Lowell, May 1844

Dear Mary: When I left home I told you that I would write in a week and let you have my first impressions of Lowell. I will keep my promise; though, if I should defer my letter a while longer, I think I could make it more interesting. But you know I promised to be very minute, and there is always sufficient minutiae to fill up a letter.

I arrived here safe and sound, after being well jolted over the rocks and hills of New Hampshire; and when (it was then evening) a gentleman in the stage first pointed out Lowell to me, with its lights twinkling through the gloom, I could think of nothing but Passampscot swamp, when brilliantly illuminated by "lightning-bugs." You, I know, will excuse all my "up-country" phrases, for I have not yet got the rust off; and to you, and all my old-fashioned friends, I shall always be rusty. My egotism I will not apologize for—it is what you request.

To return to my adventures—for it all appears very romantic to me. The driver carried me to the "corporation," as it is called; and which, so far as I now can describe it, is a number of short parallel streets with high brick blocks on either side. There are some blocks with blinds to them, and some are destitute. Some of the doors have bells, others have not. Contiguous to these boarding-houses are the mills, of which I will tell you more by and by.

I told the driver to carry me to N—, and there he left me; where there was not a soul that I knew, if cousin Sarah was gone. I inquired, of an Irish girl who came to the door, if Sarah G. Pollard boarded there. She said that she had gone to Manchester, to work with an overseer who was an old acquaintance. The girl did not invite me in, and there I stood like "a statter," as Aunt Hitty says. I did not feel disposed to make inquiries of the girl, I was so unaccustomed to her brogue. Just then—that is, just as my heart was sinking ten fathoms below zero—a pleasant-looking woman came into the entry; and, in a very motherly way, invited me into her own room; took off my things, ordered away my trunk and bandbox, brought camphor for my head, for it ached with my ride, and told me all about cousin Sarah. She said that I had better not think of following her to Manchester, and promised to do all for me that she could. This was Mrs. C., "the boarding woman"—a widow, with several children, whom she keeps at school, and maintains well, by her own industry and good management.

I had expected coldness, or at least entire indifference, in this city, and the cordiality of the good landlady filled my heart with gratitude. I have since inquired if she were not
unusually kind; but, though she is a very good woman, the girls here say that she is not more so to me than to any other new boarder; and that the boarding-women are always "dreadful good" to a new boarder. Every girl, let her be ever so rusty, or rather rustic, fills one of the many niches prepared here for so many, and some, you know, are like nest-eggs, and bring many more. But we will not be so uncharitable as to suppose there is nothing but policy in all this, for there is surely something to excite a woman's sympathies in the sight, which is not uncommon here, of a lonely friendless helpless stranger.

You can hardly think how my heart beat when I heard the bells ring for the girls to come to supper, and then the doors began to slam, and then Mrs. C. took me into the dining-room, where there were three common-sized dining tables, and she seated me at one of them, and then the girls thickened around me, until I was almost dizzy.

At the table where I sat they were very still, for the presence of a stranger is usually "a damper" upon them. But there was quite noise enough at the other tables, and what was wanted in wit was made up in merriment. After a while one or two of my boon companions "opened their mouths and spoke," and I have already found that those who make themselves most conspicuous in the presence of strangers, and would soonest attract their attention, are those who do themselves, and those with whom they are connected, the least credit.

I remember that I must be very minute—so I will inform you that we had tea, flapjacks, and plum-cake for supper. There was also bread, butter, and crackers, upon the table; but I saw no one touch them.

After supper the tables were cleared in a trice. Some of the girls came in with their sewing, some went to their own rooms, and some went "out upon the street"—that is, they went to some meeting, or evening school, or they were shopping, or visiting upon some other corporation, all of which is "going upon the street," in factory parlance.

I retained my seat with the girls in the great keeping-room, for Mrs. C. had company in her own sanctum, and I did not know where else to go. Some book-pedlers, shoe-pedlers, essence-pedlers, and candy-boys came in, and made very strenuous exertions to attract our attention. By most of the girls they were treated with cool civility, but there were some little noisy self-conceited misses, who detained them, under the pretence of examining goods for purchase, but who were slily joking at the expense of the pedler, and collecting material for future merriment. Sometimes the joke was turned upon themselves, and it was seldom that both parties separated in good humor.

At ten o'clock Mrs. C. came in, and told us that it was time for us all to go to bed. Some begged for time to "read this story out;" others just for "a few minutes to finish this seam." She refused them good-naturedly, but those were most cunning who wanted to warm their feet, and detained her by telling queer stories, of what they had seen and heard upon "the street"—and she unconsciously gave them the few minutes she had at first refused.
I was shown up three flight of stairs, into what is called "the long attic"—where they put all poor stranger girls—the most objectionable places being always left for new comers. There were three beds in it, only two of which were occupied, for this is always the room for vacancies. My baggage had already been carried up by "the boys," as the boarders call Mrs. C's sons; and I looked woefully at the strange girl who was to be my "chum." She took no notice of me, and went to sleep as composedly as if I had been still among the White mountains; but the two girls in the further bed kept whispering together something about "the old man." I was very nervous, and almost wished "the old boy" had them both; but, when the house was still, a strange fear came over me, such as is created in children by telling them about the old man.

I heard the bells strike the midnight hour long before I went to sleep, and then I dreamed about "the old man."

As soon as day broke I was awakened by one of the girls jumping out of bed, and beginning to crow. That awakened the others, and they bestirred themselves. One sung

Morning bells I hate to hear,
Ringing dolefully, loud, and drear, &c.

Then the other struck up, with a loud voice,
Now isn't it a pity,
Such a pretty girl as I,
Should be sent to the factory
To pine away and die.

I dressed myself, and followed them down stairs, where I found my place at the table, and our early breakfast was all ready for us. It consisted of hot cakes, and coffee—there was also "hash" upon the table, for those who wanted it.

When the girls had all gone to work I asked Mrs. C. what I should do. She replied that she would go herself and see if I could have a place, for she was well acquainted with many of the overseers, and thought she could "get me in."

She went in for me, but no overseer would take me, even upon her recommendation, until they had seen me themselves. One promised, however, to give me work if he liked the looks of me, and she considers this place as if already engaged, for she says she knows he will like me when he sees me.

You may ask how Mrs. C. could recommend me. She was so well acquainted with cousin Sarah that she had often heard her speak of me, and she says that she is never deceived, either, in her estimate of a good honest country girl.

The overseer said he should not want me until next week, and I felt rather unpleasant at the thought of paying my board while earning nothing. But Mrs. C. said she had some
quilts to make, and if I would assist her a little she would give me my board. So I can run round, and see all the lions and lionesses, and get quite an idea of my location, before I go into the mill. 0, how I dread to be cooped up there, day after day.

You will ask what I have already seen. I have been out upon a long street, called Central street, and another long street, at right angles with it, called Merrimack street. There are stores filled with beautiful goods upon either side and some handsome public buildings. There is a great hotel called the Merrimack House, which is much larger than any that I ever saw before, and near it is the Railroad Depot. I waited, one day, to see the cars come in from Boston. They moved, as you know, very swiftly, but not so much like "a streak of lightning" as I had anticipated. If all country girls are like me their first impressions of a city are far below their previous conceptions, and they think there is more difference than there really is. Little as I know of it now I see that the difference is more apparent than real. There are the same passions at work beneath another surface.

When I went out with Mrs. C. she made me put on one of her girls' bonnets, because mine did not turn up behind, and out at the ears, and she said it was 0. S., instead of 0. K. Well, as I walked along, and saw all the beautifully dressed ladies, I thought, within myself, that, with bonnets and dresses of an old style, they too would not be passable. You must know that they dress very much here—at least, it so appears to us, who have just come off of the hills, and been accustomed to put on our woollen gowns in the morning, and our better woollen gowns in the "arternoon." Here they wear velvets, and furs, and plumes, and bugles, and all. I should wish to know a great deal to be dressed so, for I should think there was a great deal to be expected of one who made such pretensions.

I told Mrs. C. that the city ladies were not so pale as I expected. She said that many of them were painted, and that rouge was becoming more fashionable every year. She says that even some of the factory girls use it, and pointed out several highly dressed girls whose cheeks were truly of "a carmine tint."

I have attended meeting the only sabbath I have been here. It seems as though every one went to meeting, the streets are so full on Sun- days, but it is not so. Yet Lowell is a church-going place, and they say that they have good meetings and ministers.

I went to the Congregational meeting, for that, you know, is the one I have always been accustomed to attend. The meeting-house is one of the oldest in the city, and not beautiful, though a good respectable looking building. The congregation was very tastefully dressed. I thought, as I looked at some of the ladies, that old Parson Trevor would preach to them from Matthew xxvi. 18. "Top not come down."

In the afternoon I went to the Methodist meeting. This, you are aware, is, with us, "the ragged meeting;" but here—my paper is full, and I can only say ribbons, bows, plumes, ruffles, fringes, wimples, and crimples, "ruffs, puffs, and farthingales." Yet the preaching was of a higher order than I had anticipated.
Next Sunday I shall go to see the Episcopalians, and Catholics, of whom we have always heard so little that is good. Yet there was a strange, and not unhallowed sensation excited in my breast when I first saw a church with a spire surmounted by a cross, that symbol of our holy religion; and the dark stone church which was first built here, revived the impressions which were created by our juvenile literature, which you know a few years since was wholly English.

Yours affectionately, Susan