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“A little schoolgirl”

May 28, 1886

My dear Sir,

My marriage with Miss Folsom will take place at the White House on Wednesday (June 2nd) at seven o'clock in the evening.

I humbly think that I can creditably claim . . . you and Mrs. — as friends to encourage and sustain us in this new and untried situation.

May I expect to see you both on this occasion.

Yours Sincerely,
Grover Cleveland¹

With a handwritten invitation and a formal announcement from the White House, President Grover Cleveland ended nearly a year of speculation about his marital intentions. The front pages of the nation's major newspapers had covered the story daily from the beginning of May, and gossip in Washington was intense. Cabinet wives pestered their husbands for word of the president's plans, but Cleveland had kept close counsel. Family members and Cleveland's closest confidantes proved their loyalty; they did not reveal the identity of his fiancée.

Washington society had been looking for a bride for the forty-eight-year old bachelor president since he entered the White House in March 1885. A women's reception at the end of March, held by Cleveland's sister, Rose, who was acting as her brother's hostess in the absence of a first lady, provided ideal grist for the rumor mill. The

leading candidate for White House bride, from the gossips' perspective, was Miss Van Vechten. Her first name, city of origin, and connection to the Clevelands are lost to history, but a description of her remains. She was tall, commanding, self-possessed, superb, a most thorough and finished woman of the world and society.²

Assisting Rose with her duties were Emma Folsom and her daughter, Frances. Mrs. Folsom, a widow, was next in line in Washington society's marital sweepstakes. Described as "a handsome matron, with a gentle, amiable countenance," Emma Folsom exhibited a "protecting, absorbed air" as she presented the visitors to her daughter, and "intently watched every motion of the young girl and encouraged her in the ordeal."³

In contrast, Frances Folsom was portrayed as innocent and naive. Her age was given as nineteen (she was actually a few months shy of her twenty-first birthday), and some reporters characterized her as timid, restrained, and unaccustomed to being in society.⁴ The *Washington Post* was somewhat more charitable, describing her as the "fresh and charming schoolgirl, with a rich color in her cheeks and a rather shy, constrained manner."⁵ "Miss Folsom," it continued, "stood next to her mother in a simple dress of white nun's veiling and surah, with some cascades of lace on waist and skirt, and her corsage bouquet of Jacqueminot roses matched the excited color that flamed in her cheeks."⁶

Frank, as she was known to her family, had both her supporters and her detractors at the reception. Mrs. Daniel S. Lamont, the wife of President Cleveland's personal secretary, commented about Frank to another woman at the reception, "Isn't she the loveliest, the sweetest little beauty you ever saw?"

Mrs. Lamont's companion, however, thought otherwise. "Charming, charming. How perfectly ridiculous it is to talk of the President marrying that child. The mother is even a trifle young for a man of his years and seriousness, and he will never marry while he lives in this house, I know. That sort of thing is not in his line and not in his mind, now that he has the duties of this great office on his shoulders."⁷

But Cleveland very much had "that sort of thing" in his mind, as he admitted to a friend many years later. "Poor girl, I often say to my wife. You never had any courting like other girls. It is true I

did say some things to her one night, when we were walking in the East Room, when she was here visiting my sister.”⁸

After the reception, Frank returned to Wells College, and was one of five women in the class that graduated on June 20, 1885. The commencement program listed her as Frank Folsom, of Buffalo, New York. Although she had no special honors at Wells, she had become a favorite of the faculty, was a leader among her classmates, and had established friendships with other women that provided her with an anchor for what became a very public life. Cleveland did not attend the ceremonies, but he sent hampers of flowers and ivy, which Frank and her classmates planted along the side of the college’s Morgan Hall.

In midsummer, Cleveland proposed marriage in a letter written to Frank while she was visiting family in Scranton. “Would you put your life in my hands?” he asked, and she answered “Yes.” The couple and their families agreed to keep the engagement a secret, and no firm wedding date was set.

Frank’s cousin, Benjamin Folsom, wrote Cleveland in October that he would like to accompany Frank and her mother on a trip to Europe. In the spring, when news of the engagement began to appear in the press, people speculated that Cleveland had paid for the trip so that Frank could purchase a trousseau and learn the ways of the European courts.

Frank’s grandfather, Colonel John B. Folsom, responded strongly when asked if Cleveland had paid Frank’s expenses. “That is an infamous lie, sir,” Folsom retorted.

“Grover Cleveland would not offer to do it knowing that it would be distasteful to us. . . . I told Frankie she should buy her trousseau, as the newspapers call it, in Paris, if she wanted to, and I told her to draw on me to pay for it. I want her to ask me for money. The only condition I imposed was that she should get as fine a costume as possible.”⁹

If the family thought there was anything inappropriate about the relationship between the forty-eight-year-old Cleveland and the twenty-one-year-old Frank, it was carefully concealed. Her cousin, Ben Folsom, a longtime friend of Cleveland’s, regarded him with appropriate deference and respect as Frank’s fiancé. Colonel Folsom, likewise, did not question the propriety of the relationship. Emma Folsom, who would have had the support of her mother, brother, and

sisters had she objected, evidently approved the match. “[Frank] made a hero of him before she was out of short dresses; and [she] looks at him through the glamour of love’s young dream,” Emma commented approvingly about the relationship.¹⁰

On Cleveland’s side, his letters to his sisters Susan C. Yeomans and Mary C. Hoyt suggest that they accepted their brother’s engagement to a woman who was certainly young enough to be one of their daughters. Rose Cleveland, commenting on the event of the wedding, hinted to the press that her new sister-in-law was more than just another pretty face.

Kate Willard, Frank’s former roommate at Wells, on the other hand, made several attempts to discourage Frank from marrying Cleveland. Kate had left Wells in late 1884 or early 1885 to join her mother, Mary Bannister Willard, in Germany. Mary oversaw the Women’s Christian Temperance Union’s European activities and had started the American School for Girls, in Berlin. Kate traveled to Europe to study vocal music.

Kate’s letters to Frank over the years reflect Kate’s own reluctance to marry, and she was jealous of Frank and Cleveland’s relationship. Even so, the letter written immediately after the two friends parted company after visiting together in Italy demonstrates a genuine concern on Kate’s part for her friend’s happiness. Kate wrote Frank:

I think I shall tell you what I could scarcely help from writing on the third of March. . . . On that day I should have begged you wildly never, never to marry Mr. Cleveland, and doubtless give you very good reasons for hindering you. . . .

I am not disappointed that this seems to you to be the right thing; only disappointed because I had thought of another life and love for you. I don’t know *what*, only not this, and I am slow to see the best thing. I believe you know I want you to be happy, and I want you to make other people happy. I am only afraid I have not chosen *your* way of doing this.

I trust you, Frank, if I know you “love the best thing” more than I do, I think, inasmuch as you do them often, and so I am bound to believe you are doing what

seemed the best thing . . . but I believe you think of that side, too, from your saying in your note to me that [you] had found your “mission.”¹¹

Cleveland’s doubts were of a wholly different nature. In his letters to Frank, he often reminded her that his public office would greatly intrude into their private relationship. If Frank understood the extent to which Cleveland’s devotion to duty, coupled with the expectations of Washington society, would infringe on their marriage, she did not waver in her commitment.

Cleveland’s other concern was whether he would be able to “make” Frank into a sensible woman. His letter to his sister, Mary, suggests that he wanted to have control over Frank:

It has occurred to me that it would be nice to have the little room adjoining mine which William [Cleveland’s valet] occupies fixed up for a dressing room, etc., for Frank, or a place where she could sit and stay during the day. . . .

I have my heart set upon making Frank a sensible, domestic American wife, and I would be pleased not to hear her spoken of as “The First Lady of the Land” or “The Mistress of the White House.” I want her to be happy and to possess all she can reasonably desire, but I should feel very much afflicted if she lets many notions in her head. But I think she is pretty levelheaded. . . .¹²

Cleveland eventually decided that Frank was not a petulant schoolgirl. When the couple visited St. Paul, Minnesota, during their western and southern tour in 1887, Cleveland addressed a group by noting that his wife had once lived there. “I thank you that you did not spoil my wife,” he told the group.

Cleveland’s mind might have been set at ease had he read Kate’s letter to Frank, written a month earlier. “I don’t think you are weak, Frank,” Willard wrote her friend. “I think you have ruled and controlled yourself during the time I’ve known you as thoroughly as anyone I know. And as for evenness of action day in and day out, you have been more [unintelligible word] than any friend I have ever had. . . .”¹³

By April, the press had wind of rumors that the president was engaged. Miss Van Vechten had long since disappeared from the scene. Now the press speculated as to whether Cleveland's fiancée was the young "Frankie" or her mother, the older, more mature, Mrs. Emma Folsom.

Washington watchers speculated that a marriage was in the offing when Rose Cleveland did not join her brother after Easter for the spring 1886 social season. By early May, newspapers were writing that the rumors of pending presidential nuptials were true. Just confirming the suspicions was not enough to satisfy the curious reporters. They wanted to know the who, what, and when of the details, and expressed dismay at being left in the dark.

Cleveland, for the most part, kept his counsel, although he was quoted as telling some friends during an afternoon's carriage ride, "I don't see why the papers keep marrying me to old ladies all the while. I wonder why they don't say I am engaged to marry her daughter."¹⁴

Evidence of Cleveland's choice of bride could be found in Frank's hometown, Buffalo. Sometime during her stay in Europe, Frank wrote Cora Townsend to announce her engagement. Mrs. Townsend was most likely the mother of Frank's first fiancé, Charles. As was the family's custom, Cora began reading Frank's letter aloud to the family at the breakfast table. It was not until she reached the end of the note that she read the request to keep the matter a secret. By then, it was obviously too late. The word was out, but the press still doubted the truth of the information.

As late as May 26, just a week before the wedding took place, the hometown papers "reported that the engagement of President Cleveland and Miss Folsom, of Buffalo, probably received less credence in this city than anywhere else in the country."¹⁵

Frances herself was reported to have denied her engagement to Miss Granger, a close friend who visited Frances in Paris. Two days before the official announcement was made on May 30, the *New York Times* wrote, "[T]he marriage between Mrs. or Miss Folsom is still uncertain. The President's wish to keep the matter private only incites greater interest in the feminine minds of this country."¹⁶

Reporters, hungry for even the slightest tidbit of information about the identity of the president's bride, quickly realized that Daniel Lamont might be the key to an answer. He had been dispatched by

Cleveland to New York to assist the Folsoms with their return from Europe. He met their boat when it docked during the night of May 27, 1886, helped them get through customs, and got them situated in their accommodations at Gilsey House, in Manhattan.

Lamont carried out his activities undetected. His silence as he went about his tasks prompted the *Times* to complain, “Lamont would not confirm whom the President is to marry. The steamship company denies that the Folsoms are on the *City of Chicago*,” which was another steamship in its line. Sarcastically, the paper added, “[Lamont] will depart as mysteriously as he came, and anyone who secures the slightest information from him concerning his visit to New York will receive a Government pension of \$500 a week.”¹⁷

Part of the reason for the delay was that the wedding date itself had not been confirmed prior to Frances’s European tour. A June date had been discussed, and there were tentative plans for Frances and the president to marry at Colonel Folsom’s farm. Folsom’s death, on May 22, while Frances, her mother, and cousin were en route from London eliminated that possibility.

Frank did not learn of her grandfather’s death until she reached New York. At that point, Cleveland was able to communicate with Frank, and she apparently suggested the June 2 date. The wedding would now be at the White House. In consideration of her grandfather’s very recent death, the occasion would be a quiet, private affair.

In retrospect, the absorption of the press with the identity of Cleveland’s bride is humorous. Cleveland secretly courted Frank in plain sight, but no one caught on. Like all other men who corresponded with Wells students, Cleveland had obtained family permission to send Frank letters. Helen Fairchild Smith scrutinized the mails and the male visitors who called upon “her girls.” Governor Grover Cleveland was no exception. Students noted his portrait in Frank’s room, but she always referred to him as “Uncle Cleve” or “the Governor.”

Frank’s travels with Cleveland around New York, after he became governor, were not considered unusual. And her regular receipt of flowers from the governor’s mansion, and then the White House, did not tip off any students that a romance was developing.

Cleveland’s fervent wish was to keep the press as far away as possible. In a letter to his sister, Mary, dated March 21, 1886, Cleveland wrote:

I expect to be married pretty early in June—very soon after Frank returns. I think the quicker it can be done the better and she seems to think so too. You know she can hardly be said to have a home, and if the event was delayed long after her return the talk and gossip which would certainly be stirred up could not fail to be very embarrassing to her. I find it very hard to settle the question as to the manner in which the thing should be conducted. . . .

I want my marriage to be a quiet one and am determined that the American Sovereigns shall not interfere with a thing so purely personal to me. And yet I don't want to be churlish and mean or peculiar for the sake of being peculiar. But if the example of the President is worth anything I want it in this matter to be in the direction of sense and proper decency. . . .¹⁸

The "American Sovereigns" were very intent on interfering. Before Frank's accommodations were finally confirmed, reporters combed the city to learn where she and her family were staying. Women asked the clerks in their respective hotels if the president's bride-to-be was staying there. "The attachés of all the hotels were besieged from morning until night with inquiries and were much wearied with their task," the *New York Times* reported. One reporter said, "I have rarely seen such public interest. It is simply marvelous."¹⁹

Neither Cleveland, Lamont, nor the Folsoms found the hounding "simply marvelous." To combat the public clamor for a glimpse of Frances, her cousin released a statement saying that Miss Folsom would not respond to cards left at the front desk. She only wanted to see a few intimate friends; they already knew her room number, and would reach her rooms on their own.

President Cleveland left Washington by train on Sunday, May 30, to attend the Decoration Day ceremonies the following day in New York. The press and public tracked his every movement. Interest in the president's romantic life intensified. Word of Cleveland's departure time from the train station in Washington, where he traveled in a special car attached to a regularly scheduled train of the Pennsylvania Railroad, was telegraphed to New York, and a party of the curious and of well-wishers awaited his arrival there.

The veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic played second fiddle to the future Mrs. Grover Cleveland at New York’s Decoration Day Parade, on May 31, 1886. Thousands of pairs of eyes were occupied more with the details of her figure than with the contemplation of the parade.²⁰ Joined by Benjamin Folsom and Mrs. Lamont, Frank and her party traveled by carriage to the Fifth Avenue Hotel, where she watched the parade from an upstairs window. The bands recognized her, and as President Cleveland passed underneath the window, struck up the tune, “He’s Going to Marry Yum-Yum,” from the then-popular Gilbert & Sullivan musical, *The Mikado*.

As Cleveland passed underneath Frank’s window, he tipped his hat in acknowledgment, and she responded by a wave of her handkerchief. The crowd roared its appreciation of the gestures. After all his efforts to keep his romantic affairs private, Cleveland showed visible appreciation for the public’s enthusiastic approval.

Frank and her mother arrived by train from New York at six o’clock on the morning of the wedding, Wednesday, June 2, 1886. Cleveland and Rose were there to greet Frank; her mother, Emma; and her cousin, Ben. They breakfasted together, and afterward Cleveland returned to work as if nothing out of the ordinary were scheduled for his day.

Reporters staked out the White House and observed the day’s activities, looking for more information about the type of wedding the president would have that evening. The wedding cake arrived by a limited express train from New York, and the individual boxes, containing the cake’s multilayer tiers, were removed under the watchful eyes of the baggage men. A carriage transported the cake boxes from the station to the White House.

Representatives of the press were allowed a brief glimpse of the wedding decorations at five o’clock that afternoon, when the White House attendants opened the doors to the parlors.

At six, area church bells tolled in anticipatory celebration of the wedding. As the time for the ceremony neared, people gathered in front of the White House. The papers numbered the crowds in the hundreds.

The presidential mansion, in 1886, was unguarded, and since it was considered a possession of the people of the United States, it was publicly accessible. The *New York Times* reported, “It was a jolly,

good-natured gathering and thoroughly democratic. There was the ragged street arab and the well-to-do merchant and his wife, the slipshod colored girl and the lady in silk attire, the rough laborer, bricklayer or hodcarrier and the neatly-dressed clerk from the stores. The gates were left wide open. Everybody could come in and everybody who was so disposed entered the wide portals and passed up the wide asphalt drive to the very portals of the White House itself."²¹

The crowd stood by and watched as the wedding guests arrived in their carriages. The total wedding party numbered under thirty, consisting of the president's immediate family; Benjamin and Mrs. Folsom and other members of Frank's family; members of Cleveland's cabinet and their wives; and selected friends of both sides from Buffalo, including Julia Severance.

Rose Cleveland oversaw the wedding preparations for her brother and his bride. The White House's extensive greenhouses furnished the flowers for wedding decorations. The Blue Room had been completely transformed. "The crystal chandelier poured a flood of mellow radiance upon the scene, and the colors of the massive banks of scarlet begonias and royal Jacqueminot roses mingling with the blue and silver tints of the frescoed walls and ceiling gave a warm and glowing tone to the whole brilliant interior."²²

The letters *C* and *F* were interwoven in moss and white roses through the dark red Jacqueminot bouquets on the mantel. Tall tropical plants concealed the view of the room from the outside. The fireplace was filled with flowers that represented the colors of a blaze.

The East Room was similarly decorated with groups of palms, ferns, azaleas, and hydrangeas in the window spaces. Garlands of roses trimmed the four columns that supported the ceiling, and banks of orchids, lilies, and roses were arranged along the four large mantels in the room.

At exactly seven o'clock, the crowd heard the strains of the "Wedding Chorus" from *Lohengrin* performed by the Marine Band, under the direction of John Philip Sousa, and whispered to one another that the service had begun. A presidential salute was fired from the southern end of the city, and church bells pealed in celebration.

The president descended the western staircase, with Frank on his arm. With a nod, he signaled that the music was to stop. The two stood together in the center of the room, facing Dr. Byron Sun-

derland, the pastor of Washington’s First Presbyterian Church, and Reverend William Cleveland, the president’s brother. The guests stood in a semicircle behind the couple.

The physical contrast between the two was captured by an artist’s rendering of the ceremony. Cleveland, a stout man of 250 pounds, looks distinctly middle-aged next to his young bride. His heavy, dark mustache was carefully trimmed, but nothing could disguise his very noticeable double chin, or his receding hairline. Cecil Spring-Rice, who joined the British Consulate in 1887, wrote to a friend in England, “The President is 5 feet high and 4 feet wide: he has no neck and six chins.”²³ The philosopher and historian Henry Adams observed to his wife, “We must admit that, like Abraham Lincoln, the Lord made a mighty common-looking man in him.”²⁴

On the other hand, the press immediately characterized Frances as a beauty. She was a half a head shorter than Cleveland, shapely, and considered “full-bosomed.” Her dark, luxurious hair was piled atop her head in the typical fashion of the day. She had expressive blue-gray eyes and a youthful, fresh complexion.

At Sunderland’s direction, the two joined their right hands to signify their willingness to marry. Cleveland had changed Frank’s vows, substituting the word “keep” for “obey.” The gold ring that he placed on her finger was inscribed “June 2, 1886.” Cleveland and his bride did not kiss at the end of the ceremony. Mrs. Folsom was the first to offer her congratulations, and the new Mrs. Cleveland kissed each of the women in attendance. “The gentlemen were not so favored,” the *Post* noted.²⁵

Cleveland, who typically showed little interest in his personal appearance, had dressed with unusual care for the ceremony. “[He] wore a smoothly fitting dress suit of black broadcloth, patent leather shoes, white kid gloves, wearing the left and carrying the right one. His low cut vest displayed an expanse of shirt bosom in which were three flat white studs. A white lawn tie encircled his standing collar.”²⁶

Frances’s wedding gown was made of ivory satin, “simply garnished on the high corsage with India muslin crossed in Grecian folds and carried in exquisite falls of simplicity over the petticoat.” Orange blossoms were woven throughout her five-yard-long veil of tulle in the shape of a crown. The veil “completely enveloped her, falling to the edge of the petticoat in front and extending the entire length

of her full court train.” Frances’s only jewelry was her diamond-and-sapphire engagement ring.²⁷

The newlyweds led the way to the family dining room for an informal supper. Cleveland and his new bride stood in front of the now-assembled, huge wedding cake. Frances cut the cake with a pearl-handled knife, signaling the beginning of the toasts and the meal.

Rose Cleveland, who had been especially attentive to her brother’s bride, handed Frank a glass of sparkling water with which she could drink the toasts to her marriage. Like Frank, Rose had taken a temperance vow. Unlike her predecessor, “Lemonade Lucy” Hayes, the new Mrs. Cleveland did not deny others their enjoyment of alcoholic beverages.

The guests were favored with satin bags and boxes of bonbons in every conceivable variety and shape. The newlyweds had found time prior to the ceremony to each sign a small card that was tied to a small box, handpainted with a spray of flowers that contained a piece of the wedding cake.

Cleveland and his bride did not linger in the dining room, but left to change for their honeymoon. Cleveland emerged first, wearing a black suit and Prince Albert frock. Frank’s traveling outfit was a deep-gray suit and matching large gray hat lined with velvet and trimmed with picot ribbons and ostrich feathers.

They said their good-byes in the main corridor of the White House and left the White House via the southern balcony. Rice, old slippers, and wishes of “Godspeed” followed them as they drove away in an enclosed carriage.

Cleveland thought that he had outwitted the newspaper reporters that lined the streets hoping to catch a glimpse of the newlyweds. The carriage followed a less heavily traveled road, and brought the Clevelands to a side track away from the main depot of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. There a train of two cars and an engine waited to take the couple to Deer Park, Maryland.

But as Cleveland learned the next day, he was the one who was outwitted. The reporters hired a train to follow the couple, and newspapermen hid in the trees around the resort hoping to learn whatever they could about the lives of the newly married couple.