

Charles S. Ryan to Alice E. Sumner
April 1883

My dearest Alice,

Let me say
how truly chuffed I am that you've
agreed to my proposal

made this very day at Brighton.
It's been an April afternoon
I'm sure we'll both remember —

the breeze in off the Bay,
our families in conversation
back behind us on the sand

and both so well-disposed.
Twenty-two and twenty-nine
is not too large a gap.

I may have rushed you just a little
with all my talk of sons;
'nine of them', I heard myself

half-whisper in your ear.
I fear I may have overdone
my Siege of Plevna amputations,

my anecdotes of Erzeroum.
I pray the nightmares I've acquired
do not, in time, disturb your sleep.

I know, like me, you are resilient.
I've seen the way you handle horses,
your resolute good sense.

I know, too, how you've chased down foxes!
These past four years since my return
I've spent long hours considering

the woman who might share my life.
I talked to you about
'la belle Américaine'

already on her honeymoon
along the Bosphorus
and, just your age, that Russian princess

complete with general.
I said how I admired
their frankness and directness,

their lack of mince and simper.
That, too, is what I find in you,
a forthrightness to match my own.

No doubt, your Sumner line
will be of no small use
restraining my extravagance.

Your Charlie is impetuous,
it cannot be denied.
It's true, to be a doctor's wife

requires a share of hardship;
you also must endure
the vagaries of patients.

I'm writing this tonight, *ma chère*,
on Spring Street at the top of Collins,
this corner where I rent the rooms

I'm hoping you will grace
within these next few months.
My heart says we should press ahead;

we are agreed there's little point
in stretching out engagements.
I see you in your white already,

some gusty Melbourne day in June,
fearless up the aisle.

I see you in these rooms forthwith,

mistress of the house and servants,
mother of our children.

We'll have the bedroom drapes re-done

and add some furniture to suit
our new connubiality.

The thoughts I have re that, *chérie*,

are better chuckled in your ear
than bowdlerised with ink on paper.

My sweet Alice Elfreda

(has no one ever called you 'Elfie'?)

I write this merely to confirm
the understanding we have reached

this long, slow afternoon at Brighton,
strolling in that steady breeze
along a stretch of sand.

Our paired lives will, I'm more than sure,
enjoy such steadiness.

I am, my dear, your ever-loving

future husband, Charlie.

Geoff Page