

Roanoke Island, N.C., April 20th, 1865

Your letter of the 17th was duly received, and was a genuine sunbeam to me for a whole sunless day. I do not think you realize how much good a cheery word from "61 John St." can do among your daughters in the field.

Events in these "latter days" are crowding so thickly upon us that we are almost lost in a bewildered maze. One great joy follows close upon another, and before we have time to tune our hearts to the nation's pulsation of victory and hope, a despatch boat, with drooping flag shrouded in mourning, touches at your wharf, leaving a message that brings us down to the valley of humiliation. It was a sad, sad day for us all, with the solemn half hour guns booming from the forts all around, and their key tone seemed changed from the utterance of four short days before, when they thundered "victory" till the winding shores, the sea and the far off sky appeared to join the choral echo.

It has been exceedingly interesting to watch the emotions of the colored people. The fall of Richmond came upon us like a full sunrise at midnight. Matters get to flow smoothly along, even under the regime of red tape--after one becomes "used to it." So it was that the event, talked of, and expected till it became quite mythical--startled us at last. It seemed as if another yoke had been removed from the shoulders of the Freedmen. "Thank God, the day is dawning!" "Now, perhaps my boy will come!" "I shall see my chil'en before I dies!" were among the glad outbursts that met us everywhere. On discussing the news with my scholars I was surprised to see faces, which soon passed from dubious to tearful; and upon inquiring learned that "they did not know whether they were glad or not. Would Miss Roper go home and leave them before they go through their Geography?" I assured them there was no immediate cause for alarm on that score, but they have since taken hold of Geography,--their favorite study, with redoubled zeal.

There were tearful faces everywhere when the news of our national calamity spread among them. Old and young were alike bowed down. The affection with which the President's name was always mentioned, now mingled with reverence. "God has not brought you out of Egypt, to desert you in the wilderness," I said to some who stood moaning and weeping near my school house. "I knows it, honey, but 'pears like I cant see de light anywhere. I cries might hard to de Good Lord, to have pity on us, now wese no friend on earth." I heard a very sharp rebuke administered among the children, to one who had spoken of "Linkum." "Why dont you call him Uncle Sam!" said an earnest indignant voice! In our own Sunny Side home, we could only murmur, when thy Father and mother forsake thee, then the Lord will take thee up.

I wish I could transmit to you, even the faintest conception of the beauty of our island in its "living green." I can but wonder how any could ever call it desolate. The air is heavy with the fragrance of magnolias, azaleas, and the wisteria; the forests are one vast conservatory where towering mounds of the snowy dogwood--the yellow jasmine and scarlet honeysuckle neighbor with or festoon the sturdy oak and sombre pine.

The velvet carpeting of the marshes almost rivals the rainbow with its mosaic of Saracenia, lillies and the emblematic Fleur-de-lis.

I trust I may be spared the imputation of egotism in regard to the island. The general prejudice against it, makes us all the more earnest in vindicating its comeliness; and its burst of spring beauty is too great an addition to our happiness to be lightly passed over.

I enjoy more, day by day, with my scholars. They have come to seem more like a family than a school, so well have I learned the character, the desires, the life of each--so much do they depend upon me, for advice in their home affairs. The days spent in that little schoolroom, will always be sunny in memory, through however long or bright a way I may look back to them.

The attainment with which my pupils are to be satisfied is always just ahead. The end of the "First Reader" was once the desired haven, but to their surprise, a second and third develop beyond. A certain limit in Geography and Arithmetic was also established as the Ultima Thule of their ambition. The goal reached in each of these, their education is complete. I was highly amused at seeing their ideas enlarged to-day.

A little boy in school, brought me a Testament, asking for "the place" that he might "look over" while the class was reading. It proved to be in the French, and after the close of school one of the most advanced pupils came to me with a sadly puzzled face asking, "Why cant I read the book?" I explained the difficulty, showed him his Sunday School lesson translating it for him word by word. He went to his class imparting such portions of what I had told him as would most enhance his own wisdom in their eyes; but it was received as an imposition upon their good sense, and a parley elapsed concerning the propriety of administering corporeal punishment to the offender. An appeal was finally made to me, resulting in the earnest entreaty to "make all them know how."

The suffering of the people is much lessened of course, by our genial April sun. Of destitution, there is still enough to make our hearts sad--Is, and always will be--for have we not the poor ever with us? We are a little world by ourselves. I realize this more fully, as the state of the island becomes more settled. We have all characters among us, from the thrifty man whose industry has enabled him to put up and stock and curious little store--down to the idle being who is never able to find his place in the world. The orphans are still unprovided for, still objects which would call forth the warmest sympathy of our kind friends at home could they see them. We have not yet felt here the almost tidal rush of refugees, resulting from the march of our victorious army. I feel that wherever these poor creatures are is the sorest need.

[Ella Roper]

[“From Miss Ella Roper,” *American Missionary* 9 (July 1865): 157-8.]