Letter Ten

SHOWS HOW YANKEE JIM INTRODUCED ME TO DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS ON THE BANKS OF THE YELLOWSTONE, AND HOW A GERMAN JEW SAID I WAS NO TRUE CITIZEN. ENDS WITH THE CELEBRATION OF THE 4TH OF JULY AND A FEW LESSONS THEREFROM

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LIVINGSTON IS A TOWN of two thousand people and the junction for the little side-line that takes you to the Yellowstone National Park. It lies in a fold of the prairie, and behind it is the Yellowstone river and the gate of the mountains through which the river flows. There is one street in the town where the cowboy’s pony and the little foal of the brood-mare in the buggy do rest contentedly in the blinding sunshine while the cowboy gets himself shaved at the only other barber’s shop and swaps lies at the bar. I exhausted the town, including the saloons, in ten minutes, and got away on the rolling grass downs whereon I threw myself to rest. Montana is a bad territory. She grows little green cacti, hidden in the grass, which hurt. Directly under the hill I was on swept a drove of horses in charge of two mounted men. That was a picture I shall not soon forget. A light haze of dust went up from the hoof-trodden green, scarcely veiling the unfettered deviltries of three hundred horses who very much wanted to stop and graze. “Yow! Yow! Yow!” yapped the mounted men in chorus like coyotes. The column moved forward at a trot, divided as it met a hillock and scattered into fan shape all among the suburbs of Livingston. I
heard the “snick” of a stock whip, half a dozen “Yow, Yows,” and the mob had come together again and, with neighing and whickering and squealing and a great deal of kicking on the part of the youngsters, rolled like a wave of brown water toward the uplands.

I was within twenty feet of the leader, a grey stallion—lord of many brood mares all deeply concerned for the welfare of their fuzzy foals. A cream-coloured beast—I knew him at once for the bad character of the troop—broke back, taking with him some frivolous fillies. I heard the snick of the whips somewhere in the dust, and the fillies came back at a canter, very shocked and indignant. On the heels of the last rode both the stockmen—picturesque ruffians who wanted to know “what in hell” I was doing there, waved their hats and sped down the slope after their charges. When the noise of the troop had died there came a wonderful silence on all the prairie—that silence, they say, which enters into the heart of the old-time hunter and trapper and marks him off from the rest of his race. The town disappeared in the dusk of evening, and a very young moon showed herself over a bald-headed, snow-flecked peak that guards it. Then the Yellowstone hidden by the water-willows lifted up its voice and sang a little song to the mountains, and an old horse that had crept up in the dusk breathed inquiringly on the back of my neck. When I reached the hotel I found all manner of preparation under weigh [way] for the 4th of July, and a drunken man with a Winchester rifle over his shoulder patrolling the sidewalk. I do not think he wanted any one. He carried the gun as other folk carry walking-sticks. None the less I avoided the direct line of fire and listened to the blasphemies of miners and stockmen till far into the night. In every bar-room lay a copy of the local paper, and every copy impressed it upon the inhabitants of Livingston that they were the best, finest, bravest, richest and most progressive town of the most progressive nation under Heaven; even as the Tacoma and Portland papers had belauded their readers. And yet, all my purblind eyes could see was a grubby little hamlet full of men without clean collars and perfectly unable to get through one sentence unadorned by three oaths. They raise horses and minerals round and about Livingston, but they behave as though they raised cherubim with diamonds in their wings. Merely as a matter of curiosity I should like to see an American stripped of all his blatherumskite
and bunkum and reduced to ordinary levels. I do not think he would
bulk larger than any other white man.

From Livingston the National Park train follows the Yellowstone
River through the gate of the mountains and over arid volcanic coun-
try. A stranger in the cars saw me look at the ideal trout-stream below
the windows and murmured softly: “Lie off at Yankee Jim’s if you
want good fishing.”1 They halted the train at the head of a narrow val-
ley, and behold I leaped literally into the arms of Yankee Jim, sole
owner of a log hut, an indefinite amount of hay-ground, and construc-
tor of twenty-seven miles of wagon-road over which he held toll right.
There was the hut—the river fifty yards away, and the polished line of
metals that disappeared round a bluff. That was all. The railway
added the finishing touch to the already complete loneliness of the
place. Yankee Jim was a picturesque old man with a talent for yarns
that Ananias might have envied.2 It seemed to me, presumptuous in
my ignorance, that I might hold my own with the old-timer if I judi-
ciously painted up a few lies picked up in the course of my wan-
derings. In ten minutes I saw the error and was dumb. Yankee Jim saw
every one of my tales and went fifty better on the spot. He dealt in
bears and Indians—never less than twenty of each; had known the
Yellowstone country for years and bore upon his body marks of Indian
arrows; and his eyes had seen a squaw of the Crow Indians burned
alive at the stake. He said she screamed considerable. In one point did
he speak the truth—as regarded the merits of that particular reach of
the Yellowstone. He said it was alive with trout. It was. I fished it from
noon till twilight and the fish bit at the brown hook as though never a
fat trout-fly had fallen on the water. From pebbly reaches quivering in
the heat-haze where the foot caught on stumps cut foursquare by the
chisel tooth of the beaver; past the fringe of the water willow crowded
with the breeding trout fly and alive with toads and water-snakes,
over the drifted timber to the grateful shadow of big trees that shad-
owed the potholes where the fattest fish lay. I worked for seven hours.
The mountain flanks on either side of the valley gave back the heat
the desert gives it, and the dry sand by the railway track, where I
found a rattlesnake, was hot to the touch. But the trout did not care
for the heat. They breasted the boiling river for my fly and they got it.
I simply dare not give the bag. At the fortieth trout I gave up counting,
and I had reached the fortieth in less than two hours. They were small fish—not one over two pounds—but they fought like small tigers, and I lost three flies before I could understand their methods of escape. The click of the reel followed the swish of the rod, as the plunge of the horse follows the stroke of the lash. Ye gods! That was fishing, though it peeled the skin from my nose in strips.

At twilight Yankee Jim bore me off, protesting, to supper in the hut. The fish had prepared me for any surprise, wherefore when Yankee Jim introduced me to a young woman of five-and-twenty, with eyes like the deep-fringed eyes of the gazelle, and on the neck the small head buoyant, like a bell-flower in its bed, I said nothing. It was all in the day’s events. She was California-raised, the wife of a man who owned a stock farm “up the river a little ways,” and, with her husband, tenant of Yankee Jim’s shanty. I know she wore list slippers and did not wear stays: but I know also that she was beautiful by any standard of beauty, and that the trout she cooked were fit for a king’s supper. And after supper strange men loafed up in the dim delicious twilight with the little news of the day—how a heifer had “gone strayed” from Nicholson’s, how the widow at Grant’s Fork wouldn’t part with a little hayland nohow though “she’s an’ her big brothers can’t manage more than ha-af their land now. She’s so darned proud.” Diana of the Crossways entertained them in queenly wise, and her husband and Yankee Jim bade them sit right down and make themselves at home. Then did Yankee Jim uncurl his choicest lies of Indian warfare aforetime; then did the whisky flask circle round the little crowd; then did Diana’s husband ‘low that he was quite handy with the lariat, but had seen men rope a steer by any foot or horn indicated; then did Diana in womanly wise unburden herself about her neighbours. The nearest house was three miles away, “but the women aren’t nice, neighbourly folk. They talk so. They haven’t got anything else to do seemingly. If a woman goes to a dance and has a good time they talk, and if she wears a silk dress they want to know how jest ranchin’ folks—folks on a ranch—come by such things, and they make mischief down all the lands here from Gardiner city way back up to Livingston. They’re mostly Montana-raised and they haven’t been nowheres. Ah, how they talk.” “Were things like this,” demanded Diana, “in the big world outside whence I had come?” “Yes,” I said,
“things were very much the same all over the world,” and I thought of a far away station in India where new dresses and the having of good times at dances raised cackle more grammatical perhaps, but no less venomous than the gossip of the “Montana-raised” folk on the ranches of the Yellowstone.

Next morn I fished again and listened to Diana telling the story of her life. I forget what she told me, but I am distinctly aware that she had royal eyes and a mouth that the daughter of a hundred earls might have envied—so small and so delicately cut it was. “An’ you come back right along an’ see us again,” said the simple-minded folk. “Come back an’ we’ll show you how to catch six-pound trout at the head of the canyon.” I would that I could.

To-day I am in the Yellowstone Park, and I wish I were dead. The train halted at Cinnabar station and we were decanted, a howling crowd of us, into stages, variously horsed, for the eight-mile drive to the first spectacle of the Park—a place called the Mammoth Hot Springs. “What means this eager, anxious throng?” I asked the driver. “You’ve struck one of Rayment’s excursion parties—that’s all—a crowd of creator-condemned fools mostly. Aren’t you one of ’em?” “No,” I said. “May I sit up here with you great chief and man with a golden tongue? I do not know Mister Rayment. I belong to T. Cook and Son.”

The other person, from the quality of the material he handles, must be the son of a sea-cook. He collects masses of Down-Easters from the New England States and elsewhere and hurls them across the Continent and into the Yellowstone Park on tour. A brake-load of Cook’s Continental tourists trapezing through Paris (I’ve seen ’em) are angels of light compared to the Rayment trippers. It is not the ghastly vulgarity, the oozing, rampant Bessemer steel self-sufficiency and ignorance of the men that revolts me, so much as the display of these same qualities in the womenfolk. I saw a new type in the coach, and my dreams of a better and more perfect East died away. “Are these—um—janwars here any sort of man in their own places?” I asked a shepherd who appeared to be herding them. “Why, certainly. They include very many prominent and representative citizens from seven States of the Union, and most of them are wealthy. Yes, sir. Representative and prominent.”
I do not remember fainting. I think I moaned like a stricken dove till I had to clutch the rails of the box seat and stay clutched. We ran across bare hills on an unmetalled road under a burning sun in front of a volley of playful repartee from the prominent citizens inside. It was the 4th of July. The horses had American flags in their headstalls, some of the women wore flags and coloured handkerchiefs in their belts, and a young German on the box seat with me was bewailing the loss of a box of crackers and a flag. He said he had been sent to the Continent to get his schooling and so had lost his American accent; but no Continental schooling writes German-Jew all over a man’s face and nose. He was a rabid American citizen—one of a very difficult class to deal with. As a general rule, praise unspARINGLY and without discrimination. That keeps most men quiet: but some, if you fail to keep up a continuous stream of praise, proceed to revile the Old Country—Germans and Irish who are more American than the Americans are the chief offenders. In the latter event sit still and take notes. This young American began to attack the English army. He had seen some of it on parade and he pitied the men in bearns as slaves. The citizen, by the way, has a contempt for his own army which exceeds anything you met among the most illiberal classes in England. I admitted that our army was very poor, had done nothing and been nowhere. This exasperated him, for he expected an argument, and he trampled on the British Lion generally. Failing to move me he vowed that I had no patriotism like his own. I said I had not, and further ventured that very few Englishmen had; which, when you come to think of it, is quite true. By the time he had proved conclusively that before the Prince of Wales came to the throne we should be a blethering republic, we struck a road that overhung a river and my interest in “politics” was lost in admiration of the driver’s skill as he sent his four big horses along that winding khud road. There was no room for any sort of accident—a shy or a swerve would have dropped us sixty feet into the roaring Gardiner river. Some of the persons in the coach remarked that the scenery was “elegant.” Wherefore, even at the risk of my own life, I did urgently desire an accident and the massacre of some of the more prominent citizens. What “elegance” lies in a thousand-foot pile of honey-coloured rock, riven into peak and battlement, the highest peak defiantly crowned by an eagle’s
nest, the eaglet peering into the gulf and screaming for his food, I could not for the life of me understand. But they speak a strange tongue.

*En route* we passed other Akkastarus, full of trippers who had done their appointed five days in the Park and yelped at us fraternally as they disappeared in clouds of red dust. The road lay up hill, was some five thousand feet above sea level, and when we struck the Mammoth Hot Spring Hotel—a huge yellow barn—a signboard informed us that the altitude was 6200 feet. The Park is just a howling wilderness of three thousand square miles, full of all imaginable freaks of a fiery nature. An hotel company assisted by the Secretary of State for the Interior appears to control it: there are hotels at all the points of interest, guide-books full of telegraphese talk, stalls for the sale of minerals and photographs and so forth, after the model of Swiss summer places.

The tourists—may Rayment their master die an evil death by the hand of a mad locomotive—poured into that place with a joyful whoop, and scarce washing the dust from themselves began to celebrate the 4th of July. They called it “patriotic exercises:” elected a clergyman of their own faith as President, and sitting, on the landing of the first floor, began to make speeches and read the Declaration of Independence. The clergyman rose up and told them they were the greatest, freest, sublimest, most chivalrous and richest people on the face of the earth, and they all said Amen. Another clergyman asserted in the words of the Declaration that all men were created equal, and equally entitled to Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. I should like to know whether the wild and woolly West recognizes the first right as freely as the grantors intended. The clergyman then bade the world notice that the tourists included representatives of seven of the New England States: whereat I felt deeply sorry for the new England States in their latter days. He opined that this running to-and-fro upon the earth under the auspices of the excellent Rayment would draw America more closely together, especially when the Westerners remembered the perils that they of the East had surmounted by rail and river. At duly appointed intervals the congregation sang “My country ‘tis of Thee” to the tune of “God Save the Queen” (here they did not stand up) and the “Star Spangled Banner”
(here they did), winding up the exercise with some doggerel of their own composition to the tune of “John Brown’s Body” movingly setting forth the perils before alluded to. They then adjourned to the verandas and watched fire-crackers of the feeblest exploding one by one, for several hours.

What amazed me was the calm with which these folks gathered together and commenced to belaud their noble-selves, their country, and their “institootions” and everything else that was theirs. The language was, to these bewildered ears, wild advertisement, gas, bunks, blow, bukh, anything you please beyond the bounds of common sense. An archangel selling town-lots on the Glassy Sea would have blushed to the tips of his wings to describe his property in similar terms. Then they gathered round the pastor and told him his simple little sermon was “perfectly glorious,” really grand, sublime, and so forth, and he bridled ecclesiastically. At the end a perfectly unknown man attacked me and asked me what I thought of American patriotism. I said there was nothing like it in the Old Country. By the way, always tell an American this. It soothes him.

Then said he: —“Are you going to get out your letters—your letters of naturalisation?”

“Why?” I asked.

“I presuppose you do business in this country and make money out of it,—and it seems to me that it would be your dooty.”

“Sir,” said I sweetly, “there is a forgotten little island across the seas called England. It is not much bigger than the Yellowstone Park. In that island a man of your country could work, marry, make his fortune or twenty fortunes and die. Throughout his career not one soul would ask him whether he were a British subject or a child of the Devil. Do you understand?”

I think he did, because he said something about “Britishers” which wasn’t complimentary.