

MRS. AURELIA R. KING, *wife of Henry W. King, wholesale clothing merchant, 4 and 6 Lake Street, to friends in the East. The King residence stood on Rush Street near Erie.*



*Elmhurst, Du Page County, Illinois
Oct. 21, 1871, Saturday*

MY DEAR FRIENDS ALL,

Your kind and sympathizing letter reached us last evening, and I should not have waited to receive it before telling you of our fearful experiences, only to tell the truth, I have been and still am so bewildered, I can neither think nor write. It seems a year since the fire, and it will be only two weeks tomorrow evening since it occurred.

We had just moved to the city and had settled ourselves for the winter. I had just laid in all my household supplies of every kind, including every winter garment for my children. We were never so comfortably situated in our lives—our new barn completed, our new house nearly done,—in fact we were on the high tide of prosperity a fortnight ago today. Sunday was an uncommon day with us. We had just finished repairs in our church,¹

¹The Westminster Presbyterian, at Ontario and N. Dearborn streets.



*West End
of the
Courthouse*

had a new organ, a new choir, and two wonderful sermons from our beloved pastor, Mr. Swing, had a delightful communion season, and when we went to our beds, were talking of our joys in rather an exultant manner.

At one o'clock we were wakened by shouts of people in the streets declaring the city was on fire—but then the fire was far away on the south side of the river. Mr. King went quite leisurely over town, but soon hurried back with the news that the courthouse, Sherman House, post office, Tremont House, and all the rest of the business portion of the city was in flames, and thought he would go back and keep an eye on his store. He had scarcely been gone fifteen minutes when I saw him rushing back with his porters, bringing the books and papers from the store, with news that everything was burning, that the bridges were on fire, and the North Side was in danger. From that moment the flames ran in our direction, coming faster than a man could run. The rapidity was almost incredible, the wind blew a hurricane, the air was full of burning boards and shingles flying in every direction, and falling everywhere around us. It was all so sudden we did not realize our danger until we saw our Water Works (which were beyond us) were burning, when we gave up all hope, knowing that the water supply must soon be cut off.

We had just time to dress ourselves, tie up a few valuables in sheets, and stuff them into our carriage, when we had to deliberately leave our home and run for our lives. It was two o'clock in the morning when I fled with my little children clinging to me, fled literally in a shower of fire. You could not conceive anything more fearful. The wind was like a tornado, and I held fast to my little ones, fearing they would be lifted from my sight. I could only think of Sodom or Pompeii, and truly I thought the day of judgment had come. It seemed as if the whole world were running like ourselves, fire all around us, and

where should we go? The cry was "North! North!" So thitherward we ran, stopping first at Mr. MacGregor Adams;² (you perhaps remember Mrs. Adams was formerly Mrs. Charles King) where we found many fugitives like ourselves, tarrying to take breath, every one asking every other friend: "Are you burned out?"—"What did you save?"—"Where are you going?" then running on further north up Dearborn Street to the house of another friend, followed ever by the fire. On, on we ran, not knowing whither we went till we entered Lincoln Park. There among the empty graves of the old cemetery we sat down, and threw down our bundles until we were warned to flee once more. The dry leaves and even the very ground took fire beneath our feet, and again packing our few worldly effects into our closed carriage we got into a wagon and travelled with thousands of our poor fellow mortals on and on, at last crossing a bridge on North Avenue and reaching the West Side, where we found a conveyance at noon on Monday which brought us out to Elmhurst—the Adamses and ourselves.

I wish I could give you an adequate idea of that flight, but it is impossible. The streets were full of wagons transporting household furniture, people carrying on their backs the little bundles they had saved. Now and then we would pass a friend seated on a truck or a dray, huddling her children together and her two or three little treasures snatched from the burning. It was only by some look of the eye or some motion [that] we could recognize friends—we were all so blackened with dust and smoke. The ladies, many of them, [were] dressed in a nightgown and slippers with the addition of a sacque or a petticoat. Half of the gentlemen were in nightshirts and pantaloons.

²On N. LaSalle St. near the beginning of the present 900 block. J. McGregor Adams was a member of the firm of Crerar, Adams & Co., dealers in railway supplies and contractors' materials.

We reached our home at Clover Lawn at six o'clock Monday night, finding Mother and kind neighbors with open arms and sweet sympathy waiting for us. We had had nothing to eat since Sunday at four P.M., and when I said to my little children: "Won't you be glad to get an apple?" they said: "Why, Mamma, haven't we had anything? We didn't know we were hungry." The alarm and strain upon our feelings was so intense that none of us, not even the children, knew what we wanted or what we had been through.

The next day came the anxiety as to the fate of friends, the thrilling accounts of different friends, inquiry into losses, etc., and to this day the excitement increases rather than diminishes. There is so much to see and hear. Our house is full—people coming all the time to talk over respective losses—seamstresses, teachers, workwomen whom we have known, following us out to know what they shall do, what we can do for them. We are much more fortunate than most of our friends in having a roof to cover us, and thankful are we for it, though when we go to Chicago and see the desolation there, see the houseless, homeless creatures there, we feel almost ashamed to be so comfortable.

It is a wonderful change to step from a home where not only every want was satisfied, but luxuries abounded, to a place where we have not the necessities of life, no pins or needles, not a brush or a comb, a knife or a fork—what a contrast! It would have been hard to bear, only that we are every moment seeing or hearing of some one so much poorer than we, that we are in comparison nabobs. Then too, there is a little touch of the ludicrous now and then which cheers us. Imagine your friend Aurelia, for instance, with a thousand dollar India shawl and a lavender silk with a velvet flounce, and not a chemise to her back!³—not a pocket handkerchief to wipe the soot from her

³Mrs. King is describing herself.



*Lake Shore and Michigan Southern
Railroad Station, Van Buren at
La Salle Street*



face. A friend of mine saved nothing but a white tulle dress. Another lady has a pink silk dress but no stockings. I went to town yesterday, and was the envy and admiration of my Chicago friends because I had clean cuffs and a collar. I had to own at last that they were stolen. It was said that when the fire was raging, one citizen left his house and family, and fled on horse-back down Michigan Avenue with his portrait under one arm and his lecture, "Across the Continent," under the other.⁴ So, you see, we laugh a little, just enough to keep alive.

It seems to me I can never resume the even tenor of my way, my nerves are so unstrung. I do not sleep at night—when I lose myself for a little while I start up, forever running from fires with my children and a bundle. Yet we are so thankful that if we were to be afflicted, it is only by the loss of property. Our dear ones are all alive and well, and we are happy.

The hope and cheerfulness which our business men preserve is wonderful. The whole business portion of the South Side is in ashes—there is nothing to be seen from the river to Congress Street, that is, two blocks beyond where Mr. Williams used to live. The North Side is entirely destroyed. There is only one house, Mr. Mahlon Ogden's, between the river and Wright's Grove. The fire stopped at Judge Peck's old house—you will remember Jule going there to a party with me. Such destruction is almost incredible. I suppose such a conflagration was never before known.

The sympathy of sister cities and towns is very sweet. Quantities of provisions, clothing, and money are coming in, but the

⁴William Bross, one of Chicago's leading citizens. In the Society's files is a memorandum, written by George M. Higginson in 1881, regarding the Bross incident: "This is probably in part a mere rumor as the citizen mentioned was not one who would leave his family when he considered his house in danger immediately, but he probably thought there was sufficient time to secure some safe deposit for his portrait (which he undoubtedly did) knowing his daughter prized that more than any other household treasure he possessed."

sufferers are so numerous it is hard to meet their wants. Wooden buildings are going up by hundreds, stoves and bedding etc. are coming by thousands. The work of dispensing is in itself stupendous as I have reason to know, as Mr. King is President of the Relief and Aid Society. He has been obliged to delegate his work in great measure to Mr. Dexter⁵ and others now, for his business demands much of his time. His personal losses are large, he thinks not less than \$200,000, though he may get more insurance than he expects. He is irrepressible however, full of hope and vim, has taken a store on the West Side, and will open it on Monday next. Mr. Browning, his partner, has been here, and is hopeful and encouraging. I have sent by him to New York for supply of our present needs, and we shall soon have some blankets, pillows, towels, handkerchiefs etc.

Clothing will be easily supplied, but I can't help mourning over my household Gods, the dear things that can never be replaced—my books, the gifts of dear friends, the treasured locks of hair, my Mother's Bible, relics of my little daughter Fanny, my wedding dress, and a thousand things I had saved for my children. My pictures too, and my beautiful statue of the Sleeping Peri that I did delight in—all gone in a minute, and I can't help a little heart-aching, though they are but the things that perish. Why Jule, I haven't a book in the world, not even a Bible. My children grieve over their little treasures and their books, and I cry with them. I saved my baby's portrait and my Mother's and husband's—my silver, my India and lace shawls, and a few silk dresses, my photograph album, and a little jewelry. The above is my stock in trade, and I feel as if my life were beginning again. I have said too much of myself, only I knew those were the things you wished first to know.

⁵Wirt Dexter, railroad lawyer and philanthropist, had been president of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society from 1868 to 1870.

I am going to spend next week in going into the city daily to distribute clothing and food to the suffering, and I want to say to you that if you will have your Blooming Grove contribution sent directly to me, I will distribute to the needy that I know personally. I have already received money and other things from different places which I divide and apportion exactly as I see most pressing need. In so large a work as the present Chicago Relief, there must of course be some donations misapplied. Mr. King feels this, and I thought perhaps it might please your Society to send their supplies where they would reach some of the sufferers directly. I only suggest this, but you may think it wiser to send to the general fund. If you send a letter or anything to me, direct to Elmhurst, Du Page County, Illinois.

I enjoyed the visit of your two brothers amazingly, and grew young in talking of old times. If my house were not already crowded, I would ask you to come out here and look upon the state of things, the like of which was never before known. If either of your brothers has curiosity to come and see, I can give him a lounge to sleep on, and plenty of bread and butter. It is almost impossible to get accommodation in the city, it is so over-crowded. Stores are now re-opening, so we shall, within a week, be able to supply ourselves with shoes and stockings, necessary clothing, and other provisions. We are having delightful weather, which is a great blessing as it gives time for building shanties for the poor, and temporary houses for business. We are all cheerful and hopeful. I have seen only one complainer and that was a millionaire.

Now I have spun you a long yarn without saying much that I wished to, but you must imagine what I had not words to say. With much love to all your family, I am,

Your loving friend

AURELIA R. KING.