

Letter from Leonard Kephart to Frances Kephart:

Nairobi, October 27, 1927

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Transcribed and Edited by

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For English 618: Research Methods in English

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## Introduction to the Series

This transcription and its attendant annotations, explanatory material, and bibliography was prepared by students in ENGL 618: Research Methods in English, the required gateway class for the MA in English degree program at Western Carolina University (WCU). The learning outcomes for this class include the following:

1. Conduct appropriate, effective, and ethical scholarship.
  - a. Effectively find and use advanced research tools (handbooks, databases, guides, bibliographies, etc.) appropriate to a subject.
    - Students will be able to use a wide variety of such tools and evaluate those tools.
  - b. Find appropriate advanced research (print and electronic scholarship) and apply that research to specific disciplinary questions or issues.
    - Students will be able to find a variety of scholarship, evaluate both the appropriateness and rigor of that scholarship, and incorporate that scholarship correctly and effectively.
  - c. Develop accurate bibliographies and reference citations.
    - Students will be able to annotate, abstract, and cite materials following standard MLA format.
2. Understand the process by which the texts we use are made available.
  - Students will be able to conduct basic editorial work and evaluate the editorial work of others.

All work is presented as submitted by the graduate students. While they take great care with their transcriptions and annotations, errors are possible. As they learn throughout this class, good scholarship requires meticulous research and corroboration by authoritative sources. Our objective is to provide transcriptions and annotations of WCU's Special Collections materials that will be useful to the institution, students, scholars, patrons, and all users of our library's resources.

If you wish to submit an emendation or correction for this document, please email Dr. Brian Gastle ([bgastle@wcu.edu](mailto:bgastle@wcu.edu)).

## Introduction to Document

This edition represents one of the earliest correspondences between Leonard Kephart and his wife Frances during a Department of Agriculture-sponsored trip the former made to Africa. This trip was taken in the interest of discovering and acquiring new species of grass for use as groundcover in the United States. It was unsuccessful; however, Kephart discovered several new species of clover during his travels. This letter is dated October 27, 1927, and is addressed from the American Consular Service in Nairobi, which was British East-African territory at the time.

Leonard Kephart, the son of Horace Kephart, was born on January 10, 1892 in New York. His wife, Frances Kephart, was born in 1887 in Texas. They married in 1916 and had three children together: Jane Frazer Kephart Keller, George Overton Kephart (also called Buddy), and Barbara Kephart Crane. At the time this letter was written, Leonard was 35 years old, Frances 40, Jane 10, Buddy 7, and Barbara-Ann 4. Leonard's tone throughout the letter is primarily matter of fact, although his characteristic sense of humor shines through in his storytelling and commentary.

Of particular interest in this letter is Leonard and Frances' relationship dynamic. Though Frances is at home with the children, she evidently has a critical role here in communicating with Leonard's fellow USDA employees on his behalf and in coordinating his finances. The confident assurance Leonard has in Frances' ability to handle things demonstrates their mutual respect and interdependence. In addition, Leonard's flirtatious banter gives readers a picture into the easy-going, loving, and decidedly egalitarian nature of their married life. Scholars may also note the proliferation of brand-name foods and products present here. Leonard and Frances' correspondence is an excellent record of how quickly these products became commonplace in American households in the 1920's.

Kephart begins his letter by thanking Frances for her correspondence before discussing the role his letters play in acting as a diary of his travels. He also mentions the fact that some of his letters have evidently been lost in the mail and that, at this point, he has not been able to make copies of all his letters due to a lack of carbon paper. From here he moves on to briefly discuss domestic matters that include replacing the family vehicle and arranging for a loan. His mentions of official business involve a proposed itinerary of his trip from the current day until arriving back in the United States, which he estimates will take place between February 1 and 15<sup>th</sup> of the following year. Frances seems to have an important role in arranging for Leonard's return trip, as he asks her to privately speak to Henry Allanson, a coworker in the Department of Agriculture, to assist him in procuring a boat home. The rest of his letter chronicles an upcoming shopping opportunity in Paris, Kephart's intention to sell freelance travel stories, a lengthy discussion of food and imported American goods, more domestic concerns, and at last an address to each of his three children.

### **Editorial Statement**

The document is a hand-written letter that comprises eight pages and is written on the front and back of four sheets of lined paper. The letter is written in a cursive script, and the writing has been done for the most part in pencil, except on the second page, which is written in blue ink. Compared to Kephart's other letters, this one includes handwriting that is cramped and faded.

Our transcript represents a diplomatic transcription. This means that our goal was to represent the original document as clearly as possible. As a result, we have sought to replicate what Kephart literally wrote on the page and have done nothing to edit his words for clarity or grammatical correctness. Wherever Kephart's meaning is unclear, we have kept his original

writing and inserted footnotes to clarify what he likely meant. In keeping with a diplomatic transcription, we have observed several editorial choices:

- We have maintained Kephart's punctuation and line breaks as they appear in the letter.
- We have included Kephart's misspellings and incorrect word breaks (i.e. correspon-dence), as these are minor and do not significantly obscure his meaning.
- We have kept the alternating uses of the word "and" and the ampersand symbol "&."
- We have added explanatory footnotes to transcribed words that are not abundantly clear; in addressing these words our first priority was the analysis of Kephart's handwriting, and the second was whether a possible reading is consistent with Kephart's voice or the context of the passage.

## Transcription

Nairobi<sup>1</sup>    October 27, 1927

Dear Frances<sup>2</sup> –

A whole raft of letters were here when we returned a few days ago from a two week trip around Mt. Kenia<sup>3</sup> and I'll answer those before getting on with the "travelogue" that is now some weeks behind.

It sure is fine to receive so many good letters and I appreciate your writing so often. I know that constant letter writing is a chore, especially when you have little leisure time and would like to use that to read or sew or sleep. So I'll try to hold up my end of this correspondence too.

The letter I wrote from England must have gone astray or you would have received it long ago. I can't remember now where I mailed it and unfortunately I had not yet begun to make carbon copies as I had no carbon paper.<sup>4</sup> Since then I have made copies of all the letters that I have written because they are the best diary of the trip.

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<sup>1</sup> Major city in Kenya. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was a significant commercial center.

<sup>2</sup> Frances Frazer Kephart. She was born in 1887 in Hunt County, Texas. In 1916 she married Leonard Wheeler Kephart in Washington, D.C. She was the mother of Jane Frazer Kephart Keller, George Overton Kephart, and Barbara Kephart Crane. She died in 1971 in Montgomery County, Maryland, near Washington, D.C.

<sup>3</sup> Likely a variant spelling of Mount Kenya. It is the highest mountain in Kenya, reaching 17,058 feet.

<sup>4</sup> Carbon paper was used to create copies of hand- or type-written documents. It could be placed under the document being written on and imprint a copy automatically.

I think you must have received all of them from your comments. The only other missing letter is one that I wrote to Dr. Pieters<sup>5</sup> and mailed on the boat at Aden.<sup>6</sup> Evidently he has not received it. I think also I must have missed a letter from the office as he makes several remarks in a recent letter that I do not understand. About an office being moved

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&c. It would be a miracle however if all of the mail did reach its destination, as I have received and sent it from some funny places.

The Ford<sup>8</sup> sale is entirely O.K. Piemeisel<sup>9</sup> did really think that they got \$225<sup>10</sup> for theirs. I believe you did real well to get \$200 in view of the new Ford coming out. As names of course we had us luck in the deal. The price of Fords dropped twice first after I bought it and when we wanted to sell Ford decided to make a complete change. So that's that. I don't know what we had better do about another car. I don't see

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Adrian John Pieters. He was an agronomist, botanist, and administrator who worked in the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

<sup>6</sup> Port city on the Arabian Peninsula that is on the other side of the entrance to the Red Sea from East Africa.

<sup>7</sup> No page number is included on either page 1 or 2; however, one is provided at the top of each page from 3 onwards.

<sup>8</sup> By the 1920s it was commonplace for middle-class American families to own an automobile, as America had transitioned to "an automobile-oriented way of life" during the decade. The Kepharts likely would have owned a covered automobile, also known as a sedan, as this kind of car was more suitable for family life and comprised 85% of car sales in 1927 (Hugill, 344-45).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Louis Piemeisel. He was a botanist who worked in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and accompanied Kephart in Africa.

<sup>10</sup> In 1927, new Ford sedans cost \$495, and new Chevrolets cost \$594 (Hugill, 345). The costs Kephart references here, in the \$200 range, were evidently typical prices in used car deals.

how we can get along without one lest we may need the money more badly for something else. Also there is likely to be a big shake-up in the small car situation after the new Ford comes out & I would want to wait and see what the Chevrolet<sup>11</sup> is going to do about it. Likewise there is the matter of having the whole house to ourselves. I am certainly strong for that if there is any possible way to work it.

Either way I wish you would think on the matter of renewing the 1st trust.<sup>12</sup> I shall probably be home before March 6th and not in time to do much about making a new arrangement. You know that I spoke to Mr. Crittenden<sup>13</sup> about getting a Building & Loan Assn.<sup>14</sup> loan on the house to take the place of the 1st trust and whatever is left of the 2nd trust, which won't be much by March 6th. Mr. C. did not encourage the idea much but he may feel differently about it now and if you have a good chance you might speak to him about it. I don't

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<sup>11</sup> Although Ford was the most visible motor company, Chevrolet was making a name for itself as a manufacturer of low-cost sedans (Flink, 345).

<sup>12</sup> In the following passage, Leonard appears to ask Frances if she will consider agreeing to a reorganization of their trust fund agreements. He suggests getting a home loan to take the place of these trusts. This would perhaps mean that they are pulling from their trusts to pay for their home, and Leonard would prefer to replace this arrangement by taking out a home loan from a Building and Loan association.

<sup>13</sup> Possibly Edgar V. Crittenden; as of 1930, he was a president of a building and loan association and lived in Montgomery County, Maryland, near Washington, D.C.

<sup>14</sup> Building and loan associations were organizations that provided home loans for low-income households. They existed from the 1830s to the 1930s. Membership was made up of mostly working-class members who made regular payments, owned shares in the association, and were on a waitlist to receive a loan. These types of associations fell out of existence during the Great Depression and were replaced by savings and loan associations.

think his Assn. gives very good terms, considering the terms that 2nd Assns. usually give but even with their terms the net cost to us would be no more than the present arrangement and it would do away with the constant renewals.

According to our present plan we will leave here tomorrow for Uganda, be up there about three weeks, return to Nairobi for a final pack-up and leave by train for Moshi, Amani, Tanga, and Dar-es-Salaam.<sup>15</sup> From Dar-es-Salaam we will go up-country to see some territory that we could not reach by auto, then return to Dar-es-Salaam and about Dec. 6 take ship for Beira in Portuguese East Africa.<sup>16</sup> From there we will go by tram up into the highlands of Southern Rhodesia,<sup>17</sup> across to Victoria Falls, down to Pretoria and Johannesburg and from there to Cape Town.<sup>18</sup> We will probably be in Jo-burg on Christmas. And on New Years' Eve we will board the Njassa<sup>19</sup> of the German Africa Line<sup>20</sup> at Cape Town for home. We will leave the Njassa at Lisbon and go over land through

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<sup>15</sup> Major port city on the coast of Tanzania. It is Tanzania's largest city.

<sup>16</sup> Mozambique was controlled by Portugal at this time. All of the other African territories Kephart mentions were under British occupation.

<sup>17</sup> Modern-day Zimbabwe.

<sup>18</sup> All major cities in South Africa, with Pretoria being the capital and Cape Town being located on the coast.

<sup>19</sup> In later letters, Kephart alternatively spells this ship as "Nyassa" and "Njassa." There are two separate ships with these names. He most likely voyaged on the S.S. Njassa, as he writes letters from the ship on stationery that could be traced back to the Njassa. He also describes a German-speaking crew, and the Njassa was still German-owned at this time, while the Nyassa was Portuguese-owned.

<sup>20</sup> The German Africa Line was owned by the Hamburg America Line, which owned the Njassa. Kephart's letters from the Njassa are written on Hamburg America Line stationery.

Portugal Spain and France to Cherbourg where we hope to arrive in time to catch the Leviathan<sup>21</sup> about Jan. 25. If we do we will arrive in New York shortly after the first of February. This however depends on the sailing dates of the U.S. Ships.<sup>22</sup> We can't get any information about their dates here of course. However it will be sometime between Feb. 1 and 15 that we will finally set foot in the U.S.A. again. We will of

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course cable Allanson<sup>23</sup> when we find out just what boat we will come across on. And you might speak to him sometime in strict unofficial privacy and remind him that he offered to obtain the "freedom of the purse"<sup>24</sup> for us. We might, very unofficially of course, need it.

This is still October but we are forwarding today two boxes. One contains our collections and is addressed to the office of Foreign Plant Introduction.<sup>25</sup> The other will probably contain mostly personal stuff and will be addressed to Dr.

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<sup>21</sup> American ocean liner, formerly German-owned and named the S.S. Vaterland. The ship was docked in Hoboken, New Jersey when the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, so the federal government seized the ship and renamed it Leviathan. The episode would later form part of the backstory of Ron Rash's 2012 novel *The Cove*.

<sup>22</sup> Unclear; possibly Kephart is concerned about scheduling delays caused by unpredictable departures of other ships.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Allanson. He was a scientific assistant in the Department of Agriculture.

<sup>24</sup> Unclear; possibly Kephart is hoping that Allanson can help with getting additional funding for their expedition. This would depend on how much influence a scientific assistant would hold in the department, although Kephart apparently has an informal agreement in mind.

<sup>25</sup> The Office of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction was an office of the USDA. The function of the office was to receive seeds and plants from the department's explorers and study them in American facilities, hoping to adapt them to American climates.

Pieters.<sup>26</sup> It will contain a package addressed to you confirming some things for Christmas. I rather blew myself on these but there will never be another opportunity so I could not resist getting them.<sup>27</sup> It may cut down on the things that I can bring when I come home but I thought that you would like the biggest things for Christmas.

And by the way please tell all the women folks that we will be glad to bring them some Parisian gloves<sup>28</sup> if they will send us their sizes. I will let you know in time what our Paris address will be – probably 40 American Express Co. We will be in Paris only between trains but it does not take long to buy gloves now that we know where to go. We might be able to get other things too but can't guarantee it on acct. of lack of time. Don't say anything publically about the gloves. Just pass the word around quietly.

You are doing first-rate in the financial end of things and I hope that we can get our heads out of water

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and keep them there. I have some good material for stories and hope to be able to make a little money from

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<sup>26</sup> This suggests that the Kepharts were friends with Pieters as well as colleagues.

<sup>27</sup> The meaning of the phrase "blew myself" is evidently that Leonard has spent significantly more money on these Christmas gifts than he usually would.

<sup>28</sup> French women's fashion of the 1920s was highly popular. Marked by the introduction of the bob haircut and looser clothing, it was considered culturally provocative but also experienced a spread that was considered "epidemic" (Roberts, 657).

magazine articles.<sup>29</sup> If so we should come out all right. I won't need any more money here. McKee<sup>30</sup> cabled \$1500 as reimbursement for my first expense acct. so I'll have enough to run on.<sup>31</sup>

Your stories of your dinner parties and the menus thereof make me ravenous for some good American food. We are, as Dr. Pieters suggested, getting used to this food, at least to the point that it does not worry us. But it is awfully tiresome and uninteresting. The English have absolutely no imagination whatever when it comes to food.<sup>32</sup>

Please thank Weston<sup>33</sup> or whoever is responsible for the coffee. We had a regular celebration over at the Consulate getting the package and getting our first percolator-full going. Mr. Thompson had a percolator that he had had sent from Sears-Roebuck<sup>34</sup>, the only one in Africa I suppose. We made and drank three cups apiece within the first half hour

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<sup>29</sup> In her book "Travel Writing," Casey Blanton calls the interwar period the "heyday of travel literature" (viii). It can therefore be assumed that freelance writing such as that mentioned here by Kephart might be profitable.

<sup>30</sup> Most likely Roland McKee, an agrostologist working in for U.S. Dept. of Agriculture throughout the 1920s and '30s. In 1920, he co-authored a study with Kephart titled "Hairy-Vetch Seed Production in the United States" (Kephart and McKee).

<sup>31</sup> According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' CPI Inflation Calculator, USD \$1500 in October of 1927 is the equivalent of USD \$27,212.41 in October of 2024 (The Bureau of Labor Statistics). Cost of living data from 1924-1928 suggests that the buying power of such a sum as USD \$1500 would have been significantly higher in Nairobi than in either the States or Europe (*Report of Inquiry 1924-1928*).

<sup>32</sup> In 1925, Englishwomen Hilda Leyel and Olga Hartley published *The Gentle Art of Cookery*, a lively collection of 750 imaginative recipes that remains an English classic. Unfortunately, innovative cookbooks such as this seem to have done little to ease English food's poor international reputation.

<sup>33</sup> Unknown; possibly William H. Weston, an assistant professor of botany at Harvard University who also worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the mid '20's. His work there as an agrostologist makes it likely that the two would have known each other (Wilson, *William H. Weston*).

<sup>34</sup> Although the history of Sears-Roebuck goes back to 1886, the company's first retail store opened in Chicago in 1925. The company's successful catalog had by this time made it a household name with product lines such as Kenmore and Craftsman (Sears Archives).

and have had it every morning at 11 o'clock since then.

The fudge has not yet arrived and judging from the condition of Mrs. Piemeisel<sup>35</sup> velatis<sup>36</sup> when it got here I'm afraid the fudge and also the candy for Mrs. Watt<sup>37</sup> will suffer. Mrs. P's caramels were soft and sugary and somewhat moldy when they arrived and had a peculiar metallic taste that all candy seems to acquire in coming through the Red Sea.<sup>38</sup> The English chocolates that you get here are the same way even

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though packed in air tight tins. If not so packed I am afraid that any candy will spoil completely. I'm sorry you went to so much trouble and I hope the fudge will not be as much damaged as I fear.

If we were going to stay here longer we would have the use of a good supply of Campbell Beans, Beech nut Bacon, Spaghetti, Jellies, Deviled Ham & Peanut Butter.<sup>39</sup> About July 1 we ordered through an American here, Mr. Thompson<sup>40</sup>, a big bill of canned goods from N.Y. Instead of shipping them at once however the N.Y. agent waited six weeks until he had accumulated a large consignment. Consequently the stuff did not reach here until about 10 days ago. It is now too late

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<sup>35</sup> Lydia Staley Nickle Piemiesel, the wife of Robert Louis Piemiesel. They were married in 1925.

<sup>36</sup> "Velatis" here refers to the famous Italian caramels made in Washington, D.C from 1866 to 1970 (*Velatis*). This store was located less than 10 miles from the Kephart family home in Takoma Park.

<sup>37</sup> Unknown; possibly a friend or neighbor of the Kepharts.

<sup>38</sup> By this time, the Suez Canal had been in operation for nearly 60 years (Karabell). The use of this route would save approximately 3000 nautical miles compared to traveling around the Cape of Good Hope.

<sup>39</sup> Butterick Publishing Company's 1925 *The Story of a Pantry Shelf* lists each one of these foods (besides Campbell's) as being manufactured by Beech-Nut Company. Beech-Nut's combination of effective advertising and innovative packaging had by this time made the company (and its products) a household name (33).

<sup>40</sup> An unknown American merchant. The recent establishment of direct steamship services between the United States and Mombasa was noted to have significantly raised the supply of American imported goods (*Report for 1927*, 35).

to use it so we have ordered Mr. T to sell it, except one box of Bacon which we will take to Uganda.

We will certainly have to have the house painted soon or it will begin to decay.<sup>41</sup> It should he been done this fall but I'll have to wait until spring. The inside too will need fixing. I like papered walls myself. I think they look warmer and cozier than painted walls. But I can paint them myself and cannot paper them. Anyway, think it over and we will try to get cleaned up in the spring.

I'm not surprised that the washing machine & heater should begin to need repairs.<sup>42</sup> 5 years is about the limit on such things. You have to count on refinishing a house completely about every 10 years.

Please tell the people who gave me all those presents

[7]

That every one of them has been in constant and arduous service and in every case has turned out to be exactly what I needed. The only exception is the beads.<sup>43</sup> Tell Farwell<sup>44</sup> that I have carried them with me wherever I have gone and have let it be known that I was in the market for a nice medium size wife.<sup>45</sup> But so far I have not found any of just the right shade, size and

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<sup>41</sup> The Kephart's family home address was 226 Maple Ave., Takoma Park, Washington, D.C.

<sup>42</sup> The first electric clothes-washing machines hit the market in 1907; however, it wasn't until 1927 that 2-speed, waterproof, spin-function machines could be purchased (*Speed Queen Investor*). The first oil-burning furnaces also debuted in the '20's and quickly became popular in American homes. Electric heat wouldn't become widespread until decades later (*Warner Service*).

<sup>43</sup> Beads have a rich cultural history among East African peoples and have been used to decorate or adorn, to signify age, marital status, or wealth, and to perform religious rituals (Nguru et. al, 87).

<sup>44</sup> Unknown; possibly another neighbor.

<sup>45</sup> See introduction for notes on Leonard and Frances' relationship dynamic and humorous banter.

smell. – chiefly smell. I almost thought I had one last week when a trim little mem bibi<sup>46</sup> came mincing down the road one morning while we were eating breakfast and begged for some “chumbi” (salt). There wasn’t any question about her size because she wore nothing but a short skirt. But her smell – oh, la la. They wash themselves in castor oil that has been placed out in the sun to ferment.<sup>47</sup> We had to give her the salt before we could eat our breakfast without holding our noses.

The sweater has been in use constantly. It is getting worn in places and has been faded by the sun to a dingy rust color. But it has seen yeoman service.<sup>48</sup> The jack-knife was my constant companion and was used for everything from skinning buck to digging plants + opening tin cans. But in an absent-minded moment I left it on the seat of the car one morning, and I’ve never seen it since. I have bought another as nearly like it as possible – a Remington scout-knife.<sup>49</sup>

The money-belt was never off my person for three months

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day or night. It finally got so stiff from perspiration that I had to send it to the cleaners, but it will resume

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<sup>46</sup> A portmanteau of “mem-sāhib”, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century address for a lady (particularly a European one) and “bibi,” an older term that also meant “lady,” but which was at this time usually only applied to women of lower rank or to native mistresses (*OED*).

<sup>47</sup> Kenya’s traditionally arid climate likely made water bathing largely unfeasible during the dry season (Mogaka et. al, 7). This detail may also be an unkind exaggeration on Kephart’s part.

<sup>48</sup> “Good, efficient, or useful service, such as is rendered by a faithful servant of good standing” (*OED*).

<sup>49</sup> These knives became enormously popular in America after 1924, when Remington developed an innovative can-opener design that they included into most of their new knives (Ellingson).

operations tomorrow.

Tell Jane<sup>50</sup> that I received her fine letter and will certainly try to answer it just as soon as I possibly can. It is sweet to have a nice little daughter who writes her daddy such good letters. I'll certainly give her a great big hug for them when I get home again.

And I got little old Barbara Ann's<sup>51</sup> letter too. It was a dear little scribbly letter all full of news and I read every word of it. Tell her that I'm really not as fat as I look in the picture. I'll send her another picture soon.

So far I have not had any letter from Buddy.<sup>52</sup> But I know that boys have lots to do and don't have much time to write letters. And I know it's hard to think of something to say. I used to be that way too.

Well I must quit and get into the dining room for breakfast. We are staying at the hotel<sup>53</sup> for a change.

Oh yes – we are getting the Stories and they are sure fine reading. Thanks to Mrs. P when you see her.

Love to all my big family.

From Daddy.

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<sup>50</sup> Jane Frazer Kephart (b. 1918), the Kepharts' oldest daughter (1930 U.S. Census).

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Kephart Crane (b. 1924), the Kepharts' youngest daughter (1930 U.S. Census).

<sup>52</sup> George Overton Kephart (b. 1920), nicknamed "Buddy," the Kepharts' only son (1930 U.S. Census).

<sup>53</sup> Perhaps "The Norfolk Hotel," founded in Nairobi in 1904 (*Historic Hotels Then and Now*).

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