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Letter Two

HOW I GOT TO SAN FRANCISCO
AND TOOK TEA WITH THE NATIVES THERE

“Serene, indifferent to fate,
Thou sittest at the western gate,
Thou seest the white seas fold their tents,
Oh warden of two Continents.
Thou drawest all things small and great
To thee beside the western gate.”

THIS IS WHAT Bret Harte has written of the great city of San Francisco, and for the past fortnight I have been wondering what made him do it. There is neither serenity nor indifference to be found in these parts, and evil would it be for the continent whose wardship were intrusted to so reckless a guardian. Behold me pitched neck-and-crop into the whirl of California, deprived of the guidance of the Professor—who, wise man, has fled to more settled places—and left [me] to draw my own conclusions. Protect me from the wrath of an outraged community if these letters are ever read by American eyes. San Francisco is a mad city—a city inhabited for the most part by perfectly insane people whose women are of a remarkable beauty. When the City of Peking steamed through the Golden Gate I beheld with great joy that the block-house, which guarded the mouth of the “finest harbour in the world, Sir,” could be silenced by two gunboats from Hong Kong with safety, comfort, and despatch. Also there was not a single American vessel of war in the harbour.
This may sound bloodthirsty: but remember I had come with a grievance upon me, the grievance of the pirated English books. Then a reporter leaped aboard, and ere I could gasp held me in his toils. He pumped me all the time while I was getting ashore, demanding, of all things in the world, news about Indian journalism. It is an awful thing to enter a new land with a new lie on your lips. I spoke the truth to the evil-minded Custom-house man who turned out my most sacred raiment on a floor composed of stable refuse and pine splinters; but the reporter overwhelmed me not so much by his poignant audacity as his beautiful ignorance. I am sorry now that I did not tell him more lies as I passed into a city of three hundred thousand white men. Think of it. Three hundred thousand white men and women gathered in one spot, walking upon real pavements in front of plate-glass windowed shops and talking something that at first sight was not very different from English. It was only when I had tangled myself up in a hopeless maze of small wooden houses, dust, street refuse, and children who played with empty kerosine tins, and urgently desired to find a hotel that I discovered the difference of speech.

“You want to go to the Palace Hotel?” said an affable youth on a dray. “What in hell are you doing here then? This is about the lowest ward in the city. Go six blocks north to corner of Geary and Market; then walk around till you strike corner of Gutter and Sixteenth, and that brings you there.”

I do not vouch for the literal accuracy of these directions. I do but quote from a disordered memory.

“Amen,” I said. “But who am I that I should strike the corners of such as you name? Peradventure they be gentlemen of repute, and might hit back. Bring it down to dots, my son.”

I thought he would have smitten me, but he didn’t. He explained that no one ever used the word street, and that everyone was supposed to know how the streets ran: for sometimes the names were up on the lamps and sometimes they weren’t. Fortified with these directions I proceeded till I struck a mighty street full of sumptuous buildings four and five stories high, but paved with rude cobble stones in the fashion of the year One. Here a tram-car without any visible means of support slid stealthily behind me and nearly struck me in the back. This was the famous cable-car of San Francisco which runs
by gripping an endless wire-rope sunk in the ground and of which I 
will tell you more anon. A hundred yards further there was a slight 
commotion in the street—a gathering together of three or four and 
something that glittered as it moved very swiftly. A ponderous Irish 
gentleman with priest’s cords in his hat and a small nickel-plated 
badge on his fat bosom emerged from the knot, supporting a China-
man who had been stabbed in the eye and was bleeding like a pig. The 
bystanders went their way, and the Chinaman, assisted by the police-
man, his own. Of course this was none of my business, but I rather 
wanted to know what had happened to the gentleman who had dealt 
the stab. It said a great deal for the excellence of the municipal ar-
rangements of the town that a surging crowd did not at once block the 
street to see what was going forward. I was the sixth man and the last 
who assisted at the performance, and my curiosity was six times the 
greatest. Indeed, I felt ashamed of showing it.

There were no more incidents till I reached the Palace Hotel, a 
seven-storied warren of humanity with a thousand rooms in it. All 
the travel-books will tell you about hotel arrangements in this coun-
try. They should be seen to be appreciated. Understand clearly—and 
this letter is written after a thousand miles of experiences—that 
money will not buy you service in the West.

When the hotel clerk—the man who settles your room for you and 
who is supposed to give you information—when that resplendent in-
dividual stoops to attend to your wants he does so whistling or hum-
ing, or picking his teeth, or in the pauses of conversation with some 
one he knows. These performances, I gather, are to show you that he is 
a free man and your equal. From his general appearance and the size 
of his diamonds he ought to be your superior. There is no necessity for 
this swaggering, self-consciousness of freedom. Business is business, 
and the man who is paid to attend to a man might reasonably devote 
his whole attention to the job. Afterwards he can take his coach-and-
four and pervade society.

In a vast marble-paved hall under the glare of an electric light sat 
forty or fifty men, and for their use and amusement were provided 
spittoons of infinite capacity and generous gape. Most of the men 
wore frock-coats and top-hats—the things that we [in India] put on at 
a wedding breakfast if we possess them,—but they all spat. They spat
on principle. The spittoons were on the staircases, in each bedroom—yea, in chambers even more sacred than these. They chased one into retirement, but they blossomed in chiepest splendour round the bar and they were all used, every [reeking] one of ‘em. Just before I began to feel deathly sick another reporter grappled me. What he wanted to know was the [precise] area of India in square miles. I referred him to Whittaker. He had never heard of Whittaker. He wanted it from my own mouth, and I would not tell him. Then he swerved off to details of journalism in the country—just like the other man. When I ventured to suggest that the interior economy of a paper most concerned the people who worked it he protested. “That’s the very thing that interests us,” he said. “Have you got reporters anything like our reporters on Indian newspapers?” “We have not,” I said, and suppressed the “thank God” that was rising to my lips. “Why haven’t you?” said he. “Because they would die,” I said. It was exactly like talking to a child—a very rude little child. He would begin almost every sentence with: “Now tell me something about India,” and would turn aimlessly from one question to another without the least continuity. I was not angry, but keenly interested. The man was a revelation to me. To his questions I returned answers mendacious and evasive. After all it really did not matter what I said. He could not understand. I can only hope and pray that none of the readers of the Pioneer will ever see that portentous interview. The man made me out to be an idiot several sizes more drivelling than my destiny intended, though the rankness of his ignorance managed to distort the few poor facts with which I supplied him into large and elaborate lies. Then thought I: “The matter of American journalism shall be looked into later on: at present I will enjoy myself.”

No man arose to tell me what were the lions of the place. No one volunteered any sort of conveyance. I was absolutely alone in the big city of white folk. By instinct I sought refreshment and came upon a bar-room, full of bad Salon pictures, in which men with hats on the backs of their heads were wolfing food from a counter. It was the institution of the “Free Lunch” that I had struck. You paid for a drink and got as much as you wanted to eat. For something less than a rupee a day a man can feed himself sumptuously in San Francisco, even
though he be bankrupt. Remember that if ever you are stranded in these parts.

Later I began a vast but unsystematic exploration of the streets. I asked for no names. It was enough that the pavements were full of white men and women, the streets clanging with traffic and the restful roar of a great city in my ears. The cable-cars glided to all points of the compass. I took them one by one till I could go no further. San Francisco has been pitched down on the sand-bunkers of the Bikanir desert. About one-fourth of it is ground reclaimed from the sea—any old-timers will tell you all about that. The remainder is just ragged, unthrifty sand-hills, today held down by houses.

From an English point of view there has not been the least attempt at grading those hills, and indeed you might as well try to grade the hillocks of Sind. The cable-cars have for all practical purposes made San Francisco a dead level. They take no count of rise or fall, but slide equably on their appointed courses from one end to the other of a six-mile street. They turn corners almost at right angles; cross other lines and, for aught I know, may run up the sides of houses. There is no visible agency of their flight, but once in a while you shall pass a five-storied building humming with machinery that winds up an everlasting wire-cable, and the initiated will tell you that here is the mechanism. I gave up asking questions. If it pleases Providence to make a car run up and down a slit in the ground for many miles, and if for twopence-halfpenny I can ride in that car, why should I seek the reasons of the miracle? Rather let me look out of the windows till the shops give place to thousands and thousands of little houses made of wood to imitate stone—each house just big enough for a man and his family. Let me watch the people in the cars and try to find out in what manner they differ from us their ancestors. It grieves me now that I cursed them (in the matter of book piracy), because I perceive that my curse is working and their speech is becoming a horror already. They delude themselves into the belief that they talk English—the English—and I have already been pitied for speaking with “an English accent.” The man who pitied me spoke, so far as I was concerned, the language of thieves. And they all do. Where we put the accent forward, they throw it back, and vice versa; where we gave the long a they use the short; and words so simple as to be past mistaking, they
pronounce somewhere up in the dome of their heads. How do these things happen? Oliver Wendell Holmes says that the Yankee school-marms, the cyder, and the salt codfish of the Eastern States are responsible for what he calls a nasal accent.\(^{10}\) I know better. They stole books from across the water without paying for ‘em, and the snort of delight was fixed in their nostrils forever by a just Providence. That is why they talk a foreign tongue to-day. “Cats is dogs, and rabbits is dogs and so’s parrots; but this ere tortoise is an insect, so there ain’t no charge,” as the old porter said.\(^{11}\) A Hindu is a Hindu, and a brother to the man who knows his vernacular; and a Frenchman is French because he speaks his own language; but the American hasn’t got a language. He’s dialect, slang, provincialism, accent, and so forth. Now that I have heard their voices, all the beauty of Bret Harte is being ruined for me, because I find myself catching through the roll of his rhythmical prose the cadence of his peculiar fatherland. Get an American lady to read to you “How Santa Claus came to Simpson’s Bar,”\(^{12}\) and see how much is, under her tongue, left of the beauty of the original.

But I am sorry for Bret Harte. It happened this way. A reporter asked me what I thought of the city, and I made answer suavely that it was hallowed ground to me because of Bret Harte. That was true. “Well,” said the reporter, “Bret Harte claims California, but California don’t claim Bret Harte. He’s been so long in England that he’s quite English. Have you seen our cracker-factories and the new offices of the \textit{Examiner}?”\(^{13}\) He could not understand that to the outside world the city was worth a great deal less than the man. I never intended to curse the people with a provincialism so vast as this.

But let us return to our sheep—which means the sea-lions of the Cliff House.\(^{14}\) They are the great show of San Francisco. You take a train which pulls up the middle of the street (it killed two people the day before yesterday, being unbraked and driven regardless of consequences), and you pull up somewhere at the back of the city on the Pacific beach. Originally the cliffs and their approaches must have been pretty, but they have been so carefully defiled with advertisements that they are now one big blistered abomination. A hundred yards from the shore stood a big rock covered with the carcasses of the sleek sea-beasts who roared and rolled and wallopped in the spouting
surges. No bold man had painted the creatures sky-blue or advertised newspapers on their backs, wherefore they did not match the landscape which was chiefly boarding. Some day, perhaps, whatever sort of Government may obtain in this country will make a reservation of the place and keep it clean and neat. At present the sovereign people, of whom I have heard so much already, are vending cherries and painting the virtues of “Little Bile Beans” all over it.\textsuperscript{15}

Night fell over the Pacific, and the white sea fog whipped through the streets, dimming the splendours of the electric lights. It is the use of this city, her men and women folk, to parade between the hours of eight and ten a certain street called Kearney Street, where the finest shops are situated. Here the click of light heels on the pavement is loudest, here the lights are brightest, and here the thunder of the traffic is most overwhelming. I watched young California and saw that it was at least expensively dressed, cheerful in manner, and self-asserting in conversation: also the women were very fair. Perhaps eighteen days aboard ship had something to do with my unreserved admiration. The maidens were of generous build, large, well-groomed, and attired in raiment that even to my inexperienced eyes must have cost much. Kearney Street at nine o’clock levels all distinctions of rank as impartially as the grave. Again and again I loitered at the heels of a couple of resplendent beings, only to overhear, when I expected the level voice of culture, the \textit{staccato} “Sez he,” “Sez I,” that is the mark of the white servant-girl all the world over.

This was depressing because, in spite of all that goes to the contrary, fine feathers ought to make fine birds. There was wealth—unlimited wealth—in the streets, but not an accent that would not have been dear at fifty cents. Wherefore, revolving in my mind that these folk were barbarians, I was presently enlightened and made aware that they also were the heirs of all the ages, [and civilized after all]. There appeared before me an affable stranger of prepossessing appearance, with a blue and an innocent eye. Addressing me by name he claimed to have met me in New York at the Windsor, and to this claim I gave a qualified assent. I did not remember the fact, but since he was [so] certain of it, why then—I waited developments. “And what did
you think of Indiana when you came through?” was the next question. It revealed the mystery of previous acquaintance and one or two other things. With reprehensible carelessness, my friend of the light-blue eye had looked up the name of his victim in the hotel register and read “India” for Indiana. The provincialism with which I had cursed his people extended to himself. He could not imagine an Englishman coming through the States from West to East instead of by the regularly-ordained route. My fear was that in his delight at finding me so responsive he would make remarks about New York and the Windsor which I could not understand. And indeed, he adventured in this direction once or twice, asking me what I thought of such and such streets, which, from his tone, I gathered were anything but respectable. It is trying to talk unknown New York in almost unknown San Francisco. But my friend was merciful. He protested that I was built after his own heart and pressed upon me rare and curious drinks at more than one bar. These drinks I accepted with gratitude, as also the cigars with which his pockets were stored. He would show me the life of the city. Having no desire to watch a weary old play again, I evaded the offer and received in lieu of the Devil’s Instruction much coarse flattery. Verily curiously constituted is the soul of man. Knowing how and where this man lied, waiting idly for the finale, I was distinctly conscious, as he bubbled compliments in my ear, of soft thrills of gratified pride stealing from hat-rim to boot-heels. I was wise, quoth he, anybody could see that with half an eye; sagacious; versed in the affairs of this world; an acquaintance to be desired; one who had tasted the cup of life with discretion. All this pleased me and in a measure numbed the suspicion that was thoroughly aroused. Eventually the blue-eyed one discovered, nay insisted, that I had a taste for cards (this was clumsily worked up, but it was my fault in that I met him half-way and allowed him no chance of good acting). Hereupon I laid my head upon one side and simulated unholy wisdom, quoting odds and ends of poker talk, all ludicrously misapplied. My friend kept his countenance admirably; and well he might, for five minutes later we arrived by the purest of chances at a place where we could play cards and also frivol with Louisiana State Lottery tickets. Would I play? “Nay,” said I, “for to me cards have no meaning or continuity; but let us assume that I am going to play. How would you and
your friends get to work. Would you play a straight game, or make me drunk, or—well, the fact is I’m a newspaper man and I’d be much obliged if you’d let me know something about bunco-steering.” My blue-eyed friend erected himself into an obelisk of profanity. He cursed me by his gods—the Right and the Left Bower\textsuperscript{16}—he even cursed the very good cigars he had given me. But, the storm over, he quieted down and explained. I apologized for causing him to waste an evening and we spent a very pleasant time together. Inaccuracy and provincialism, and a too hasty rushing to conclusions were the rocks that he had split on; but he got his revenge when he said: “How would I play with you? From all the poppycock” (\textit{Anglice, rot}) “you talked about poker, I’d ha’ played a straight game and skinned you. I wouldn’t have taken the trouble to make you drunk. You never knew anything of the game: but how I was mistaken in going to work on you makes me sick.” He glared at me as though I had done him an injury.

To-day I know how it is that year after year week after week, the bunco-steerer, who is the confidence-trick and the card-sharper man of other climes,\textsuperscript{17} secures his prey. He slavers them over with \textit{metabat}, as the snake slavers the rabbit. The incident depressed me because it showed I had left the innocent East far behind and was come to a country where a man must look out for himself. The very hotel bristled with notices about keeping your door locked, and depositing your valuables in a safe. The white man in a lump is bad. Weeping softly for O-Toyo\textsuperscript{18} (little I knew then that my heart was to be torn afresh from my bosom), I fell asleep in the clanging hotel.

Next morn I had entered upon the Deferred Inheritance. There are no Princes in America,—at least with crowns on their heads,—but a generous-minded member of some royal family got hold of a letter of introduction. Ere the day was done I was a member of the two clubs and booked for many engagements to dine and party. Now this prince, upon whose financial operations be continual increase, had no reason, nor had the others his friends, to put himself out for the sake of one Briton more or less: but he rested not till he had accomplished all in my behalf that a mother could think of for her debutante daughter. Know you the Bohemian Club of San Francisco?\textsuperscript{19} They say its fame extends over the world. It was created somewhat on the lines of the Savage\textsuperscript{20} by men who wrote or drew things, and it has blossomed into
most unrepulblican luxury. The ruler of the place is an owl—an owl standing upon a skull and cross-bones, showing forth grimly the wisdom of the man of letters and the end of his hopes for immortality. The owl stands on the staircase, a statue four feet high, is carved in the woodwork, flutters on the frescoed ceilings, is stamped on the note paper, and hangs on the walls. He is an ancient and honourable bird. Under his wing 'twas my privilege to meet with white men whose lives were not chained down to routine of toil, who wrote magazine articles instead of reading them hurriedly in the pauses of kutcherry, who painted pictures instead of contenting themselves with cheap etchings picked up at a long leaver’s sale of effects. Mine were all the rights of social intercourse, craft by craft, that India, stony-hearted step-mother of collectors, has swindled us out of. Treading soft carpets and breathing the incense of superior cigars I wandered from room to room studying the paintings in which the members of the club had caricatured themselves, their associates and their aims. There was a slick French audacity about the workmanship of these men of toil unbending that went straight to the heart of the beholder. And yet it was not altogether French. A dry grimness of treatment, almost Dutch, marked the difference. The men painted as they spoke—with certainty. The club indulges in revelries which it calls “jinks”—high and low at intervals—and each of these gatherings is faithfully portrayed in oils by hands that know their business. Here were no amateurs spoiling canvases because they fancied they could handle oils without knowledge of shadows or anatomy—no gentlemen of leisure ruining the temper of publishers and an already ruined market with attempts to write because everybody writes something these days. My hosts were working, or had worked, for their daily bread with pen or paint, and their talk for the most part was of the shop-shoppy—that is to say delightful. They extended a large hand of welcome and were as brethren, and I did homage to the owl[21] and listened to their talk. An Indian club about Christmas time will yield, if properly worked, an abundant harvest of queer tales; but at a gathering of Americans from the uttermost ends of their own continent the tales are larger, thicker and more spinous, [and even more azure][22] than any Indian variety. Tales of the war I heard told by an ex-officer of the South over his evening drink to a Colonel of the Northern
Army; my introducer, who had served as a trooper in the Northern Horse, throwing in emendations from time to time. Tales of the land, which in this country is an amazingly elastic affair, followed from the lips of a judge. Forgive me for recording one tale that struck me as new. It may interest the up-country Bar [of India].

Once upon a time there was a young lawyer who feared not God neither regarded the Bench. (Name, age, and town of the man were given at great length.) To him no case had ever come, partly because he lived in a district where lynch law prevailed, and partly because the most desperate prisoner shrank from intrusting himself to the mercies of a phenomenal stammerer. But in time there happened an aggravated murder, so bad that by common consent the citizens decided, [as a prelude to lynching,] to give the pukka law a chance. [They could, in fact, gambol round that murder.] They met—the court in its shirt-sleeves—and against the raw square of the court house window a temptingly suggestive branch of a tree fretted the sky. No one appeared for the prisoner, and, partly in jest, the court advised young Samuelson to take up the case. “The prisoner is undefended, Sam,” said the court. “The square thing to do would be for you to take him aside and do the best you can for him.” Court, jury, and witness adjourned to the veranda, while Samuelson led his client aside to the court house cells. An hour passed ere the lawyer returned alone. Mutely the audience questioned. “May it p-p-please the c-court,” said Samuelson, “my client’s case is a b-b-bad one—a d-d-damn bad one. You told me to do the b-b-best I c-could for him, judge. So I’ve jest given him y-your b-b-bay gelding, an’ told him to light out for healthier c-climes, my p-p-professional opinion being he’d be hanged quick-er’n h-h-hades if he dallied here. B-by this time my client’s ‘bout fifteen miles out yonder somewhars. That was the b-b-best I could do for him—may it p-p-please the court.” The young man, escaping punishment in lieu of the prisoner, made his fortune ere five years.

Other voices followed with equally wonderous tales of riata-throwing in Mexico or Arizona, of gambling at army posts in Texas, of newspaper wars waged in godless Chicago, of deaths sudden and violent in Montana and Dakota, of the loves of half-breed maidens in the South and fantastic hunttings for gold in mysterious Alaska. Above all they told the story of the [building of] old San Francisco, when the
“finest collection of humanity on God’s earth Sir, started this town and the water came up to the foot of Market Street.” Very terrible were some of the tales, grimly humorous the others, and the men in broadcloth and fine linen who told them had played their parts in them.

“And now and again when things got too bad they would toll the city bell, and the Vigilance Committee turned out and began hanging the suspicious characters. A man didn’t begin to be suspected in those days till he had committed at least one unprovoked murder,” said a calm-eyed, portly old gentleman. I looked at the pictures around me, the noiseless, neat uniformed waiter behind me, the oak-ribbed ceiling above, the velvety carpet beneath. It was hard to realize that even twenty years ago you could see a man hanged with great pomp. Later on I found reason to change my opinion. The tales gave me a headache and set me thinking. How in the world was it possible to take in even one-thousandth of the huge, roaring, many-sided continent? In the tobacco-scented silence of the sumptuous library lay Professor Bryce’s book on the American Republic.23 “It is an omen,” said I. “He has done all things in all seriousness, and he may be purchased for half a guinea. Those who desire information of the most undoubted must refer to his pages. For me is the daily round of vagabondage, the recording of the incidents of the hour, and intercourse with the traveling companion of the day. I will not ‘do’ this country at all.”

And I forgot all about India for ten days while I went out to dinners and watched the social dastur of the people, which is entirely different from our dastur; and I was introduced to the men of many millions. These persons are harmless in their earlier stages; that is to say, a man worth three or four million dollars may be a good talker, clever, amusing and of the world; a man with twice that amount is to be avoided; and a twenty-million man is—just twenty millions. Take an instance. I was speaking to a newspaper man about seeing the proprietor of his journal, as in my innocence I supposed newspaper men occasionally did. My friend snorted indignantly: “See him! Great Scott! No! If he happens to appear in the office I have to associate with him; but, thank Heaven, outside of that I move in circles where he cannot come.” And yet the first thing I have been taught to believe is that money was everything in America!