Letter Nine

TAKES ME FROM VANCOUVER TO THE
YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK—WITH A MEAN
OPINION OF MYSELF AND A MEANER OF
RAYMENT’S TOURISTS

“But who shall chronicle the ways
Of common folk, the nights and days
Spent with rough goatherds on the snows
And travelers come whence no man knows?”

7 January 1890  Pioneer

THIS DAY I know how a deserter feels. Here in Victoria, a hundred and forty miles out of America, the mail brings me news from our Home—the land of regrets. I was enjoying myself by the side of a perfect trout-stream away in the woods, and I feel inclined to apologise for every rejoicing breath I drew in the diamond clear air. The sickness, they said, is heavy with you; from Rewari to the south good men are dying. Two names come in by the mail—two strong men dead—men that I dined and jested with only a little time ago, and it seems unfair that I should be here, cut off from the chain-gang and the shot-drill of our weary life. After all, there was no life like it that we lead over yonder. Americans are Americans and there are millions of them; English are English; but we of India are Us all the world over, knowing the mysteries of each other’s lives and sorrowing for the death of a brother. How can I sit down and write to you of the mere joy of being alive? The news has killed the pleasure of the day for me, and I am ashamed of myself. There are seventy speckled beauties of brook
trout lying in a creel, fresh drawn from Harrison Hot Springs, the result of two hour’s strenuous wading, and they do not in the least console me. Rather they are like the stolen apples that clinch the fact of a bad boy’s playing truant. I would sell them all and my heritage in the woods and air and the delight of meeting new and strange people, just to be back again in the old galling harness, the heat and the dust, the gathering in the evenings by the flooded tennis-courts, the ghastly dull dinners at the Club when the very last woman has been packed off to the hills and the four or five men ask the doctor the symptoms of incubating small-pox. I should be troubled in body, but at peace in the soul. O excellent and toil-worn public of mine, men of the brotherhood, griffins new joined from the February troopers, and gentlemen waiting for your off-reckonings—take care of yourselves and keep well. It hurts so when any die. There are so few of Us, and we know one another too intimately.

Vancouver three years ago was swept off by fire in sixteen minutes, and only one house was left standing. To-day it has a population of fourteen thousand people, and builds its houses out of brick with dressed granite fronts. None the less a great sleepiness lies on Vancouver as compared with an American town: Men don’t fly up and down the streets telling lies, and the spittoons in the delightfully comfortable hotel are unused; also the baths are free and their doors are unlocked. You do not have to dig up the hotel clerk when you want to bathe; which shows the inferiority of Vancouver. An American bade me notice the absence of bustle and was alarmed when in a loud and audible voice I thanked God for it. “Give me granite—hewn granite and peace,” quoth I, “and keep your deal boards and bustle for yourselves.”

The Canadian Pacific terminus is not a very gorgeous place as yet, but you can be shot directly from the window of the train into the liner that will take you in fourteen days from Vancouver to Yokohama. The Parthia, of some five thousand tons, was at her berth when I came, and the sight of the ex-Cunard, on what seemed to be a little lake was curious. Except for certain currents which are not much mentioned,
but which make the entrance rather unpleasant for sailing-boats, Vancouver possesses an almost perfect harbour. There are no tides that can be reduced to a tide-table. A man came here once and stayed for six months in order to make out the tides. He then left raving mad, his tables unfinished. All the Sound and all the shores of British Columbia are a mass of queer tide effects when the sea pours through the thousand channels forming tide rips a foot high on the glassy water and whirlpools which spin small craft round like tops. A venerable steamer, the first and certainly the smallest that ever turned screw in the Pacific or doubled Cape Horn, lies a mouldy green wreck at the entrance to the narrows which lead into the harbour. She was caught in the sheer of the tide at the precise moment when her engines happened to be out of order and tossed on a rock. The town is built all round and about the harbour, and young as it is, its streets are better than those of Western America. Moreover, the old flag waves over some of the buildings, and this is cheering to the soul. Also the place is full of English men who speak the English tongue correctly and with clearness, avoiding more blasphemy than is necessary, and taking a respectable length of time to getting through their drinks. These advantages and others that I had heard about, such as the construction of elaborate work-shops and the like by the Canadian Pacific in the near future, moved me to invest in real estate. That’s American for buying a piece of land. He that sold it me was a delightful English boy who, having tried for the Army and failed, had somehow meandered into a real estate office, where he was doing well. I couldn’t have bought it from an American. He would have overstated the case and proved me the possessor of the original Eden. All the Boy said was: —“I give you my word it isn’t on a cliff or under water, and before long the town ought to move out that way. I’d advise you to take it.” And I took it, as easily as a man buys a piece of tobacco. *Me voici* owner of some four hundred well-developed pines, a few thousand tons of granite scattered in blocks at the roots of the pines, and a sprinkling of earth. That’s a town plot in Vancouver. You or your agent hold to it till property rises, then sell out and buy more land further out of town and repeat the process. I do not quite see how this sort of thing helps the growth of a town, but the English boy says that it is the “essence of speculation,” so it must be all right. But I wish there were fewer pines
and rather less granite on my ground. Moved by curiosity and the lust of trout, I went seventy miles up the Canadian Pacific in one of the cross-continent cars, which are cleaner and less stuffy than the Pullman. A man who goes all the way across Canada is liable to be disappointed—not in the scenery, but in the progress of the country. So a batch of wandering politicians from England told me. They even went so far as to say that Eastern Canada was a failure and unprofitable. The place didn’t move, they complained, and whole counties—they said provinces—they lay under the rule of the Roman Catholic Priests, who took care that the people should not be over cumbered with the good things of this world to the detriment of their souls. All my interest was for the line—the real and accomplished railway, which is to throw actual fighting troops into the East when our hold of the Suez Canal is temporarily loosened.

All that Vancouver wants is a fat earthwork fort upon a hill—there are plenty of hills to choose from. A selection of big guns, a couple of regiments of infantry, and later on a big arsenal. The raw self-consciousness of America would be sure to make her think these arrangements intended for her benefit, but she could be enlightened. It is not seemly to leave unprotected the head-end of a big railway; for though Victoria and Esquimalt, our naval stations on Vancouver Island, are very near, so also is a place called Vladivostok, and though Vancouver narrows are strait, they allow room enough for a man-of-war. The people—I did not speak to more than two hundred of them—do not know about Russia or military arrangements. They are trying to open trade with Japan in lumber and are raising fruit, wheat and sometimes minerals. All of them agree that we do not yet know the resources of British Columbia and all joyfully bade me note the climate, which was distinctly warm. “We never have killing cold here. It’s the most perfect climate in the world.” Then there are three perfect climates, for I have tasted ‘em—California, Washington Territory and British Columbia. I cannot say which is the loveliest. Here in British Columbia it seems to me that the retired Anglo-Indian might establish himself in great comfort. He can rent him a pretty cottage for fifteen dollars a month, or with his savings buy one for three or four hundred pounds. The cost of living is cheap, and there are good schools for the babies and more than good amusements for the father.
All the world is his to fish or hunt deer in, and he can buy a boat and drift about the glossy Sound exploring a thousand islands, prospecting for gold if he likes or pretending to raise sheep at “perfectly ridiculous cost.” This information was given to me by a retired officer of a Highland regiment who had a little yacht and contrived to extract a great deal of amusement out of the evening of his day. For the memsahib who follows her husband there is very pleasant English society, and it will presently grow; and young people seem to get through quite as much flirtation as is consistent with attention to business. This latter the English boy told me, and I fancy he’s an authority.

When I left by steamer and struck across the Sound to our naval station at Victoria, Vancouver Island, I found in that quite English town of beautiful streets quite a colony of old men doing nothing but talking, fishing and loafing at the Club. That means that the retired go to Victoria. On a thousand a year pension a man would be a millionaire in these parts, and for four hundred he could live well. It was at Victoria they told me the tale of the fire in Vancouver. How the inhabitants of New Westminster, twelve miles from Vancouver, saw a glare in the sky at six in the evening, but thought it was a lumber fire; how later bits of burnt paper blew about their streets and they guessed that evil had happened; how an hour later a man rode into the city crying that there was no Vancouver left. All had been wiped out by the flames in sixteen minutes. How two hours later, the Mayor of New Westminster having voted nine thousand dollars from the Municipal funds, relief wagons with food and blankets were pouring into where Vancouver stood. How fourteen people were supposed to have died in the fire, but how even now when they laid new foundations the workmen unearth charred skeletons, many more than fourteen. “That night,” said the teller, “all Vancouver was houseless. The wooden town had gone in a breath. Next day they began to build in brick, and you have seen what they have achieved.”

The sight afar off of three British men-of-war and a torpedo boat consoled me as I returned from Victoria to Tacoma and discovered *en route* that I was surfeited with scenery. There is a great deal in the remark of a discontented traveller: “When you have seen a fine forest, a bluff, a river and a lake you have seen all the scenery of Western America.” Sometimes the pine is three hundred feet high and some-
times the rock is and sometimes the lake is a hundred miles long. But it’s all the same, don’t you know. I’m getting sick of it. I dare not say getting sick. I’m only tired. If Providence could distribute all this beauty in little bits where people most wanted it—among you in India—it would be well. But it is en masse, overwhelming, with nobody but the tobacco-chewing captain of a river steamboat to look at it. Men said if I went to Alaska I should see islands even more wooded, snow-peaks loftier and rivers more lovely than those around me. That decided me not to go to Alaska. I went East—east to Montana after another horrible night in Tacoma, among the men who spat. Why does the Westerner spit? It can’t amuse him and it doesn’t interest his neighbour. How is it that in the East things are not so foul?

But I am beginning to mistrust. Everything good as well as everything bad is supposed to come from the East. Is there a shooting scrape between prominent citizens? Oh you’ll find nothing of that kind in the East. Is there a more than usually revolting lynching? They don’t do that in the East. I shall find out when I get there whether this unnatural perfection be real.

Eastward then to Montana I took my way for the Yellowstone National Park, called in the guide-books “Wonderland.” But the real Wonderland began in the train. We were a merry crew. One gentleman announced his intention of paying no fare and grappled the conductor who nearly cross-buttocked him through a double window of plate-glass. His head was cut open in four or five places. A doctor on the train hastily stitched up the biggest gash and he was dropped at a wayside station, spurting blood at every hair—a scarlet-headed and ghastly sight. The conductor guessed that he would die and volunteered the information that there was no profit in monkeying with the North Pacific Railway.

Night was falling as we cleared the forests and sailed out upon a wilderness of sage brush. The desolation of Montgomery, the wilderness of Sind, the hummock-studded desert of Bikaneer are joyous and homelike compared to the impoverished misery of the sage. It is blue, it is stunted, it is dusty. It wraps the rolling hills as a mildewed shroud wraps the body of a long dead man. It makes you weep for sheer loneliness and there is no getting away from it. When Childe
Roland came to the dark Tower he traversed the sage brush or he could never have been so magnificently gloomy.

Yet there is one thing worse than sage unadulterated and that is a prairie city. We stopped at Pasco Junction and a man told me that it was the Queen City of the Prairie. I wish Americans didn’t tell such useless lies. I counted fourteen or fifteen frame houses, a portion of a road that showed like a bruise on the untouched surface of the earth that was sage—blue sage running away and away up to the setting sun. The sailor ships with a half-inch plank between himself and death. He is nobody compared to the handful of people who curl themselves up o’ nights with nothing but a frail scantling, almost as thin as a blanket, to shut out the unmeasurable loneliness of the sage.

When the train stopped on the road, as it did once or twice, the solid silence of the sage got up and shouted at us. It was like a nightmare and one not in the least improved by having to sleep in an Emigrant-car, the regularly-ordained sleepers being full. There was a row in the car toward morning, a man having managed to get querulously drunk in the night; then up and rose a Cornish-man with a red head full of strategy and strapped the obstreperous [one], smiling largely as he did so, and a delicate little woman in a far bunk watched the fray and called the drunken man a “damned hog,” which he certainly was, though she needn’t have put it quite so coarsely. Emigrant cars are clean but the accommodation is as hard as a plank bed.

Later we laid our bones down to crossing the Rockies. An American train can climb up the side of a house if need be, but it is not pleasant to sit in it. We clomb till we struck violent cold and an Indian reservation, and the noble savage came to look at us. He was a Flathead and unlovely. Most Americans are charmingly frank about the Indian. “Let us get rid of him as soon as possible,” they say. “We have no use for him.” Some of the men I meet have a notion that we in India are exterminating the native in the same fashion, and I have been asked to fix a date for the final extinction of the Aryan. I answer that it will be a long business. Also very many Americans have an offensive habit of referring to natives as “heathen.” Mahometans and Hindus are heathen alike in their eyes, and they vary the epithet with “pagan” and “idolater.” But this is beside the matter which is the Stampede Tunnel—the actual point of crossing the Rockies.\(^\text{10}\) Thank Heaven I need
never take that tunnel again. It is about two miles long, and in effect is nothing more than the gallery of a mine shored with timber and lighted with electric lamps. Black Darkness would be preferable, for the lamps just reveal the rough cutting of the rocks and that is very rough indeed. The train crawls through, brakes down, and you can hear the water and little bits of stone falling on the roof of the car. Then you pray, pray fervently, and the air gets stiller and stiller, and you dare not take your unwilling eyes off the timber shoring, lest a prop should fall for lack of your moral support. Before the tunnel was built you crossed in the open air by a Switchback line. Like the Bhoreghat line\textsuperscript{11} only more so. A watchman goes through the tunnel after each train, but that is no protection. He just guesses that another train will pull through, and the engine-driver guesses the same thing. Some day between the two of them there will be a cave in in the tunnel. Then the enterprising reporter will talk about the shrieks and groans of the buried and the heroic efforts of the Press in securing first information, and—that will be all. Human life is of no account out here.

I was listening to yarns in the smoking-compartment of the Pullman all the way to Helena, and with very few exceptions, each had for its point, violent, brutal, and ruffianly murder—murder by fraud and the craft of the savage—murder unavenged by the law or at the most by an outbreak of fresh lawlessness. At the end of each tale I was assured that the old days had passed away, and that these were anecdotes of five years’ standing. One man in particular distinguished himself by holding up to admiration the exploits of some cowboys of his acquaintance, and their skill in the use of the revolver. Each tale of horror wound up with “and that’s the sort of man he was,” as who should say: “Go and do likewise.” Remember that the shootings, the cuttings, and the stabbings were not the outcome of any species of legitimate warfare; the heroes were not forced to fight for their lives. Far from it. The brawls were bred by liquor in which they assisted—in saloons and gambling hells they were wont to “pull their guns” on a man, and in the vast majority of cases without provocation. The tales sickened me, but taught one thing. A man who carries a pistol may be put down as a coward—a person to be shut out from every decent mess and club and gathering of civilised folk. There is neither chiv-
alry nor romance in the weapon, for all that American authors have seen fit to write. I would I could make you understand the full measure of contempt with which certain aspects of Western life have inspired me. Let us try a comparison. Sometimes it happens that a young, a very young, man whose first dress-coat is yet glossy, gets slightly flushed at a dinner party among his seniors. After the ladies have gone, he begins to talk. He talks, you will remember, as a “man of the world” and a person of varied experiences, an authority on all things human and divine. The grey heads of the elders bow assentingly to his wildest statement; some one tries to turn the conversation when what the youngster conceives to be wit has offended a sensibility; and another deftly slides the decanters beyond him as they circle round the table. You know the feeling of discomfort, pity mingled with aversion, over the boy who is making an exhibition of himself. The same emotion came back to me when an old man who ought to have known better appealed from time to time for admiration of his pitiful sentiments. It was right in his mind to insult, to maim and to kill; right to evade the law where it was strong and to trample over it where is was weak; right to swindle in politics, lie in affairs of State, and commit perjury in matters of municipal administration. The car was full of little children, utterly regardless of their parents, fretful, peevish, spoilt beyond anything I have ever seen in Anglo-India. They in time would grow up into men such as sat in the smoker, and had no regard for the law; men who would conduct papers siding “with defiance of any and every law.” But it’s of no consequence, as Mr. Toots says. Later on, when I have concluded a small investigation, I will return and preach a sermon on the text: “And each man did what was right in his own eyes and the people loved to have it so.”

During the descent of the Rockies we journeyed for a season on a trestle only two hundred and eighty-six feet high. Mercifully it was made of iron, but up till two years ago a wooden structure bore up the train, and was used long after it had been condemned by the civil engineers. Some day the iron one will come down, just as Stampede Tunnel will, and the results will be even more sketting [startling].

Late in the night we ran over a skunk—ran over it in the dark. Everything that has been said about a skunk is true. The awful stench
waked me through all the swaddlements of a Pullman bed; waked me to sorrow, anguish and presently despair. The smell clung to the train. I got off at Livingston but the smell continued to go on with the train. It was an Awesome Stink.