Letter Five

TELLS HOW I DROPPED INTO POLITICS AND
THE TENDERER SENTIMENTS. CONTAINS A MORAL
TREATISE ON AMERICAN MAIDENS AND AN
ETHNOLOGICAL ONE ON THE HUBSHI.¹
ENDS WITH A BANQUET AND A TYPE-WRITER

I HAVE BEEN watching machinery in repose after reading about
machinery in action. An excellent gentleman who bears a name hon-
owned in the magazines writes, much as Disraeli orated, of “the sub-
lime instincts of an ancient people,” the certainty with which they can
be trusted to manage their own affairs in their own way, and the
speed with which they are making for all sorts of desirable goals. This
he called a statement or purview of American politics. I went almost
directly afterwards to a saloon where gentlemen interested in ward
politics nightly congregate. They were not pretty persons. Some of
them were bloated and they all swore cheerfully till the heavy gold
watch-chains on their fat stomachs rose and fell again: but they
talked over their liquor as men who had power and unquestioned ac-
cess to places of trust and profit. The magazine-writer discussed
theories of government: these men the practice. They had been there.
They knew all about it. They banged their fists on the table and spoke
of political “pulls,” the vending of votes, and so forth. Theirs was not
the talk of village babblers reconstructing the affairs of the nation,
but of strong, coarse, lustful men fighting for spoil and thoroughly un-
derstanding the best methods of reaching it. I listened long and in-
tently to speech I could not understand, or but in spots. It was the
speech of business, however. I had sense enough to know that, and to do my laughing outside the door. Then I began to understand why my pleasant and well-educated hosts spoke with a bitter scorn of such duties of citizenship as voting and taking an interest in the distribution of offices. Scores of men had told me with no false pride that they would as soon concern themselves with the public affairs of the City or State as rake muck with a steam-shovel. It may be that their lofty disdain covers selfishness, but I should be very sorry habitually to meet the fat gentlemen with shiny top-hats and plump cigars in whose society I have been spending the evening. Read about politics as the cultured writer of the magazines regards ‘em, and then, and not till then, pay your respects to the gentlemen who run the grimy reality.

I’m sick of interviewing night editors, who lean their chair against the wall, and in response to my demand for the record of a prominent citizen, answer: “Well, you see, he began by keeping a saloon,” etc. I prefer to believe that my informants are treating me as in the old sinful days I was used to treat our wandering globe-trotters. They declare that they speak the truth, and the news of dog-politics lately vouchsafed to me in groggeries incline me to believe—but I won’t. The people are much too nice to slangander as recklessly as I have been doing. Besides, I am hopelessly in love with about eight American maidens—all perfectly delightful till the next one comes into the room. O-Toyo was a darling, but she lacked several things: conversation, for one. You cannot live on giggles. She shall remain unpersecuted at Nagasaki while I roast a battered heart before the shrine of a big Kentucky blonde who had for ayah, when she was little, a Negro “mammy.” By consequence she has welded on Californian beauty, Paris dresses, Eastern culture, Europe trips, and wild Western originality the queer dreamy superstitions of the Negro quarters, and the result is soul-shattering. And she is but one of many stars. Item, a maiden who believes in education, and possesses it, with a few hundred thousand dollars, and a taste for slumming. Item, the leader of a sort of informal salon where girls congregate, read papers, and daringly discuss metaphysical problems and candy—a sloe-eyed, black-browed, imperious maiden she. Item, a very small maiden, absolutely without reverence, who can in one swift sentence trample upon and
leave gasping half a dozen young men. Item, a million-heiress, burdened with her money, lonely, caustic, with a tongue keen as a Kuttar, yearning for a sphere, but chained up to the rock of her vast possessions. Item, a type-writer maiden earning her own bread in this big city, because she doesn’t think a girl ought to be a burden on her parents who quotes Theophile Gautier, and moves through the world manfully and much respected for all her twenty inexperienced summers. Item, a woman from Cloudland who has no history in the past, but is discreetly of the present and strives for the confidences of male humanity on the grounds of “sympathy” (methinks this is not altogether a new type). Item, a girl in a “dive” blessed with a Greek head and eyes that seem to speak all that is best and sweetest in the world. But woe is me!—she has no ideas in this world or the next, beyond the consumption of beer (a commission on each bottle), and protests that she sings the songs allotted to her nightly with no more than the vaguest notion of their meaning.

Sweet and comely are the maidens of Devonshire; delicate and of gracious seeming those who live in the pleasant places of London; fascinating for all their demureness the damsels of France clinging closely to their mothers, and with large eyes wondering at the wicked world; excellent in her own place and to those who understand her is the Anglo-Indian “spin” in her second season; but the girls of America are above and beyond them all. They are clever, they can talk. Yea, it is said that they think. Certainly they have an appearance of so doing which is delightfully deceptive. They are original, and regard you between the brows with unabashed eyes as a sister might look at her brother. They are instructed, too, in the folly and vanity of the male mind, for they have associated with boys from babyhood, and can discerningly minister to both vices, or pleasantly snub the possessor. They possess, moreover, a life among themselves independent of masculine associations. They have societies and clubs and unlimited tea-fights where all the guests are girls. They are self-possessed without parting with any tenderness that is their sex right; they understand; they can take care of themselves; they are superbly independent. When you ask them what makes them so charming they say: “It is because we are better educated than your girls and—and we are more sensible in regard to men. We have good times all round, but we aren’t
taught to regard every man as a possible husband. Nor is he expected to marry the first girl he calls on regularly." Yes, they have good times, their freedom is large, and they do not abuse it. They can go driving with young men, and receive visits from young men to an extent that would make an English mother wink with horror; and neither driver nor drivee have a thought beyond the enjoyment of a good time. As certain also of their own poets have said: —

"Man is fire and woman is tow,
And the Devil he comes and begins to blow."

In America the tow is soaked in a solution that makes it fire-proof, in absolute liberty and large knowledge; consequently accidents do not exceed the regular percentage arranged by the Devil for each class and climate under the skies. But the freedom of the young girl has its drawbacks. She is—I say it with all reluctance—irreverent, from her forty-dollar bonnet to the buckles in her eighteen-dollar shoes. She talks flippantly to her parents and men old enough to be her grandfather. She has a prescriptive right to the society of the Man who Arrives. The parents admit it. This is sometimes embarrassing, especially when you call on a man and his wife for the sake of information; the one being a merchant of varied knowledge, the other a woman of the world. In five minutes your host has vanished. In another five his wife has followed him, and you are left with a very charming maiden doubtless, but certainly not the person you came to see. She chatters and you grin; but you leave with the very strong impression of a wasted morning. This has been my experience once or twice. I have even said as pointedly as I dared to a man: "I came to see you." "You'd better see me in my office, then. The house belongs to my women-fock—to my daughter that is to say." He spoke truth. The American of wealth is owned by his family. They exploit him for bullion, and sometimes it seems to me that his lot is a lonely one. The women get the ha’pence; the kicks are all his own. Nothing is too good for an American’s daughter (I speak here of the moneyed classes). The girls take every gift as a matter of course; and yet they develop greatly when a catastrophe arrives and the man of many millions goes up or goes down and his daughters take to stenography or typing. I have heard many tales of much heroism from the lips of girls who counted the principals among their friends. The crash came,
Maimie or Hattie or Sadie gave up their maid, their carriages and candy, and with a No. 2 Remington and a stout heart set about earning their daily bread.

“And did I drop her from the list of my friends? No, Sir,” said a [scarlet-lipped] vision in white lace, “that might happen to us any day.”

It may be this sense of possible disaster in the air that makes San Franciscan society go with so captivating a rush and whirl. Recklessness is in the air. I can’t explain where it comes from, but there it is. The roaring winds off the Pacific make you drunk to begin with. The aggressive luxury on all sides helps out the intoxication, and you spin for ever “down the ringing grooves of change” (there is no small change, by the way, west of the Rockies) as long as money lasts. They make greatly and they spend lavishly; not only the rich but the artisans, who pay nearly five pounds for a suit of clothes and for other luxuries in proportion. The young men rejoice in the days of their youth. They gamble, yacht, race, enjoy prize-fights and cock-fights—the one openly, the other in secret—they establish luxurious clubs; they break themselves over horse-flesh and—other things; and they are instant in a quarrel. At twenty they are experienced in business; embark in vast enterprises, take partners as experienced as themselves, and go to pieces with as much splendour as their neighbours. Remember that the men who stocked California in the Fifties were physically, and as far as regards certain tough virtues, the pick of the earth. The inept and the weakly died en route or went under in the days of construction. To this nucleus were added all the races of the Continent—French, Italian, German and, of course, the Jew. The result you shall see in large-boned, deep-chested, delicate-handed women, and long, elastic, well-built boys. It needs no little golden badge swinging from his watch-chain to mark the Native Son of the Golden West—the country-bred of California. Him I love because he is devoid of fear, carries himself like a man, and has a heart as big as his boots. I fancy, too, he knows how to enjoy the blessings of life that his province so abundantly bestows upon him. At least I heard a little rat of a creature with hock-bottle shoulders explaining that a man from Chicago could pull the eye-teeth of a Californian in business. Well, if I lived in Fairyland, where cherries were as big as plums,
plums as big as apples, and strawberries of no account; where the pro-
cession of the fruits of the seasons was like a pageant in a Drury Lane
pantomime and the dry air was wine, I should let business slide once
in a while and kick up my heels with my fellows. The tale of the re-
sources of California—vegetable and mineral—is a fairy tale. You can
read it in books. You would never believe me. All manner of nouris-
ning food from sea-fish to beef may be bought at the lowest prices; and
the people are consequently well-developed and of a high stomach.
They demand ten shillings for tinkering a jammed lock of a trunk;
they receive sixteen shillings a day for working as carpenters; they
spend many sixpences on very bad cigars which the poorest of them
smoke, and they go mad over a prize-fight. When they disagree, they
do so fatally with firearms in their hands and on the public streets. I
was just clear of Mission Street when the trouble began between two
gentlemen, one of whom perforated the other. When a policeman,
whose name I do not recollect, “fatally shot Ed. Kearney,”11 for at-
temptsing to escape arrest I was in the next street. For these things I
am thankful. It is enough to travel with a policeman in a tram-car,
and while he arranges his coat-tails as he sits down to catch sight of a
loaded revolver. It is enough to know that fifty per cent of the men in
the public saloons carry pistols about them. The Chinaman waylays
his adversary and methodically chops him to pieces with his hatchet.
Then the press roar about the brutal ferocity of the Pagan. The Ita-
lian reconstructs his friend with a long knife. The press complains of
the waywardness of the alien. The Irishman and the native Cali-
fornian in their hours of discontent use the revolver, not once but six
times. The Press records the fact and asks in the next column whether
the world can parallel the progress of San Francisco. The American
who loves this country will tell you that this sort of thing is confined
to the lower classes. Just at present an ex-judge who was sent to jail
by another judge (upon my word, I cannot tell whether these titles
mean anything) is breathing red-hot vengeance against his enemy.
The papers have interviewed both parties and confidently expect a fa-
tal issue.

Now let me draw breath and curse the negro waiter and through
him the negro in service generally. He has been made a citizen with a
vote, consequently both political parties play with him. But that is
neither here nor there. He will commit in one meal every *betise* that a *mussalshī* fresh from the plough-tail is capable of, and he will continue to repeat those faults. He is as complete a heavy-footed, uncomprehending, bungle-fisted fool as any *memsahib* in the East ever took into her establishment. But he is according to law a free and independent citizen—consequently above reproof or criticism. He, and he alone, in this insane city will wait at table (the Chinaman doesn’t count). He is untrained, inept, but he will fill the place and draw the pay. Now God and his father’s fate [Kisment] made him intellectually inferior to the Oriental. He insists on pretending that he serves tables by accident—as a sort of amusement. He wishes you to understand this little fact. You wish to eat your meals, and if possible to have them properly served. He is a big, black, vain baby and a man rolled into one. A coloured gentleman, who insisted on getting me pie when I wanted something else, demanded information about India. I gave him some facts about wages. “Oh hell,” said he, cheerfully, “that wouldn’t keep me in cigars for a month.” Then he fawned on me for a ten-cent piece. Later he took it upon himself to pity the natives of India—“heathen” he called them, this *hubhsi* whose race has been the butt of every comedy on the native [Asiatic] stage since the beginning. And I turned and saw by the head upon his shoulders that he was a Yoruba\textsuperscript{12} man, if there be any truth in ethnological caste. He did his thinking in English, but he was a Yoruba negro, and the race type had remained the same throughout his generations. And the room was full of other races—some that looked exactly like Gallases\textsuperscript{13} (but the trade was never recruited from that side of Africa), some duplicates of Cameroon heads, and some Kroomen,\textsuperscript{14} if ever Kroomen wore evening dress. The American does not consider little matters of descent, though by this time he ought to know all about “damnable heredity.” As a general rule he keeps himself very far from the negro and says things about him that are not pretty. There are six million negroes more or less in the States, and they are increasing. The Americans once having made them citizens cannot unmake them. He says, in his newspapers, they ought to be elevated by education. He is trying this: but it is like to be a long job because black blood is much more adhesive than white and throws back with annoying persistence. When the negro gets religion he returns, directly as a homing bee, to the in-
instincts of his people. Just now a wave of religion is sweeping over
some of the Southern States. Up to the present, two Messiahs and a
Daniel have appeared; and several human sacrifices have been of-
fered up to these incarnations. The Daniel managed to get three
young men, who he insisted were Shaddrach, Mechach, and Abed-
nego, to walk into a blast furnace guaranteeing non-combustion.
They did not return. I have seen nothing of this kind, but I have at-
tended a negro church—they pray or are caused to pray—by them-
selves in this country. The congregation were moved by the spirit to
groans and tears, and one of them danced up the aisle to the mour-
er’s bench. The motive may have been genuine. The movements of the
shaken body were those of a Zanzibar stick-dance, such as you see at
Aden on the coal boats; and even as I watched the people the links
that bound them to the white man snapped one by one and I saw be-
fore me—the hubshi praying to the God he did not understand. Those
neatly-dressed folk on the benches, the grey-headed elder by the win-
dow were savage neither more nor less. What will the American do
with the negro? The South will not consort with him. In some States
miscegenation is a penal offence. The North is every year less and less
in need of his services. And he will not disappear. He will continue as
a problem. His friends will urge that he is as good as the white man.
His enemies—well, you can guess what his enemies will do from a lit-
tle incident that followed on a recent appointment by the President. 15

He made a negro an assistant in a post-office where—think of
it!—he had to work at the next desk to a white girl, the daughter of a
Colonel—one of the first families. Southern chivalry and all the
weary, weary rest of it. The Southern chivalry howled, and hanged or
burnt some one in effigy. Perhaps it was the President, and perhaps it
was the negro—but the principle remains the same, said Mrs. Nick-
leby. 16 They said it was an insult. It is not good to be a negro in the
land of the free and home of the brave.

But this has nothing to do with San Francisco and her merry maid-
ens, her strong, swaggering men and her wealth of gold and pride.
They bore me to a banquet in honour of a brave Lieutenant—Carlin,
of the Vandalia, 17 who stuck by his ship in the great cyclone at Apia
and comported himself as an officer should. On that occasion—‘twas
at the Bohemian Club—I heard oratory with the roundest of o’s; and
devoured a dinner the memory of which will descend with me into the hungry grave. There were about forty speeches delivered; and not one of them was average or ordinary. It was my first introduction to the American Eagle screaming for all it was worth. The Lieutenant’s heroism served as a peg from which the silver-tongued ones turned themselves loose and kicked. They ransacked the clouds of sunset, the thunderbolts of Heaven, the deeps of Hell, and the splendour of the Resurrection, for tropes and metaphors, and hurled the result at the head of the guest of the evening. Never since the morning stars sang together for joy, I learned, had an amazed creation witnessed such superhuman bravery as that displayed by the American navy in the Samoa cyclone. Till earth rotted in the phosphorescent star[-and-stripe]-slime of a decayed universe that Godlike gallantry would not be forgotten. I grieve that I cannot give the exact words. My attempt at reproducing their spirit is pale and inadequate. I sat bewildered on a coruscating Niagara of—bukh. It was magnificent—it was stupendous, and I was conscious of a wicked desire to hide my face in a napkin and grin. Then, according to rule, they produced their dead, and across the snowy table-cloths dragged the corpse of every man slain in the civil war and hurled defiance at “our natural enemy” (England, so please you) “with her chain of fortresses across the world.” Thereafter they glorified their nation afresh, from the beginning, in case any detail should have been overlooked, and that made me uncomfortable for their sakes. How in the world can a white man, a sahib of our blood, stand up and plaster praise on his own country? He can think as highly as he likes, but his open-mouthed vehemence of adoration struck me almost as indelicate. My hosts talked for rather more than three hours, and at the end seemed ready for three hours more. But when the Lieutenant—such a big brave gentle giant—rose to his feet he delivered what struck me as the speech of the evening. I remember nearly the whole of it, and it ran something in this way: “Gentlemen,—it’s very good of you to give me this dinner and to tell me all these pretty things, but what I want you to understand—the fact is—what we want and what we ought to get at once is a navy—more ships—lots of ’em —.” Then we howled the top of the roof off, and I, for one, fell in love with Carlin on the spot. Wallah! He was a man.
The Prince among merchants bade me take no heed to the warlike sentiments of some of the old Generals. “The sky-rockets are thrown in for effect,” quoth he, “and whenever we get on our hind legs we always express a desire to chaw up England. It’s a sort of family affair.” And, indeed, when you come to think of it, there is no other country for the public speaker to trample upon.

France has Germany; we have Russia; for Italy Austria is provided; and the humblest Pathan possesses an ancestral enemy. Only America stands out of the racket; and therefore to be in fashion, makes a sand-bag of the mother-country and bangs it when occasion requires. “The chain of fortresses” man, a fascinating talker, explained to me after the affair that he was compelled to blow off steam. Everybody expected it. When we had chaunted “The Star Spangled Banner” not more than eight times, we adjourned. America is a very great country, but it is not yet Heaven with electric lights and plush fittings, as the speakers professed to believe. My listening mind went back to the politicians in the saloon who wasted no time in talking about Freedom, but quietly made arrangements to impose their will on the citizens. “The Judge is a great man, but give thy dalli to the munsiff,” as the proverb saith.

And what more remains to tell? I cannot write connectedly, because I am in love with all those girls aforesaid and some others who do not appear in the invoice. The type-writer maiden is the fairest and most fascinating of them all. The type-writer is an institution of which the comic papers make much capital, but she is vastly convenient. She and a companion rent a room in a business-quarter and aided by a type-writing machine copy MS. at the rate of some six annas a page. Only a woman can manage a type-writing machine, because she has served a long apprenticeship to the sewing machine. She can earn as much as a hundred dollars a month, and professes to regard this form of bread-winning as her natural destiny. But, oh how she hates it in her heart of hearts! When I had gotten over the surprise of doing business and trying to give orders to a young woman of coldly clerkly aspect, entrenched behind gold-rimmed spectacles, I made inquiries concerning the pleasures of this independence. They liked it—indeed, they did. ’Twas the natural fate of almost all
girls—the recognised custom in America—and I was a barbarian not to see it in that light.

“Well, and after?” said I. “What happens?”

“We work for our bread.”

“And then what do you expect?”

“That we shall work for our bread.”

“Till you die?”

“Ye-es—unless. . . .”

“And then what? This is your business, you know. A man works till he dies.”

“So shall we.” This without enthusiasm—“I suppose.”

Said the partner in the firm audaciously:—“Sometimes we marry our employers—at least that’s what the newspapers say.” The hand banged on half a dozen of the keys of the machine at once. “Yes, I don’t care. I hate it—I hate it—I hate it, and you needn’t look so.”

The senior partner was regarding the rebel with grave-eyed reproach.

“I thought you did,” said I. “I don’t suppose American girls are much different from English ones in instinct.”

“Isn’t it Theophile Gautier who says that the only differences between country and country lie in the slang and the uniform of the police?”

Now in the name of all the Gods at once, what is one to say to a young lady (who in England would be a person) who earns her own bread and, very naturally hates the employ, and slings out of the way quotations at your head? That one falls in love with her goes without saying; but that is not enough.

A mission should be established.