

LETTER FROM FRANCES E. HAILE (NEE KROELL),
DAUGHTER OF PATRICK J. KROELL

TO HER NEPHEW

CHARLES K. KROELL,
SON OF GEORGE F. KROELL

DESCRIBING THE SAD RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN HER FATHER AND HIS SON,
FATHER OF CHARLES K.

Atlanta
April 14, 1989

Dear Charlie.

This attempt of mind to have you understand your daddy, to see him as I saw him (and still do) has been a long time reaching you and I do apologize. I have made several beginnings, would get just so far and then stop because I was fearful that the narrative might distress you too much. Finally, I decided that there was no easy way to gloss over the tragedies in the life of this good, good man so I finally have finished.

Where my father is concerned, as I said, I know that you remember him, if at all, as a kindly, grandfatherly sort of person. Papa always liked small children (the smaller the better). Mama told me once that he was fond of us when we were babies or toddlers - after that he had as little as possible to do with us. It is not my purpose to present him as an @gre but to present the facts of his dreadful influence on George's life. I can truthfully say that I could never love Papa but when I grew up I tried hard to have compassion and to understand why he was the way he was. I long ago forgave him for anything mean he did to me personally but I will never forgive him for what he did to George, who loved him with all his heart in spite of everything.

I truly hope you will not be upset by anything I have written. Thank you for letting me do so. I think George would approve.

With love,
Aunt Frances
Aunt Frances

P. S. My typing does not "improve with age" - please 'scuse.

*P.P.S. Please tell George that I appreciated and enjoyed
his letter tremendously. Am writing her this week-end.*

MY BROTHER GEORGE

My brother, George Kroell, was born on December 10, 1906, at our home in Montevallo, Alabama, the 7th of the 11 children born to our parents, Patrick J. and Sarah Frances Collier Kroell.

As a matter of record, the other children in the family, in order of birth, were:

	Born	Died
Georgia	Sept. 11, 1894	July 12, 1912
Margaret Eliz.	July 31, 1896	Jan. 3, 1897
Patrick	Jan. 19, 1898	Sept. 14, 1898
Kaiden	Aug. 8, 1899	Mar. 2, 1918
Dionetta	Feb. 10, 1902	Nov. 8, 1987
Mamie	May 31, 1904	
George	Dec. 10, 1906	Nov. 15, 1940
Patty	Aug. 20, 1909	May 31, 1976
Frances	April 21, 1912	
William & Walton	April 16, 1916	

My mother once told me that of all her babies, George was the most loving, the gentlest child she had, the one who gave her the least trouble, was the best to "mind." I had no trouble believing it because his gentle, uncomplaining nature is what I remember best about him. He was a handsome child, as all his children's pictures show. There is a group picture of the children which is of Georgia, Netta, Mamie, George and Patty (who was the baby) - oh, yes, Kaiden was in it, too. I've always thought his pictures were very handsome - he had dark brown hair, dark brown eyes and apparently olive complexion. Don't know whether you ever saw it or not.

George was named for our paternal grandfather, George Kroell, who was the patriarch of the family. He was very fond of George and, as you know, left George the handsome gold watch which you now have.

My recollections of George are very clear because I was among the last to leave home and therefore I know many things from personal observations, from things my older siblings told me, and many things that Mama told me that she apparently never told the others. We all felt strongly that George was one of those people who, no matter hard they try, have an uphill struggle all their lives and have so many bad things happen to them that they could not possibly have caused purposely. Of course, there are always events that each of us bring on ourselves but so much of what happened to him was not caused by him at all.

George loved the outdoors, liked to hunt and I remember that he and your Uncle Robbie were fond of going coon hunting. You know, they're hunted at night and I remember thinking that was so funny. I remember, too, that one time he caught one alive and brought it home, thinking, I guess, to make a pet of it but that was really an ornery critter - he had to get rid of it. He and Robbie and other friends liked to go frog gigging and enjoyed eating frogs' legs. I know they are considered a delicacy, ^{gigging} but I consider them highly over-rated!

I know that you remember my father, probably, as a kindly old gentleman who probably gave you candy or chewing gum or whatever, but I'm afraid

that growing up in his presence was for all of us, and especially George, a dreadful experience. I can't begin to understand why Papa treated him as he did unless it was because he knew that George loved him and wanted terribly to please him always. I can only say that my father was the cruelest man I ever had the misfortune to know. Your Aunt Patty was the only one he seemed to care anything about or show any pride in (she was Grandpa's favorite, too, I think because she was the only one of us who was blonde, like his people; he treated her differently and therefore she always took up for him, which was natural. He never actually physically abused the girls, only because that was one thing my mother absolutely would not have tolerated. We know now that psychological and emotional abuse can be even worse and constantly putting children down can be just as hard to take. (Papa)

When we were growing up there were so many of us that most of us slept in a sort of dormitory-like room that was built on the back of the house. The house itself was small for so many children, though by the time I was of school age, four of the children were dead. At any rate, when I was small, until about the age of 10, I slept with George. Don't know that particular arrangement was made but because it was, the following occurrence was witnessed by me and is forever etched on my memory as though it happened yesterday. Incidentally, in order to get to our "dormitory" you had to go through our parents' bedroom. George would sometimes go out with some of his friends for a while in the evening and in a little one-horse town like Montevallo, the drugstore was about the only place to go - or the picture show. At the time of this incident George was probably about 16. I will digress here a moment to mention that in those days when boys became 16 they quit wearing knickers and put on trousers, a sort of rite of passage into manhood. I remember how proud he was when he put on his first trousers. Well, he never stayed out late in those young years and to this day I have no idea why Papa was so enraged on this particular occasion, though I'm sure he said so at the time. It never took much to set Papa off, anyway, especially where George was concerned. I was awakened in terror by Papa flashing on the light, swearing and cursing, dragging George out of bed and beating him unmercifully with a buggy whip. That was his favorite instrument of punishment with the older boys (except the twins, will tell you something about that later on) Mama told me that he even used it on Kaiden after they knew that Kaiden had diabetes and could never recover). This night, Mama was clinging to his arm, begging him not to beat George anymore. George never uttered a sound, he never opposed Papa - it was not through fear, I don't know what it was.

My Grandfather Kroell, like my Grandfather Collier, was quiet, soft-spoken, gentle, and George was like them. I was always told that Papa got his temper and disposition from Grandmother Kroell. She died when I was 4, so I don't know but I have a picture of her which, to me at least, reflects a very unhappy person. Papa's children remembered (and the few of us left still remember) very few good things about him. He always made us feel that we were a terrible burden to him and I've often wished I had had the courage at some time to say, "We didn't ask to be born." I am sure that all of us would have fought back more if we hadn't known that he would take it out on Mama and we had an unspoken pact to make her life easier if we could. He had the most hair-trigger temper than anybody I ever knew; we never knew what was going to set him off like a rocket. His favorite time to have one of his yelling, cursing (yes, swearing was a particular skill of his) fits was early morning. If ~~he~~ he became angry at somebody in town (which he often did), on these morning outbursts he would grab his pistol, shouting that he was going to "kill that so-and-so." Mama would hang on to him, begging: "Don't, Pat, please don't" while all the little ones cowered in a corner, scared out of our wits. Pretty soon he would "reluct-

antly" put away the gun and go off to the store, whistling, leaving us shaking like leaves from the ordeal. How my mother stood it all those years, I'll never know. She was deathly afraid of him but she adored him (a sad combination) and, alas, women of her time were like chattels, couldn't vote, own property, had no rights to speak of. He saw to it that she never had any money of her own so she had no choice but to stay with him. If my mother is not in Heaven, nobody is.

One of his favorite expressions was: "None of you are worth the powder and shot it would take to blow you to hell." It's a thousand wonders any of us ever amounted to a hill of beans but I remember thinking to myself: "I'll show you!" One small incident concerning myself; I think it was my junior year in college I brought home a report card that was all A's except for one B. I gave it to him to see and was very proud of it because I took a very heavy schedule every year and tried to make all A's. He glanced at it and with a sneer, snorted "B!" and threw the card on the table. You would have thought a B was lower than an F. I was crushed. However, I did go on to graduate magna cum laude - no, it was better than that - it was with highest honors. That was my gift to Mama, by then I didn't care what he thought. I give Mama credit for anything good in all of us. I remember complaining to her about him sometimes and she'd always say, "Remember, he is your father."

When we got old enough to see him clearly and to realize that he actually was a coward, it made a big difference - the twins established that fact when he threatened to kill them once when they were teenagers over a trivial mistake they had made. He came at them with a huge club, saying this to them but they each picked up one, too, and said, "Maybe so, but we just might kill you first." Whereupon he threw down his club, turned and walked away. So far as I know, he never threatened them in that fashion again.

I give you all this sad detail (which is not exaggerated in the least) to help you understand that he seemed to take special pleasure in making George's life a living hell. George was ^{robust}robust, boy or man, was rather more on the wiry side but he could do (and did) the work of two men always - I remember so well that he moved very quickly, even after he had the hip injury which caused him to be in constant pain. Papa never gave him a regular salary, that I know of, just worked him like a slave, with George always trying to please him. One incident when he was about 14 or 15, I guess - it was one Mama told me about, involved a horse. As you may or may not know, Grandpa Kroell owned a livery stable as well as a big general store and the town's only hotel (he was a real entrepreneur, 'way ahead of his time). It seems that in the stable they had a particularly mean horse named Black Tom that even the seasoned men had a hard time handling (why they had such a horse in a livery stable, I don't know). George had apparently begged Papa to let him ride Black Tom. One day Grandpa arrived at the stable just as George, astride the horse, came out of the stable like lightning; the horse had bolted the minute George got on his back. George didn't duck as he came under the lintel of the door and he was thrown from the horse, sustained a terrible concussion and deep gash in his head. Mama said it was one of the few times she ever saw Grandpa furious. He said to Papa, "Py God, Pat, vy you let dot poy get on dot fool horse?" Papa said, with no concern, "He's been pestering me to ride Black Tom and I decided to teach him a lesson." Mama said he was unconscious for a long, long time.

Speaking of Grandpa's watch, Charlie, I don't know whether I ever told you ~~you~~ about it. At some point, after our home burned, George asked me to keep the watch for him until he asked for it because he was afraid it would get lost or stolen because he didn't have a safe place to keep it and he

knew I would take care of it. I put it in the drawer of my wardrobe trunk that was in the little attic of our little house in Montgomery which Michael and I rented when we were first married. On the 14th of November, 1940 he called me and said he'd like to come down to Montgomery and get the watch. He came on the bus and walked the many blocks from downtown. He looked so worn, discouraged, actually like someone in a dream and his thoughts far away. I've wished a thousand times that I had begged him to stay. I fixed him a hot breakfast, for which he thanked me in his usual gentle way, then he took the watch, walked back downtown, caught the bus and killed himself the next day in the back part of Papa's store.

The little store he'd tried so hard to make a go of had not worked out. He went all over town asking people to trade with him and a few people did, but Montevallo people in the main were (and I feel sure still are) very judgmental and holier-than-thou and the town is still run by hardshell Baptists. Somewhere along the way, especially after Helen came and got you, he began to drink (the twins say, heavily). I only know that the only time I saw him relaxed and laughing was when he had had a few drinks. The thing was, all the young men in Montevallo, that little two-bit town, drank, even in the so-called "best" families but their families pretended otherwise. The whole county was dry and the bootleggers saw to it that it stayed that way, they and the preachers. It may still be, for all I know. Everyone liked George but when he needed their help, they turned their backs, mainly for the reason I will relate shortly. When he came back from Montgomery that day, he packed two boxes of clothes, toys and candy for you and for Anne, wrapped them, indicated they for you, locked the door of the little store for the last time and walked the half block to Papa's store. I understand your mother never told you that, but the packages were sent to you and Anne.

Did you know that Mama, my friend June Reid and I drove to Modena in August of 1932 to see George and Helen? I had a beau who had a little Ford coupe and it was in the depths of the Depression so when he was out of work and couldn't keep the car up, he would leave it with me. He gave permission for us to drive it to Pa. and Mama was so happy. I remember her saying to a neighbor, "I'm going to see my boy." How June and I ventured to drive that far in unfamiliar territory, I'll never know - guess ignorance is bliss! Mama didn't worry about a thing and, thanks be to God, we went and came back without the slightest mishap. Anne was a baby and, if I remember correctly, they were living with your Russell grandparents. Both were working and Mrs. Russell took care of Anne. June and I stayed down the street with some of the family. We didn't stay but a few days but, oh, what a good time we had! I am sure that Helen and George spent money they couldn't afford, to show us around. I remember especially the daylong trip to the DuPont estate as a highlight. I also remember their taking us to a movie and George very carefully explaining to me that if a black person happened to sit down beside me, I was not to object because "things are different up here." I don't know now whether it would have worried me or not but I distinctly remember that people appeared to be afraid of them, even then. After living in Atlanta all these years and having both the city and county become totally black-dominated, that memory amuses me now.

I can't emphasize strongly enough how happy George was when he and your mother married. To have wife, a home of their own and two fine children - he must have felt that maybe finally his luck had turned and it did, for a short time. For someone who had been put down and browbeaten by his father, he must have felt blessed indeed. He was doing heavy construction work up there until an accident having to do with wet cement caused severe and permanent damage to his hip. As time went by, he could no longer do that kind of heavy work; also the Dr.

told him he should not try to spend another winter in that severe cold. His nose had been broken years before in an auto accident and some intern in Birmingham, who apparently didn't know what he was doing, set it wrong; George suffered with it the rest of his life. Papa would not pay to have it corrected at the time. Nowadays, they would just re-break it and straighten it. I don't know whether you know, too, that when he was 17 years old, some idiot dentist pulled every tooth in his hadd. I don't know why, perhaps he may have had gum trouble and Papa just said, "Pull the damn things out." That would have been typical. At any rate, from then on George was burdened with the nickname "Mose" or "Old Man Mose" after a toothless old black man in the town. He accepted that indignity, too, but it was just another example of things going awry for him.

When he brought you South for that short time, what a joy you were! To all of us. I was still living at home and teaching (my first year) at the little 2-room school about 20 miles away, going back and forth each day on a rattletrap school bus. Because I has gone five days a week, I wasn't much help in taking care of you but George was such a good daddy and you were such a good baby it would have worked out beautifully if Mama's health had been good. I never knew George to punish you in any way, though he was firm when firmness was indicated. He was so loving and good to you and you always did what he asked you to do. Of course, he missed your mother and Anne terribly, too. Unfortunately, my mother's health and spirit were finally breaking (she was in her early '60's by then, after the years of mental and emotional abuse by Papa and the tragedies of her life. So she really was not physically able to look after you (George, of course, had gone back to work for Papa who had again promised him much that never materialized.) You went to visit Netta and Talley for a while (you called him "Man") and brightened their lives. Then Helen came and took you back with her - and his life was lonelier than ever - he had nothing.

One day George came to me and said, "Frances, we have to do something about Mama." By this time she was not able to keep house, cook or do much of anything. We (the children) would hire Negro women to be there in the day and Papa would run them off by being so ugly to them that they would leave. He had an absolutely paranoid hatred of all black people. We finally got a young woman who was not afraid of him. One day I begged her not to leave (I was working in Montgomery by this time) and she said, "Mr. Pat ain't gon' run me off. I love Miss Fanny, she need me and I gon' look after her." She was a big, strapping woman and she did stay a long time. I'll love her until I die.

So - as I said, George sat me down and he said, "If you and I don't do something, Papa will succeed in what he is trying to do, destroy her. She needs, she has to have, a guardian. I can't take that on with the responsibilities I have to my family, Talley won't let Netta assume it, Patty is just out of the hospital after major surgery, Robbie forbids Mamie to take any responsibility for Mama (because of the way Papa is), the twins are too young, so that leaves you." Of course, I said yes and fortunately I was just old enough ^{leg} to do it. In those days, for a person to be declared incompetent to handle her own affairs, you had to have a trial by a jury - how barbaric. At least, they did not adhere to the letter of the law which said something about the sheriff taking her into his custody and having her appear before the jury (I would never under any circumstances have allowed that to happen). The jury was composed of men who had known us all our lives, who loved and respected my mother and I'm sure it was almost as hard for them as it was for me when I had to testify as to her condition. I was appointed her guardian without any trouble - only George and I were there. It was just another time in my life, I guess, when I was too ignorant to know I couldn't do it!

In business, Papa took out bankruptcy at least twice that I remember, would use this means to get around paying his creditors. At one of those times he had put two pieces of property in Mama's name to hold on to them, never thinking for a moment of having any good come from it to her. He was quite indignant when I told him that the income from those properties would have to go for Mama's care. One was a little restaurant on a side street downtown and the other was the much larger building where he had his own store for a number of years. The renters (or at least one of them) were very slow to pay, the latter was a very charming gentleman, quite courtly and all but I had to learn to be much tougher than I wanted to be. Too, there were repairs and replacements needing to be done all along and since it was at the height of the Depression, nothing was very easy. I was working in Montgomery, making \$90 a month, just couldn't work it out to keep her with me since I had to support myself and she couldn't stay by herself all day. By great good fortune, we finally found a nursing home in Prattville; it was converted from a big, rambling country home with porches and beautiful old huge oak trees in the yards. She had her own room and I think she was reasonably happy for the remaining 12 years of her life - certainly happier than she would have been at home with us gone. Incidentally, she never knew that our home burned. From time to time in the beginning, she would ask if we could just ride up to Montevallo so she could see it again. Of course, I could only make some excuse.

Papa wrote her once and asked if he could come to see her, which was a surprise because he showed very little interest in how she was after she left. She asked me if she should let him come and I said, "If you want to and provided I am right there the entire time. He will never mistreat you in any way again, I will see to that." I had already left orders at the home that he was not to be allowed to see her unless one of us was there. Well, he came and she was so obviously terrified by his very presence that I think he must have finally realized that it was much too late to make any amends even if that had been his intention - which I don't know that it was. At any rate, as he left he said to me. "I will not come again." Which he didn't.

When the rents weren't paid, all of us came up with what was needed, or I borrowed from the bank until the rents were paid. Walton and Eloise were living in Montgomery and when Michael and I married, we lived there, also, for two years. That made it easy for me to look after her and when we moved to Washington the first time, Walton was faithful to look after things for me then and later when we were in Texas, also. I am thankful that she was always fully aware of her surroundings, enjoyed our visits, letters and gifts, kept up with our lives and knew what was going on with us at all times. A funny little anecdote: At the nursing home she had the option of taking her meals in the dining room with the other patients or on a tray in her room. One day I went out to see her and she was eating in her room. I said, "Mama, don't you enjoy eating with the other patients." She said, "No! I don't want to be out there with all those old people!"

But one of the very hardest times for me was when I felt I should go by to see her on my way back to Montgomery from George's funeral. I know now that I should not have tried to see her that day because we had agreed not to tell her, at least not just then. At any rate, we were sitting and talking about this and that when suddenly she said, "Frances, I'm worried about George. I haven't heard anything from him in a long time and usually he is so good to write." It was so strange that she should say that at that time. I fought to keep back the tears and made some offhand remark, with her never taking her eyes off my face. (I have never learned how to be deadpan or conceal what I'm thinking). In a moment she said, "That's it, than." She

knew, somehow, that he was dead and she never mentioned him again.

The other time that was so hard was when Patty called me in Texas and told me the Dr. said nothing further could be done for her congestive heart failure (it was called dropsy then). The other children wanted me to come home and talk to him, which I did. He urged me to seek other advice if I felt the need but he said her heart was just worn out and I decided not to put her through anything else. Pacemakers had not been developed then (not until the '50's). I am grateful to have mine as I have what she had. Anyhow, Mama knew that I had come to talk to the Dr. to try and get her some relief for her and when I came back to the room the confident, expectant look on her face said plainly, "I know Frances can fix it." It nearly broke my heart.

I keep thinking how handy and inventive George was. He could fix almost anything, had the ability to go straight to the root of a problem. If he had had the education and could have gotten away from Papa, I am convinced he could have been an excellent engineer. He was always trying new things, satisfying his curiosity about everything. Somewhere I have his recipe (in his handwriting) for making dill pickles! That wouldn't be particularly unusual now for a man to be interested in cooking, but it was then. He just always wanted to be busy, to learn things. He had Mama's love of flowers, too.

He finally gave up trying to work for Papa, moved out to the edge of town and rented a small building where he had a kind of - I believe it was called a roadhouse in those days. You see, as I said previously, the county was bone-dry and George was selling whiskey. You could drive about 15 miles toward Birmingham, across the Jefferson County line and legally buy as much liquor as you wanted but not a drop in Shelby County. Eventually, he was reported and guess who reported him, knowing he would be arrested and put in jail - Papa did. George was arrested, convicted and sent to a work camp near Montgomery - I don't remember for how long, about a year, I think - but even if it had been only for one day, it was a terrible miscarriage of justice. Don't know whether you ever knew that happened to him but I never felt it was any disgrace, still don't. None of the family (except possibly the twins, don't remember about that) ever went near him during that time but me. I went only once because he asked me not to come back, said I didn't need to come to a place like that. His spirit was truly broken.

Well, he came back to Montevallo, tried once more to pick up the pieces of his life (he was all of 32 by then). He opened up the little store and tried to make a new start - you know the rest. He knocked on the door one day of the wife of one of the long-time professors at the college, asked for her patronage at his little store. She told him to go to the back door "like other tradesmen." (This was a woman who had known him all of his life.) She wasn't going to trade with him, anyhow, just wanted to humiliate him. George laughed when he told me, but I didn't.

William and Walton have told me That they often sat up with him all night when they were worried about his drinking heavily and, as time went by, it would make him deathly ill, I never saw him like that and I'm glad I didn't. He undoubtedly became an alcoholic but whether it was in his genes, whether he was in such pain from his hip that it took more and more to assuage it, whether the sadness of his life made him just give up, I don't know. I don't think he drank when he and Helen were together and for

years in Montevallo it was just social drinking, was my impression. My father's younger brother, Uncle John, was said to be "bad to drink." He was a drummer (as salesmen were called then), traveled all over by train and had an acute attack of appendicitis on a trip, I understand, died in his 30's, leaving 4 young children and a penniless widow who took in sewing to survive. He died when I was a toddler and so do not remember him but they said he was jolly and kind and I was always glad to know that. Ah, the Kroells have never had it easy but we have managed somehow to survive!

I need to mention that your Aunt Netta was your father's staunchist ally and was the only one of us who wasn't afraid of Papa at any age. How I admired her all my life! Once she looked him the eye and gave him a piece of her mind about his behaviour (I guess she was about 19) and he ordered her out of the house. "I'll go but I will return and get my mother and I'll tell everybody in this town how you mistreat her and all of us." And that was the last anyone heard of that! Next to Mama, Netta was always my Rock of Gibraltar, my confidant, my very dear friend and uncritical sister. I love and have always loved Patty and Mamie, too, but my relationship with each of them was different than that with Netta.

Never mind; I wander from my original premise and this dissertation has probably grown far too long, so I will end it here.

Aunt Frances

April 14, 1989