigmatical in his behavior.

Sunday May 9th,—

...George is thinking of going to California. Saw Mr. F. who told me of the dirty method Mr. Cummins⁴³ is attempting to quash my case. He ordered him to stop it. I honor and respect “my dad” highly...

Thursday June 3rd;—

⁴³ *While Judge Greer appeared in court for Wells, the plaintiff in “Ida B. Wells vs. the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad” in 1884, Mr. Holmes Cummins represented the railroad company.*

...I received Charlie's long-looked-for letter Tuesday before going to school. He offers as consolation for the delay in his writing the thought that he has thought of me. Also wishes to know if I can come to Louisville this summer. I would like very much to go but fear I can't spell able. Won't answer his letter soon. Got one from Mr. Jones this morning and his letter assumed a deeper tone. I hardly know what to do. Tuesday Mr. G. came home with me and told me of his love for me and I reciprocated. I told him I was not conscious of an absorbing feeling for him but I thought it would grow. I feel so lonely and isolated and the temptation of a lover is irresistible. I should not like to go thro' another winter as wearily as heretofore. But it's all so new and strange. The only thing I regret is I did not tell him the exact truth for he asked if I had loved anyone since the rupture between myself and Mr. C. and I said no — I must rectify that mistake. I could not live under false colors. We went to the picnic next day and he was unvaryingly kind and attentive...Mr. B. was out last evening and we went walking; he had a set to settle with me about Tuesday night's escapade and he talked in such a lofty strain and gave me withal some such good advice — enacted the real friend he professes to be — that I was agreeably surprised and delighted with him, when he soars above personal pique and forgot send in my behalf. He gave me a higher opinion of himself than I've had and I now begin to think of him as a friend to be kept. I have not kept the friends I have won but will try from this on.

Monday June 7th, 1886. Holly Springs, Miss.

Didn't decide until 12 o'clock Saturday to come to H.S. [Holly Springs] but after making my waist Friday, I went out walking...Went up town to mail my letters and got a wagon to bring me to the depot for 50cts. Bought a waist for \$1.25 and hurried to the depot where I found

Fannie H., Susie B., and Stella B. all bent on the same excursion as myself. Of course we had the usual trouble about the first-class coach but we conquered⁴⁴...

Memphis June 12th — Saturday

Left Holly Springs on Thursday... Monday night we went to the college in a bus to witness the literary exercises... As I witnessed the triumph of the graduates and thought of my lost opportunity a great sob arose in my throat and I yearned with unutterable longing for the “might have been.” When Will said to me afterward: “Ida you ought to come back here and graduate,” I could not restrain my tears at the sense of injustice I felt and begged him not to ask me why I said “I could not.” I quickly conquered that feeling and heartily wished the graduates joy as tho’ no bitterness had mingled with my pleasure. I had heard it asserted before I got to H.S. that Will and Annie⁴⁵ would be married but the time was near at hand and I had met no one who could tell me positively that it would happen, or that had received an invitation, but an idea prevailed that it would be at the “students reunion” so all went and assembled themselves in the chapel and waited. Their waiting was not in vain, for they walked in after a while and were married as unpretentiously as possible; the ceremony, pronounced by Prof. H. was solemnly and impressively beautiful. He has watched over and shielded Annie ever since he has been there, and it was but fitting that he should be proud of the successful termination of his care. When thinking over it the next day and endeavoring to find an adequate reason for his particular interest and care for her, I decided that it was not — as I used to think in my childish rage and

⁴⁴ *It seems Wells and her female companions are used to having white conductors attempt to force them to move from the first-class train coach.*

⁴⁵ *This Annie is not to be confused with Wells’s younger sister Annie, who was at this time living with their Aunt Fannie in California.*

jealous as his evident preference for her — because of her color, for there have been others who were brighter in color and withal prettier than she and yet who won not his favor; it was not her high intellectual powers, for many I know were more brilliant, Florence especially was more intellectual yet he interested himself not in their behalf as in Annie's, and I've come to the conclusion that it was her obedient disposition, her extreme tractableness and therefore easily controlled and evident ladylike refinement and when I think of my tempestuous, rebellious, hard headed willfulness, the trouble I gave, the disposition to question his authority — I remember that Mr. H. is but human and I no longer cherish feelings of resentment, nor blame him that my scholastic career was cut short; my own experience as a teacher enables me to see more clearly and I know that I was to blame...

Tuesday June 15th; —

Mr. B. and I took a long walk Saturday evening and he told me some things that surprised me a little — especially about his loving me. He said he'd carefully guarded against such as I was just the kind of girl of whom he would become infatuated. I begged him not to spoil all by any such course; whereupon he said, as many others have, that he did not believe I had any heart, or could love anyone. I did not endeavor to change his belief. He furthermore said that he thought Mr. G. idolized me; I neither affirmed nor denied the statement. Sunday I went to... Collins Chapel to afternoon service. Mr. Mosely preached. It was fearfully warm and as we were coming home a heavy rainstorm came up. Luckily we were on the car. He came home with me and remained all the afternoon. He also thinks I have no heart. Mr. B. came that night and we spent a cozy evening together despite the rain. He told me all about his engagement with Miss.

C. of Ga.. He is the embodiment of frankness. With me, my affairs are always at one extreme or the other. I either have an abundance of company or none at all. Just now there are three in the city who, with the least encouragement, would make love to me; I have two correspondents in the same predicament — but past experience will serve to keep me from driving them from me. I am enjoying existence very much just now; I don't wonder longer, but will enjoy life as it comes. I am an anomaly to my self as well as to others. I do not wish to be married but I do wish for the society of the gentlemen...

...My railroad case will not come up in the Supreme Court this term...

Monday June 18th;—

...Received a letter from L.M.B. while there [staying at Mr. Payne's house], in which he told me about dreading my influence as he was afraid he was falling in love with me, also that he was going to Washington. I answered and told him not to do either, and assured him I would in response to his pleadings be in on Saturday; also told him I believed him incapable of love in its strongest, best sense...Mr. B. came out and persuaded me to go walking with him and he forced me to our trysting place. I weakly yielded to his importunities to be seated and then he too told me a tale of love and asked me directly if I were pledged to any one. I could not say yea, and I did say nay. For with all the encouragement I've given G. he has not sought to bind me to him and seems so utterly indifferent that I don't and can't feel that I belong to him. I told Mr. B I did not love him, but I was sorry that would cause a cessation of his visits. He talked sometime longer and then begged so hard for the right to pay his addresses to me to hope, that I could not satisfactorily give. But he kissed me — twice and it seems even now as if they blistered my lips.

I feel so humiliated in my own estimation at the thought that I cannot look anyone straight in the face. I feel somehow as if I were defrauded of something since then. I came home and lay thinking of the awkward predicament I am in and the remark made by Mr. Settle the other morning at the breakfast table recurred to me, "You are playing with edged tools," and I feel that I have degraded myself in that I had not the courage to repulse the one or the other. I know not which of the two I prefer. One has qualities the other does not possess and I cannot choose between them. I don't think I want either for a husband but I would miss them sadly as friends — and of course that would be an intermission of friendship if I said nay. But God helping me I will free myself from this predicament somehow and I pray for tact and judgment so to do wisely but firmly. It seems I can establish no middle ground between me and my visitors — it is either love or nothing...

Sunday July 4th —

...Went to Mrs. H's concert and recited "The Letter Reading" and Sleep-walking scenes from "Lady Macbeth." The first was loudly applauded, the last, given in my "Mother Hubbard,"⁴⁶ was not so effective as I could have wished. Mr. B. seemed very cold and contrary that night and I wondered where the glamour of his presence was... Wednesday...L.M.B. came

⁴⁶ *This refers to Wells's nightgown.*

to pay his farewell respects. Or at least we started walking up street, but I was afraid he wished me to go to our usual resort and I affected to be very tired⁴⁷...

Topeka Kansas Tuesday July 13th,

After a whole week of excitement and dissipation in Kansas City we left this morning for this place and are here⁴⁸... Was introduced to Mr. J. the same evening; his physical appearance does not prepossess me, and I perfectly abhor him since later developments. Mr. M. made an engagement to go with me riding on Saturday but when he came he brought Mr. J and Fan would not go, and we excused ourselves. Sunday morning brought an insulting note from the cur accusing us for not accepting. I eared nothing for his denouncing our conduct as despicable but when he went further to say he had heard bad things about me when he was running to Memphis but had believed none of them until now. I was so angry I foamed at the mouth, bit my lips and then realizing my impotence — ended in a fit of crying... Huyette⁴⁹ went to church with me that morning to the Episcopal service and we saw both the miserable excuses for manhood. I

⁴⁷ *It is quite telling that Wells had to resort to feigning tiredness in order to avoid unwanted physical affection from L.M.B.. It appears that saying no and simply telling L.M.B. she does not want to partake in physical affection is not an option, or at least Wells does not seem to view it as one. Given the extreme rudeness with with Mr. J. and Mr. M. respond to Wells's refusal to go riding with them in the next entry (Tuesday, July 13th), it appears that a woman saying no to a male invitation without cause was considered extremely rude.*

⁴⁸ *Wells and her colleagues went to Topeka, Kansas for a conference of the National Education Association. Wells then proceeded westward. Though she does not name it in her diary, her autobiography describes this journey from Topeka to California as an excursion of the GAR — the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization for Civil War Union veterans and their families. Once in California, Wells traveled to the town of Visalia, where her Aunt Fannie lived with Wells's little sisters Lily and Annie.*

⁴⁹ *Wells mentions a Mr. Huyette earlier in this same entry, when listing teachers whom she saw at the conference but had already met previously.*

answered his note declining further intercourse with either on the score of having discovered that neither were gentlemen...

...L.M.B. sent a card declaring his lonesomeness and urging us to return...

...Went down town this afternoon to the headquarters of the National Teachers Association, to the Capitol Building and while there called on Mr. McCabe the present auditor of the state of Kansas. He is a mulatto, a polished agreeable gentleman and has held the position for four years...

Denver, Colorado, Tuesday July 20th, 1886.

Had a fine time in Topeka the three days I was there. Met many of the teachers from different parts...Fan T. and I went out [to]...the Grand Opera House to hear the different papers on different subjects. Such crowds and crowds of people! I never saw so many teachers in my life, but none that I knew...About 30 or so are of our own race...Went to a "so-called" reception the night before I left the place and met many people. Among whom were Mr. Keeling of Waco Texas, who so wonderfully impressed me at a session of the N.E.A. by a spontaneous outburst on the subject of The Bible in Public Schools. I congratulated him on his speech and spent sometime in conference...We left Topeka at 1 o'clock and traveled all of the afternoon and night and landed in Pueblo Col. 9 o'clock Saturday morning and had to remain all day; at 6 we started again and got to Colorado Springs where I got my first glimpse of the mountains. Went to Manitou Springs Sunday and spent the day in the mountains drinking of the different springs. Did not undertake the ascent of the Peak, which is clearly visible from this point, as I had not my shoes or was sufficiently wrapped up. Went back to Colorado Springs that evening and went to

bed early and had a good night's rest. Rose early next morning and wrote the Gate City Press a letter before leaving for the place where I arrived at one P.M. and found as much prejudice here as at Memphis almost.⁵⁰

...Met Mr. Stewart a lawyer of Topeka, said to have the finest practice of any colored lawyer in the west...A great many men I meet in this western country but so few women. A Mr. Caldwell was ready to propose on the spot almost...

...Denver has some fine public buildings; the finest and most complete opera-house I ever saw The Tabor⁵¹; a magnificent court-house, over which we were carried by Mr. Hackley, one of the finest young men it has ever been my good fortune to meet, and the High School of the place...

San Francisco, Thursday July 29th, 1886.

Have been in this place two days...I have not been to the coast yet and only caught glimpses of the ocean thro' the Golden Gate as I passed across from Oakland on the ferry boat. As yet have only circulated around in the city looking at the shops and public buildings and going thro' Chinatown with its thousands of "Heathen Chinees" in all branches of industry. Went to the "Elevator" office yesterday and had quite a talk with the editor⁵², who gave us flattering

⁵⁰ Wells does not elaborate regarding the manifestations of prejudice in this place, nor does she specify the Western town.

⁵¹ The Tabor, evidently, was the name of this Denver opera-house.

⁵² The editor of the San Francisco Elevator, a Black newspaper, was originally Philip Alexander Bell, the paper's founder and a prominent abolitionist. However, he retired in 1885, so Wells and her acquaintances would have spoken with his successor. In an original copy of the Elevator from September 11, 1886 — a little more than a month after Wells's visit — P.A. Bell is still listed as the Editor, but J.B. Wilson is added as the managing editor.

accounts of the negro, and claimed that there were several wealthy colored men here who drove expresses and blacked boots. Went to see Dr. Rutherford yesterday who gave me such a history of their trials since they emigrated to this state that I became despondent and have no been able to shake it off since. He paints Visalia and the colored inhabitants thereof in anything but glowing colors⁵³ and makes me almost afraid to go there and I heartily regret having sold my ticket (which I did yesterday for \$15.) My heart is indeed heavy and I know not what to do. I can only pray to the Father of all mercy for guidance and help. Yet if all he says is true, it's a mystery to me why Aunt F. says she will not return home. Poor Aunt F! She has had a burden to bear that was very heavy. I will not run and leave her alone. As I am so anxious to see her I will leave tomorrow for there...Travel[ed] without intermission after leaving Denver until Salt Lake City was reached 21 o'clock at night 41 hours later...Strolled about the city next day especially to see the Mormons and visited their Tabernacle in the afternoon where I listened to a harangue from one of themselves. Was much impressed with what I saw and was sorry I had to leave before it was over.

Visalia Cal. Monday Aug. 2nd —

Left San Francisco Saturday...Arrived here at daybreak yesterday morning and found all well and very glad to see me. The children have all grown as tall and Annie and Ida are near my height and look very much like women. I look at them in amazement and find the little sisters of whom I spoke, shooting up into my own world and ripening for similar experiences as my own.

⁵³ Wells's phrasing suggests that he also describes the Black citizens of Visalia unfavorably. This is unclear, but Wells certainly describes Visalia as an unfavorable place for Black people in her autobiography.

A letter was given me from L.M.B. that beat me here. In it he speaks very tenderly and declares his intention of going out as far as Denver to seek a competence⁵⁴ and seductively seeks to know if he may return for me some time in the future. I wrote to him hurriedly in order to meet the morning's mail and did not enter on the question so broadly as I might have done, but I commended his determination and told him to do something that called forth admiration and respect and the rest would be easy. Wrote to Mr. Y⁵⁵ and, after consultation with Aunt F., told him not to buy the ticket. Poor Aunt F.! She wants me to stay the year with her anyhow, whether I get any work to do or not and I, seeing how careworn she is with hard work and solicitude for the children — know she is right and I should help her share the responsibility and God helping me, I will! It is not enough to take them and go right away if I could, but I will stay with her a year. The election of teachers has not taken place yet in Memphis and all are undecided and I know not whether I'm on the list or not...Also received a letter from Mr. G. who writes very disjointedly. I don't know what to think of him. He says he always feels as if in a tight jacket when in my presence and wishes to know if I love him and will live with him. I fear I don't but then I also fear I shall never love anybody.

Thursday Aug 9th, 1886.

...I went walking down the road with the children and was lying with my head in Lily's lap when Mr. Yates walked up. We spent the evening in animated conversation, and it slipped away so quickly...He left next morning but not before coming down and bringing the things I told him

⁵⁴ *An income, given that Wells writes previously about how L.M.B. received "the grand bounce" at his previous job.*

⁵⁵ *Professor W.W. Yates, who taught in the Kansas City schools, is mentioned several times.*

to get and he did so before he received my card. I paid him for them and started down to the depot, but it was so hot and dusty and the people stared so, I gave it up and bade him goodbye at the post office...⁵⁶

...School-board at home elects teachers today and if I am re-elected will return and take Annie, if not both of the children with me; for I've no books, no companionship and even an embargo is laid on my riding out with the only one who can take me⁵⁷...

Wednesday Aug. 18th,

Have just received a letter from Fan. in which she informs me that Harry is dead. As I've not heard from him in some time I was very much shocked. Poor Harry! I wonder if he was prepared to go? I always felt that he had consumption and was just thinking about him only this week for the first time in quite awhile, and my heart smites me to think what a cruel letter I sent in answer to his last declaration of love for me! A better boy, with kinder intentions never breathed and when I think of the last time he came to see me two years ago, and declared he was going away to work and that he would come back for me⁵⁸ I grieve that I did not treat him more kindly. I wish I could have seen him before he died, and I know he would like to have seen me.

May the Lord have mercy on his soul and may I remember to deal more kindly with the tender

⁵⁶ *The pair likely received stares in the town because, as Wells writes in her autobiography, "Not a dozen colored families lived there."*

⁵⁷ *In her autobiography, Wells elaborates on her unhappiness while teaching in Visalia. She writes, "This school was a makeshift one-room building. The separation of the two races in school had been asked for by the colored people themselves, as I learned afterward, and they had been given the second-rate facilities that are usual in such cases. All the white, Indian, and half-breed Mexican and Indian children went to school in a commodious building up on the hill, and I was helping to perpetuate this odious state of things by staying and teaching at this school."*

⁵⁸ *This Harry is clearly not L.M.B., though L.M.B. similarly goes away to work and asks Wells if he may come back for her.*

feelings of those who exhibit them. I always thought a great deal of him, weak and irresolute as he was, for he was the first to dispel the clouds that had settled on my young life, and treated me with the courtesy and delicacy of a true gentleman altho' he knew the whole base slanderous lie that had blackened⁵⁹ my life⁶⁰, and offered me his love even while his companions were rehearsing the lie in his ears. Gentle, kind and tender as a woman, if he was not of a decided character, he preserved my faith in human nature. I earnestly hope he has gone to rest. Peace to his ashes!...

Sunday Aug. 22nd:—

Received a letter from “Charlie boy” on the very day I mailed him the plot (?) of our novel and it has the usual platitude and I answered immediately and told him of my hesitating between marrying and staying here to raise the children. I know he will be surprised at the tone of that letter...

Thursday Aug. 26th:— Finished and at last mailed to the A.M.E. Church Review on the 24th, my article on “Our Young Men” not because I was satisfied with it or thought it worthy publication by reason of the lucid exposition and connected arrangement, but as a trial to get the opinion of others. I never wrote under a greater strain, but kept at it until it was finished, anyhow. I think

⁵⁹ *It is interesting that Wells uses language of blackness and darkness to express negativity or evil. She uses “blackening” once here, and once again in her Oct. 2nd, 1886 entry, in which she asks “if the K.C. [Kansas City] people would attempt to blacken the reputation of those who desired to sojourn among them.” It seems that the standard English linguistic equation of blackness with badness has insinuated itself into Wells’s vocabulary.*

⁶⁰ *This may again refer to the rumor that young Ida wanted to live in her late parents’ house by herself with her younger siblings because she had “been heard asking white men for money” (17). This is possibly an implication that she has taken up prostitution.*

sometimes I can write a readable article and then again I wonder how I could have been so mistaken in myself. A glance at all my “brilliant?”⁶¹ productions pall on my understanding; they all savor of dreary sameness, however varied the subject, and the style is monotonous. I find a paucity of ideas that makes it a labor to write freely and yet — what is it that keeps urging me to write notwithstanding all?...”Pap” tells me not to think of staying here, till my railroad suit is over then I can come back; that only intensified my desire to go back and I answered immediately telling him what I had done, also a card to Mr. Rutherford asking him to find out the price of return tickets. Will take Annie back if no more — that is, if I get the money...

Wednesday Sept. 1st:—

...Today witnessed my first essay in story-writing; I have made a beginning. I know not where or when the ending will be. I can see and portray in my mind all the elements of a good story but when I attempt to put it on paper my thoughts dissolve into nothingness.

Saturday Sept. 4th: —

...Thursday evening brought a letter from L.M.B. very quiet and very manly in tone yet a hopeless one so far as love is concerned and signing himself as mine “to command to service,” He is developing symptoms more to my idea of what becomes an earnest man and I told him so, as well as that if he succeeded in his new venture and in winning my love in the meantime, I would help him prove to the world what love in its purity can accomplish.

⁶¹ Wells punctuation is indispensable in creating her tone, often one of biting self-deprecation.

Exactly 13 days since I mailed my letter to C. and as I predicted the answer came immediately. I received from him last night the most lengthy letter I've ever gotten from him, containing an outline of our projected novel with which I am not much attracted. It is too much in the style of other novels, rather sensational. There was also some good advice as to marriage only marred by a preface that reflected somewhat on my common sense especially after I had requested the advice and I naturally resent that. Have not answered it yet. Dreamed about Mr. P last night...

Wrote a dynamic article to the G.C.P. almost advising murder! My only plea is the pitch of indignation to which I was carried by reading an article in the home papers concerning a great outrage that recently happened in Jackson Tenn. A colored woman accused of poisoning a white one was taken from the county jail and stripped naked and hung up in the courthouse yard and her body riddled with bullets and left exposed to view! O my God! can such things be and no justice for it? The only evidence being that the stomach of the dead woman contained arsenic and a box of "Rough on Rats" was found in the woman's house, who was a cook for the white woman. It may be unwise to express myself so strongly but I cannot help it and I know not if capital may not be made of it against me but I trust in God.

Tuesday Sept. 7th:—

...A has said point blank that she will not go back and L⁶² is not far behind...Fan. tells me George⁶³ is thinking of marrying and was very impudent to her. I earnestly hope he will get over this season of infatuation safely and do nothing to his own or any one else's discredit.

Thursday Sept. 9th:—

How much can be compassed by twelve hours! The past 24 have been very stormy ones with me. At breakfast yesterday morning L.⁶⁴ brought me a card from Fan. B and a paper from Fan. T. both apprising me of the result of the election. After knowing for certain I was elected I went up town and telegraphed to Mr. Y to lend me \$50 and send immediately. I also saw Mr. G. (one of the school board at this place) and asked for the certificate I had sent in with my application. He promised to hunt it up and send me and I came home jubilant with the idea of soon again meeting friends. Wrote a card to Fan B. telling her I'd leave here on the 15th, and for her to wait for me. After sending it, a card was brought to me from Mr. Murphy, school superintendent, and the result of his visit was an offer of the school here to begin Monday and teach until the examination for nothing and if I passed examination to get \$80 per month to compensate me for the months I received nothing. He offered all the advantages possible and his eagerness to secure me backed with my aunt's importunities made me yield tho' very reluctantly. He had the contract drawn up and signed and delivered to me by three o'clock. It was all done so swiftly there was not time to think and when I realized it all I shed bitter tears of disappointment;

⁶² Wells's younger sisters: A is Annie, and L is Lily.

⁶³ Wells's brother George was, at this time, also living in California, which is why Aunt Fannie was aware of this news.

⁶⁴ Wells's sister Lily, who apparently brought in the mail.

but my calmer sober judgment coming to the rescue I see it will be a better money plan than if I go home. I'll have no board to pay for the children nor myself till after Christmas, and I'll have over \$300 clear to take home; for I am determined to go to that railroad suit, if I come back. I see all that but don't like to acknowledge it and have been very slow in doing so...

Memphis Tenn. Oct. 2nd, 1886 —

Nearly a month since I wrote in my diary and despite all my professions of resignation in the last entry I am back in Memphis again. I taught four days in Visalia and received the remittances from both Messrs. Church and Yates. On Thursday Sept. 16 I determined to come home and telegraphed Mr. Y to that effect; I told him if too late for K.C. would come on to M. Left that night...I learned that Jones and Co., foiled in all their efforts, and angered that others succeeded in doing what they offered to do — had published a card in the papers calling a mass meeting of the citizens to protect against the employment of “imported teachers” to the exclusion of home talent. I immediately declared off and proclaimed my intentions of coming on, but Messrs. B and Y would not hear of it, and urged me to pay no attention to it, but go on and teach next day as my room was waiting for me. I yielded and went but my extreme sensitiveness caused me to determine to come home and I told Mr. B. so that night. He was very angry and that grieved me because I did not want him to be or to think I was ungrateful but I saw him no more that night. L.M.B. came in shortly and he undertook to persuade me, but I was firm and he was in high dudgeon about it...I had told Mr. Bailey, the principal that I would not return the next day so I occupied myself packing my trunks. L.M.B. came home about 10 o'clock and remained all the morning pleading but nothing he said moved me. Mr. B. came home at noon and we talked

and parted in a better frame of mind...I breathed freer after it was all over and I turned my face to the only home I know.

I arrived here next day at 4 o'clock...Was at the teachers meeting next day and...Mr. C informed me that a letter was sent to him to get information concerning our moral status as it was there rumored that we had been dismissed for immoral conduct here. Paul J wrote it also one to Mr. Sampson in the same strain. I had not expected anything like that and it angered me somewhat. I have sent a letter to Mr. B. telling him I would like to know if there was such a rumor afloat, that I might know if the K.C. people would attempt to blacken the reputation of those who desired to sojourn among them...

Met Rev. Simmons, pres. of East Press Convention and he came home with me; he wheedled a picture out of me and a promise to write for him. He is very positive and jolly...

...G was here Tuesday and was disappointed in me; he thinks I've lost my heart to some one else and writes today to tell me he is afraid such is the case...

Tuesday Oct. 12th,—

...Have received several press comments and a very flattering notice in Mr. Simmons's paper. I sent him the article. Mr. S. returned to me and he promises to print it in full. The Editor of the Indianapolis World wants to engage me as a pay contributor for his paper, also to engage in correspondence. My experience with P.J. and co. has been of such a nature I hesitate about it. They have written letters to others besides Capt. C. and even sent a forgery of evidence to convict us of immorality. Mr. B. advises me to keep cool but when he tells me that Mr. G. has circulated the report that Lily is my child, instead of my sister, I could not help getting furiously

angry, but have controlled my anger...Sent G. a short unsatisfactory note in which I told him my feelings and I've not seen nor heard from him since...

Sunday Nov. 28th:—

...Letter...from L.M.B. who wrote pages because I had called him, in my letter, “Mr. Brown” instead of “mon ami” or “ma chere frere” as I was wont. He rants about friendship when he didn't need it and friendship when he does need it and hastens to decline to do several things before they were asked of him. At first I was angry that so slight a thing would call forth such zeal and was for sending him a cutting letter in return, but on reflection I did not — at least I could not call it one. But I manifested my displeasure by sending him a half sheet in return and told him I did not need to defend myself against the silly accusation of turning my back on a friend simply because he was “down in the world,” had changed his occupation and therefore would not at this time make an assurance one way or the other, and I closed by telling him to “be a man, a strong, liberal minded man, or be none at all.” Have no answer to it as yet. I suppose he is angry...and last but, anything thing (sic) else but least Mr. Hackley's letter came to hand Thanksgiving Day. He enlarges me on the causes of his defeat and draws valuable lessons therefrom.

Visited Miss Rosa Sheppard Thanksgiving, also heard a good sermon and witnessed practical evidence of “white folks' Christianity,” in the haste with which they passed us by when choosing a seat...

Today I...went again to see Miss Sheppard where I met Mr. McAlwee⁶⁵...

Saturday Dec. 4th;—

Found a letter from “Charlie boy” when I came home Monday evening. He fails not to express himself at my waiting a month before answering him and supposes that I have a more interesting correspondent and have grown indifferent to writing to him or I have allowed my “love of repose” to get the better of me too much for my own good or the happiness of my friends. I answered two days later and told him my delay was intentional and why it was so, but sent him a good long letter. I don’t imagine he pines very much as he hardly has time. I concluded when he sent me that halfsheet, that if he had time to visit etc., he certainly had time to write me a decent letter.

Went to the lecture Monday evening and was highly entertained and enthused. I never was so touched for Africa before, as when he⁶⁶ pictured the thousands bleeding and dying in ignorance and sin, and their eagerness for the gospel, and susceptibility to learning...

...My brother Jim came to see me Wednesday and talked fully and freely with me; he has been roaming around and has been following a passion for gaming. I talked long and earnestly with him and begged him to promise to quit. He said he would consider it. I told him the depths

⁶⁵ This is actually Samuel Allen McElwee, the first Black Tennessee legislator to be elected to a third term. He gave a speech in Tennessee’s House of Representatives begging for stronger legal action against lynchings, asking, “Great God, when will this Nation treat the Negro as an American citizen?” Because of his success in elections, black voters in Tennessee became motivated to nominate and elect more Black Americans to local government positions. He met Wells on this day, in 1886. He was later driven from Haywood County, Tennessee by an armed white mob who, through threats and ballot manipulation, ensured he was not re-elected. However, McElwee and Wells met again in Memphis at a banquet given by the Live Oak Club in February 1889 for “aristocrats of color,” and McElwee and Wells were correspondents for many years. McElwee moved to Chicago in 1901 and established a law practice.

⁶⁶ Wells later notes that this was “African lecturer J.L. Johnson.”

to which he would sink and when he said the passion would never get such a mastery of him, I asked him to promise to quit and let the adherence or the struggle be the test of the power it had already acquired over him; and he might judge of the future from that. O God, hear my prayer and help my wandering boy to come back to the innocence of his childhood!...

...Mr. Settle remained up town until 12 o'clock last night and tells me this morning that Gen. Turner, editor of the Scimitar, made one of the most eloquent pleas in behalf and defense of respectable colored people he ever listened to; that he declared it was not now as it had been that colored women were harlots etc., whose virtue could be bought or was a thing of jest — a byword and reproach, that there were as decent among them as among their own race; that there were some who were disgraces to their race, but that the white race had no room to talk. The same was true of them.⁶⁷

Tuesday Dec. 21;—

...Have concluded negotiations with Simmons touching the ticket to the Press Convention. I am to write short, twice-a-month articles for him exclusively until August and the price of my ticket will be forthcoming. "The World" sends me 2 years' subscription to The World as pay for my article. I sent them to Jim, and will write no more for them. They write to ask a communication for Christmas but they will not get it. I may write them something for New Years...

⁶⁷ *One may contrast this view, with which Wells seems to agree, to the one espoused by the substitute preacher Mr. Benjamin, whose sermon Wells describes as "a constant arraignment of the Negro as compared to the whites."*

Tuesday Dec. 28th:—

...went to the Knights of Labor to hear Mrs. Lide Meriweather⁶⁸ speak. It was a noble effort...

...Monday evening Mr. R. and myself went to call on Miss Baber and spent a very pleasant time. From what he tells me, I believe him to be a sincere friend of mine. I must try and curb myself more, and not be so indifferent to the young men; they feel and resent it. I will find less business up town and be more careful than I have — so I may give no cause whatever for uncharitable remarks...

Tuesday Jan. 18th:—

...Sunday...I went to Avery Chapel S.S. and organized a class of young men or rather youths, just merging into manhood. I talked to them and got them to say they would come every Sunday. I am so thankful and more than delighted with my success, so far and pray for it to continue. But I seem to be a failure so far as my own brother is concerned, for I speak harshly or indifferently and repulsively to him before I think of the consequences. I can get along well enough with others' boys but am too hasty and impatient with my own. God help me to be more careful and watchful over my manners and hearing toward him. Let not my own brother perish while I am laboring to save others!...

⁶⁸ *Lide Meriwether was one of the first feminists and women's rights activists. She fought for women's suffrage and prohibition. She was instrumental in passing the Age of Consent Law, which raised the legal age of consent from 10 to 16 and later to 18. She created a pro-women's-rights newspaper called the Tablet, in which she criticized Tennessee's laws for discriminating against married women and limiting wage-earning options for women, and called for equal pay for women. She also spoke against the legal classification of women on the same status level as minors, criminals, and the mentally disabled. In Memphis, Meriwether founded a women's shelter, led the Tennessee chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and founded the Tennessee Equal Rights Association. She also founded many local chapters of the WCTU, including interracial chapters and chapters for Black women.*

Tuesday Feb. 1st;—

Expected to attend a party given last week but my escort did not come. He not only did not come but told others that I wrote his name on the invitation and intended subjecting it to an expert to decide if it was my handwriting. I spoke to him about it this morning and he acknowledged that he said “some” of it. I thanked him that he had so early shown me my mistake in supposing him a high-minded gentleman who could discriminate between the false and the true and would scorn to lend himself to wrong and injustice. I feel so disappointed in them all! He made no excuse last week and I asked for none... Vickie O. was married Thursday of last week. I am the only lady teacher left in the building who is unmarried...

...Wrote to Mr. P. in answer to a letter I received from him yesterday wishing know if I was to be married declaring how he was affected by it and conjuring me to tell him, “by memory of what had been” if it were true. I sent a few lines merely stating that if he desired my happiness to come home and help make me happy. I know not what he will think of it, but I feel singularly lonely and despondent and wrote on the spur of the moment...

Tuesday Feb. 8th:—

Another week has slipped away and I've done nothing. Interest has been and is still centered in the Godwin case that has brought for some shocking developments concerning the morals of high life. A silly woman forgot her marriage vows for an equally scatterbrained boy; who boasted of his conquest in Nashville, St. Louis, Marianna, as well as here, as a result he lost his life. The brother of the woman taking this revenge on him. It seems awful to take human life

but hardly more so than to take a woman's reputation and make it the jest and byword of the street; in view of these things, if he really did them, one is strangely tempted to say his killing was justifiable...

Monday Feb. 14th.

...Friday I went in company with Miss Baber and her cousin to see Booth⁶⁹ play "Hamlet." It was a superb rendition and as the first time I saw either the man or the play I could form no comparison between other actors and "the greatest living actor." I saw him also the next night, in company with Miss F.J.S. and Mr. Froman, play "Iago." I do not like that near so well as the former. There was an incongruity as well as an ordinariness about it, that showed little if any of his genius⁷⁰...

...Answer to my mad letter to D.B.F.P. today and he asks if his coming will really contribute to my happiness. I know not what to write; he seems so surprised at my writing so and that I have not forgotten him. Shall write and ask him to forget and send me back those letters...

Sunday March 20th:—

⁶⁹ Edwin Booth was often considered the greatest American actor, and the greatest Hamlet, of the 19th century. He toured in many Shakespeare productions in the U.S. and Europe. He was also notably the older brother of Lincoln assassin John Wilkes Booth, though Edwin was a Unionist and John Wilkes was a Confederate.

⁷⁰ It is interesting to consider why Wells might have considered the play Othello, and the character of Iago, too ordinary, and Iago too incongruous. Did Iago, a racist, manipulative man whose lies destroy the lives of an interracial couple by playing off of a black man's insecurities and fears about how he is viewed, seem more like a character from Wells's own time than a character from Shakespeare's classical setting?

I am not happy and nothing seems to make me so. I wonder what kind of a creature I will eventually become?...

Monday April 4th:—

...Thursday evening went up to Mrs. Hooks to meet the “Hon. J. Pennoyer.”⁷¹ He’s a gas bag if not worse...

Monday, April 11th;—

...The Supreme Court reversed the decision of the lower court in my behalf, last week. Went to see Judge G. this afternoon and he tells me four of them cast their personal prejudice in the scale of justice and decided in the face of all the evidence to the contrary that the smoking car was a first class coach for colored people as provided for by that statute that calls for separate coaches but first class, for the races. I felt so disappointed, because I had hoped such great things from my suit for my people generally. I have firmly believed all along that the law was on our side and would, when we appealed to it, give us justice. I feel shorn of that belief and utterly discouraged, and just now if it were possible would gather my race in my arms and fly far away with them. O God is there no redress, no peace, no justice in this land for us? Thou hast always fought the battles of the weak and oppressed. Come to my aid at this moment and teach me what

⁷¹ *The Honorable J. Pennoyer Jones was elected county judge of Desha County, Arkansas in 1890, serving only one term. Afterward, he continued to be involved in party politics. In 1895, he was a leader of the Black and Tans; the Southern Republican Party was divided into the nearly all-white “lily-white faction” and the biracial “black and tan faction.” This division existed from the 1870s until the 1960s, when the black-and-tan factions lost elections and essentially disappeared, giving the “Lily-whites” control of the party.*

to do, for I am sorely, bitterly disappointed. Show us the way, even as Thou led the children of Israel out of bondage into the promised land...

Monday April 18th:—

Have just returned from what I consider the best thing out. The Negro's Mutual Protective Association had a public meeting at Avery Chapel tonight and Mr. A. escorted me down. I was very much enthused as I listened to the speeches and saw the earnestness of the men present. The object tonight was to draw up resolutions concerning John Sherman's action and touching also the competitive drill to be at Washington next month. The Negro is beginning to think for himself and find out that strength for his people and consequently for him is to be found only in unity. The earnest scholarly enthusiasm of Mr. Imes, the dignified patriarchal and stern demeanor and the bearing of Mr. Shaw — show that the men of the race who do think are endeavoring to put their thoughts in action and to inspire those who do not think...

Friday June 17th;—

...Had to whip Lily severely this morning for her second peculation⁷². I earnestly pray such may never happen again.

Wendell's Farm 4 miles west of Woodstock. Wednesday July 13th, 1887.

Nearly a month has elapsed since I scratched a pen in my diary!...On the Tuesday following my last entry, I came out here, and with the exception of last week spent in town, have

⁷² *It is not specified from whom Lily, Wells's younger sister, was stealing. The word suggests she stole money, but this is also unclear.*

been here ever since...I have only \$35 in the bank now, and with no school to teach this summer, there is a strong probability of its being again diminished before school opens. Dr. S. has placed me on the program of the Press Convention against my consent and promises to send the wherewithal so I guess I'll go there and of course will have to prepare, and preparation takes money...

...Miss Mollie was down Friday evening to call and she said she wished to have a talk with me. Her ambitions seem so in consonance with mine that I offered to come up the next morning. I did go and I came away after about two hours' chat — very much enthused with her. She is the first woman of my age I've met who is similarly inspired with the same desires, hopes and ambitions. I was greatly benefited by my visit and only wish I had known her long ago. I shall not let the acquaintance slack. Indeed I shall write and invite her to come out here to see me...

Saturday July 16th:—

This morning I stand face to face with twenty five years of life, that ere the day is gone will have passed by me forever. The experiences of a quarter of a century of life are my own, beginning with this, for me, new year...As this day's arrival enables me to count the twenty fifth milestone, I go back over them in memory and review my life. The first ten are so far away in the distance as to make those at the beginning indistinct; the next 5 are remembered as a kind of butterfly existence at school, and household duties at homes; within the last ten I have suffered more, learned more, and lost more than I ever expect to again. In the last decade, I've only begun to live — to know life as a whole with its joys and sorrows. Today I write these lines with a heart overflowing with thankfulness to my Heavenly Father for His wonderful love and kindness...

When I turn to sum up my own accomplishments I am not so well pleased. I have not used the opportunities I had to the best advantage and find myself intellectually lacking. And excepting my regret that I am not so good a Christian as the goodness of my Father demands, there is nothing for which I lament the wasted opportunities as I do my neglect to pick up the crumbs of knowledge that were within my reach. Consequently I find myself at this age as deficient in a comprehensive knowledge as the veriest schoolgirl just entering the higher course. I heartily deplore the neglect. God grant I may be given firmness of purpose sufficient to essay and continue its eradication! Thou knows I hunger and thirst after righteousness and knowledge. O, give me the steadiness of purpose, the will to acquire both...

Louisville Ky, Friday Aug. 12th

Have been in this city since Monday evening. The Convention is over, my paper read, many men of prominence met, many visitors received, my picture (God save the mark) in yesterday's Courier Journal and I am still here... The Convention was but poorly represented north of Mason's and Dixie's line — none of the northern grants were present, but we had a very pleasant session and an earnest one. There were some able debates by P.H. Murray⁷³ of St. Louis, Bragg and Mitchell of Virginia, Alexander Clark⁷⁴, D.A. Rudd, Ruderson, C.M. Wade and others.

⁷³ Philip H. Murray was a journalist, civil rights activist, and abolitionist. He enlisted Black Americans in the Union Army during the Civil War. After the war, he worked as a teacher and gave public speeches advocating for Black education, which led to frequent threats of violence by white mobs. With Wells's help, Murray founded an Anti-Lynching Society in St. Louis in 1895.

⁷⁴ Alexander Clark was an African-American activist and businessman who was active in the Republican Party and eventually served as the U.S. ambassador to Liberia. In *Clark v. Board of School Directors*, Clark successfully sued the public school board in his Iowa town for refusing to admit his daughter because of her race; the case was cited in *Brown v. Board of Education* 86 years later. In the 1880s, Clark also bought *The Conservator*, the Chicago newspaper founded by Ferdinand L. Barnett.

I think it accomplished much good and I am glad to be here. Was called on to respond to “Woman in Journalism” at the banquet Wednesday night and was so surprised that I omitted to say many things I should have said. I offered a word of thanks in the behalf of my sex — for the flattering encomiums bestowed on them by our editors and the hearty welcome accorded our entrance unto this field, I wish and may never have a more favorable opportunity to urge the young women to study and think with a view to taking places in the world of thought and action. The suddenness of the thing drove every thing out of my head but I will remember next time.

Woodstock, Tenn. Tuesday Sept. 6th, 87.

Have been back from Louisville 11 days and am just making my first entry. Was made to feel badly upon my arrival and have been busying hunting a home ever since — but am unsuccessful as yet. Have only stayed at the house two or three of the nights since my return and then my things were locked up, and there was such an air of constraint visible that I have only tarried long enough to write to Dr. S., Mr. G., and Miss Jordan. I’ve had no heart to write to any one else, I’ve been in a state of such depression.

Left L. [Louisville] Friday Aug 26th at 8 o’clock P.M....

...Monday Aug. 29th I drew \$5 from the bank. Tramped all the week but have no boarding place — yet as I had not seen Lily, my dear little sister — I came out this morning and am here. Mrs. Q. greeted me so coldly I was rather hurt and will return tomorrow instead of staying the week as I had intended. Am firmly resolved to go to housekeeping on my own account next year. If Mrs. Hawkins will take Lily and teach her how to cook I will be able to do so and have her to

keep house. I am sick and tired begging people to take me to board and if the Father prospers me, I'll do it no more after this year...

15 Wrights Ave. Sept. 9th — Friday.

Moved here yesterday — at Mrs. Spilman's but don't know how I will like it. Only did it as a last resort. On coming back I found every other place objectionable on some account and I had knocked around as long as I cared... Lily is at Mrs. H's, I earnestly hope we will pull thro' the year all right.

#30 Goslee St. Sunday Sept. 18th, 1887.

Stayed at Mrs. S's 5 days and moved here on Tuesday, 12th...so far am doing very well. Lily is still at Mrs. H's. Couldn't borrow the money to buy Aunt F's place so shall try to save for it if she will wait. Wrote a statement to her and await her answer. School began the 15th, on Thursday. Went to see the Dr. about a bill of \$13.50 he sent me as charges for attending George and he told me George had never been to get the instrument⁷⁵. I wonder if that money goes for nothing...

...I don't know how to understand my Louisville friends. I've not heard a thing from Mrs. Murphy [?] yet. I'm anxious to know if she's got her shawl. Must answer [?]'s letter⁷⁶

⁷⁵ *It is unclear what kind of medical instrument this might be.*

⁷⁶ *The diary cuts off here, as Wells appears to run out of room in the notebook. The back page contains a small list of dates, items, and costs — it appears that Wells began to keep track of items she bought, such as "Blank book," "Toilet articles @ Menken's," and "Shoes," the dates when she bought them, and how much they cost. All of the items are dated September, however, and the list is only five items long. Perhaps Wells had started budgeting in a previous year and was unable to stick to the habit, or perhaps, since this diary ends in September 1887, Wells had only recently begun budgeting and had to quit when she ran out of pages and no longer used this diary.*

