Letter Thirteen


“A fool also is full of words: a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him who can tell?”

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IT HAS JUST occurred to me with great force that delightful as these letters are to myself their length and breadth and depth may be just the least little bit in the world wearisome to you over there. I will compress myself rigorously, though I should very much like to deliver a dissertation on the American Army and the possibilities of its extension. You see it is such a beautiful little army and the dear people don’t quite understand what to do with it. The theory is that it is an instructional nucleus round which the militia of the country will rally and from which they will get stiffening in time of danger. Yet other people consider that the army should be built like a pair of lazy tongs, on the principles of elasticity and extension: so that in time of need it may fill up its skeleton battalions and empty saddle troops. This is real wisdom because the American Army as at present constituted is made up of:

25 regiments Infantry . . . . 10 companies each
10 " Cavalry . . . . 12 companies "
5 " Artillery . . . . 12 companies "

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Now there is a notion in the air to reorganize the service on these lines:

18 regiments Infantry at 4 battns., 4 cos. each; 3rd batin. skeleton, 4th on paper.
8 regiments Cavalry at 4 battns., 4 troops each; 3rd batin. skeleton, 4th on paper.
3 regiments Artillery at 4 battns., 4 cos. each; 3rd batin. skeleton, 4th on paper.

Observe the beauty of this business. The 3rd battalion will have its officers but no men; the 4th will probably have a rendezvous and some equipment. It is not contemplated to give it anything more definite at present. Assuming the regiments to be made up to full complement, we get an army of 50,000 men, which after the need passes away must be cut down fifty percent to the huge delight of the officers. And the military needs of the States be three: (a) frontier warfare, an employment well within the grip of the present army of 25,000, and in the nature of things growing less arduous year by year; (b) internal riots and commotions which rise up like a dust-devil, whirl furiously and die out long before the authorities at Washington could begin to fill up even the third skeleton battalions, much less hunt about for material for the fourth; (c) civil war, in which, as was the case in the affair of the North and South, the regular army would be swamped in the wave of militia and armed volunteers that would turn the land into a hell. Yet the authorities persist in regarding an external war as a thing to be seriously considered; and the Power that would disembark troops on American soil would be capable of heaving a shovelful of mud into the Atlantic in the hope of filling it up. Consequently the authorities are fascinated with the idea of the sliding-scale or concertina army. This is an hereditary instinct, for you know that when we have got together two companies, one machine gun, a sick bullock, forty generals and a mass of W. O.² forms we say we have “an army corps capable of indefinite extension.”

The American army is a beautiful little army. Some day, when all the Indians are happily dead or drunk, it ought to make the finest scientific and survey corps that the world has ever seen: it does excellent work now, but there is this defect in its nature: it is officered, as you know, from West Point, but the mischief of it is that West Point seems
to be created for the purpose of spreading a general knowledge of military matters among the people. A boy goes up to that institution, gets his pass and returns to civil life, so they tell me, with a dangerous knowledge that he is a sucking von Moltke,\textsuperscript{3} and may apply his learning when occasion offers. Given trouble, that man will be a nuisance, because he is a hideously versatile American to begin with, as cock sure of himself as a man can be, and with all the racial disregard for human life to back him, through his demi-semi-professional generalship. In a country where, as the records of the daily papers show, men engaged in a conflict with police or jails are all too ready to adopt a military formation and get heavily shot in a sort of cheap, half-instructed warfare instead of being decently scared by the appearance of the military, this sort of arrangement does not seem wise. The bond between the States is of an amazing tenuity. So long as they do not absolutely march into the District of Columbia, sit on the Washington statues and invent a flag of their own, they can legislate, lynch, hunt negroes through swamps, divorce, railroad, and rampage as much as ever they choose. They do not need knowledge of their own military strength to back their genial lawlessness. That regular army, which is a dear little army, should be kept to itself, blooded on detachment duty, turned into the paths of science and now and again assembled at feasts of Freemasons and so forth. It’s too tiny to be a political power. The immortal wreck of the Grand Army of the Republic is a political power of the largest and most unblushing description. It ought not to help to lay the foundations of an amateur military power that is blind and irresponsible. . . .

Be thankful that the balance of the lecture is suppressed, and with it the account of a “shiveree” which I attended in Livingston City: the story of the editor and the sub-editor (and the latter was a pet cougar or mountain lion who used, they said, skillfully to sub-edit disputants in the office) of the Livingston daily paper.

Omitting a thousand matters of first importance let me pick up the thread of things on a narrow-gauge line that took me down to Salt Lake. The run between Delhi and Ahmedabad on a May day would have been bliss compared to this torture.\textsuperscript{4} There was nothing but glare and desert and alkali dust. There was no smoking accommodation. I sat in the lavatory with the conductor and a gold prospector
who told stories about Indian atrocities in the voice of a dreaming child—oath following oath as smoothly as clotted cream laps the mouth of the jug. I don’t think he knew he was saying anything out of the way, but nine or ten of those oaths were new to me, and one even made the conductor raise his eyebrows.

“And when a man’s alone mostly, leadin’ his horse across the hills, he gets to talk aloud to himself as it was,” said the weather-worn retailer of tortures, and a vision rose before me of this man tramping the Bannack City trail under the stars—swearing. Always swearing.

Bundles of rags that were pointed out as Red Indians boarded the train from time to time. Their race privileges allow them free transit on the platforms of the cars. They mustn’t come inside of course, and equally of course the train never thinks of pulling up for them. I saw a squaw take us flying and leave us in the same manner when we were spinning round a curve. Like the Punjabi, the Red Indian gets out by preference on the trackless plain and walks stolidly to the horizon. He never says where he is going.

SALT LAKE CITY

I am seriously concerned for the sake of Mr. Phil Robinson, his soul. You will remember that he wrote a book called Saints and Sinners in which he proved very prettily that the Mormon was almost altogether an estimable person. Ever since my arrival at Salt Lake I have been wondering what made him write that book. On mature reflection, and after a long walk round the city, I am inclined to think it was the sun, which is very powerful hereabouts.

By great good luck the evil-minded train, already delayed twelve hours by a burnt bridge, brought me to the city on a Saturday by way of that valley which the Mormons aver their efforts had caused to blossom like the rose. Twelve hours previously I had entered into a new world where, in conversation, every one was either a Mormon or a Gentile. It is not seemly for a free and independent citizen to dub himself a Gentile, but the Mayor of Ogden—which is the Gentile city of the valley—told me that there must be some distinction between the two flocks. Long before the fruit orchards of Logan or the shining levels of the Salt Lake had been reached that Mayor—himself a Gentile and one renowned for his dealings with the Mormons—told me
that the great question of the existence of the power within the power was being gradually solved by the ballot and by education. “We have,” quoth he, “hills round and about here, stuffed full of silver and gold and lead and all Hell atop of the Mormon church can’t keep the Gentile from flocking in when that’s the case. At Ogden, thirty miles from Salt Lake, this year the Gentile vote swamped the Mormon at the Municipal elections and next year we trust that we shall be able to repeat our success in Salt Lake itself. In that city the Gentiles are only one-third of the total population, but the mass of ‘em are grown men, capable of voting; whereas the Mormons are cluttered up with children. I guess as soon as we have purely Gentile officers in the township and the control of the policy of the city, the Mormons will have to back down considerable. They’re bound to go before long. My own notion is that it’s the older men who keep alive the opposition to the Gentile and all his works. The younger ones, spite of all the elders tell ‘em, will mix with the Gentile, and read Gentile books, and you bet your sweet life there’s a holy influence working towards conversion in the kiss of an average Gentile—specially when the girl knows that he won’t think it necessary for her salvation to load the house up with other womenfolk. I guess the younger generation are giving sore trouble to the elders. What’s that you say about polygamy? It’s a penal offence now under a Bill passed not long ago. The Mormon has to elect one wife and keep to her. If he’s caught visiting any of the others—well do you see that cool and restful brownstone building way over there against the hillside? That’s the penitentiary. He is sent there to consider his sins and he pays a fine too. But most of the police in Salt Lake are Mormons, and I don’t suppose they are too hard on their friends. I presoom there’s a good deal of polygamy practised on the sly. But the chief trouble is to get the Mormon to see that the Gentile isn’t the doubly damned beast that the elders represent. Only get the Gentiles well into the State and the whole concern is bound to go to pieces in a very little time.”

And the wish being father to the thought, “Why, certainly,” said I, and began to take in the valley of Deseret,7 the home of the latter day saints, and the abode perhaps of as much misery as has ever been compressed into forty years. The good folk at home can not understand, but you will, what follows. You know how in Bengal to this day
the child-wife is taught to curse her possible co-wife, ere yet she has
gone to her husband’s house? And the Bengali woman has been accus-
tomed to polygamy for a few hundred years. Yet she has a thoroughly
feminine hatred of her rival. You know, too, the awful jealousy be-
tween mother-wife and barren behind the purdah—the jealousy that
culminates sometimes in the poisoning of the well-beloved son. Now
and again an Englishwoman employs a high caste Mussulmani dhai,
and in the offices of that hire, women are apt to forget the differences
of colour and to speak unreservedly as twin daughters under Eve’s
curse. The dhai tells very strange and awful things. She has, and this
the Mormons count a privilege, been born into polygamy; but she
loathes and detests it from the bottom of her jealous soul. And to the
lot of the Bengali co-wife—“the cursed of the cursed—the daughter of
the dunghill—the scald-head and barren-mute” (you know the rest
of that sweet commination-service)—one creed, of all the White
creed to-day, deliberately introduces the white woman taken from
centuries of training, which have taught her that it is right to control
the undivided heart of one man. To quench her most natural re-
bellion, that amazing creed and fantastic jumble of Mahometanism, the
Mosaical law, and imperfectly comprehended fragments of Free
masonry, calls to its aid all the powers of a hell conceived and elaborated
by coarse-minded hedgers and ditches. A sweet view, isn’t it?

All the beauty of the valley could not make me forget it. And the
valley is very fair. Bench after bench of land, flat as a table against the
flanks of the ringing hills, marks where the Salt Lake rested for a
while in its collapse from an inland sea to a lake fifty miles long and
thirty broad. Before long these benches will be covered with houses.
At present these are hidden among the green trees on the dead flat of
the valley. You have read a hundred times how the streets of Salt
Lake City are very broad, furnished with rows of shade trees and gut-
ters of fresh water. This is true, but I struck the town in a season of
great drouth—that same drouth which is playing havoc with the
herds of Montana. The trees were limp and the rills of sparkling wa-
ter that one reads about were represented by dusty paved courses.
Main Street appears to be inhabited by the commercial Gentile, who
has made of it a busy, bustling thoroughfare, and, in the eye of the
sun, swigs the ungodly lager and smokes the improper cigar all day
long. For which I like him. At the head of Main Street stand the lions of the place, *videlicet*, the temple and the tabernacle, the tithing house, and the houses of Brigham Young, whose portrait is on sale in most of the booksellers' shops. Incidentally it may be mentioned that the late Amir of Utah does not unremotely resemble His Highness the Amir of Afghanistan, whom these fortunate eyes have seen. And I have no desire to fall into the hands of the Amir. The first thing to be seen was, of course, the temple, the outward exponent of a creed. Armed with a copy of the Book of Mormon, for better comprehension, I went to form rash opinions. Some day the temple will be finished. It was begun only thirty years ago, and up to date rather more than three million dollars and a half have been expended in its granite bulk. The walls are ten feet thick; the edifice itself is about a hundred feet high; and its towers will be nearly two hundred. And that is all there is of it unless you choose to inspect more closely; always reading the Book of Mormon as you walk. Then the wondrous puerility, of what I suppose we must call the design, becomes apparent. I am wrong: there is no design. These men, directly inspired from on High, heaped stone on stone and pillar on pillar without achieving either dignity, relief or interest. There is over the main door some pitiful scratching in stone representing the all seeing eye, the Masonic grip, the sun, moon and stars, and, perhaps, other skittles. The flatness and meanness of the thing almost make you weep when you look at the magnificent granite in blocks strewn abroad, and skill that three million dollars could have called in to the aid of the church. It is as though a child had said: —“Let us draw a great big fine house—finer than any house that ever was”—and in that desire had laboriously smudged along with a ruler and pencil, piling meaningless straight lines on compass-drawn curves, with his tongue following every movement of the inept hand. Then sat I down on a wheelbarrow and read the Book of Mormon, and behold the spirit of the book was the spirit of the stone before me. The estimable Joseph and Hyrum Smith struggling to create a new Bible when they knew nothing of the history of Old and New Testament, and the inspired architect muddling with his bricks—they were brothers. But the book was more interesting than the building. It is written, and all the world has read, that to Joseph Smith an angel came down from Heaven with a
pair of celestial gig-lamps, whereby he was marvelously enabled to interpret certain plates of gold scribbled over with dots and scratches, and discovered by him in the ground. Which plates Joseph Smith did translate—only he spelt the mysterious characters “caractors”—and out of the dots and scratches produced a volume of six hundred closely printed pages containing the books of Nephi, first and second, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni, Mormon, Mosiah, the Record of Zeniff, the book of Alma Helaman, the third of Nephi, the fourth, another book of Mormon, the book of Ether (the whole thing is a powerful anesthetic, by the way), and the final book of Moroni. Three men, of whom one I believe is now living, bear solemn witness that the Angel with the spectacles appeared unto them; eight other men swear solemnly that they have seen the golden plates of the revelation; and upon this testimony the book of Mormon stands. The Mormon Bible begins at the days of Zedekiah, King of Judah, and ends in a wild and weltering quagmire of tribal fights, bits of revelation and wholesale thefts from the Bible.

Very sincerely did I sympathize with the inspired brothers as I waded through their joint production. As a humble fellow-worker in the field of fiction, I knew what it was to get good names for one’s characters. But Joseph and Hyrum were harder bested than ever I have been; and bolder men to boot. They created Teancum and Coriantumy Pahoran, Kishkumen, and Gadianton, and other priceless names which the memory does not hold; but of geography they wisely steered clear, and were astutely vague as to the localities of places, because you see they were by no means certain what lay in the next county to their own. They marched and countermarched bloodthirsty armies across their pages; and added new and amazing chapters to the records of the New Testament and reorganized the heavens and the earth as it is always lawful to do in print. But they could not achieve style, and it was foolish of them to let into their weird Mosaic pieces of the genuine Bible whenever the labouring pen dropped from its toilsome parody to a sentence or two of vile bad English or downright “penny dreadfulism.” “And Moses said unto the people of Israel: ‘Great Scott! What air you doing?’” There is no sentence in the Book of Mormon word for word like the foregoing, but the general tone is not widely different.
There are the makings of a very fine creed about Mormonism. To begin with, the Church is rather more absolute than that of Rome. Drop the polygamy plank in the platform, but on the other hand deal lightly with certain forms of excess. Keep the quality of the recruits down to a low mental level and see that the best of all the agricultural science available is in the hands of the Elders and you have there a first-class engine for pioneer work. The tawdry mysticism and the borrowings from Freemasonry serve the low caste Swede and the Dane, the Welshman and the Cornish cottar, just as well as a highly organized Heaven.

Then I went about the streets and peeped into people’s front windows, and the decorations upon the tables were after the manner of the year 1850. Main Street was full of country folk from the dehat come into trade with the Zion Mercantile Co-operative Institute. The Church, I fancy, looks after the finances of this thing and it consequently pays good dividends. The faces of the women were not lovely. Indeed, but for the certainty that ugly persons are just as irrational in the matter of undivided love as the beautiful, it seemed that polygamy was a blessed institution for the women; and that only the spiritual power could drive the hulking, board-faced men into it. The women wore hideous garments and the men seemed to be tied up with string. They would market all that afternoon and on Sunday go to the praying-place. I tried to talk to a few of them, but they spoke strange tongues and stared and behaved like cows. Yet one woman, and not an altogether ugly one, confided to me that she hated the idea of Salt Lake City being turned into a show-place for the amusement of the Gentile.

“If we ‘ave our own institutions that ain’t no reason why people should come ’ere and stare at us, his it?”

The dropped “h” betrayed her.

“And when did you leave England?” I said.

“Summer of ’84. I am Dorset,” she said. “The Mormon agents was very good to us, and we was very poor. Now we’re better off—my father an’ mother an’ me.”

“Then you like the State?”
She misunderstood at first. “Oh, I ain’t livin’ in the state of polygamy. Not me yet. I ain’t married. I like where I am. I’ve got things o’ my own—and some land.”

“But I suppose you will...”

“Not me. I ain’t like them Swedes an’ Danes. I ain’t got nothin’ to say for or against polygamy. It’s the Elders’ business, an’ between you an’ me I don’t think it’s going on much longer. You’ll ‘ear them in the ‘ouse to-morrer talkin’ as if it was spreadin’ all over America. The Swedes they think it his. I know it hasn’t.”

“But you’ve got your land all right.”

“Oh yes, we’ve got our land an’ we never say aught against polygamy o’ course—father an’ mother an’ me.”

It strikes me that there is a fraud somewhere. You’ve never heard of the roti-khanakiwasti, have you?

I should have liked to have spoken to the maiden at length but she dived into the Zion Co-op, and a man captured me saying that it was my bounden duty to see the sights of Salt Lake. These comprised the egg-shaped Tabernacle, the Beehive and town houses of Brigham Young; the same great ruffian’s tomb with assorted samples of his wives sleeping round him (just as the eleven faithful ones sleep round the ashes of Runjit Singh14 outside Fort Lahore), and one or two other curiosities. But all these things have been described by abler pens than mine. The animal-houses where Brigham used to pack his wives are grubby villas; the Tabernacle is a shingled fraud, and the tithing house where all the revenue returns seem to be made, much resembles a stable. The Mormons have a paper currency of their own—ecclesiastical bank-notes which are exchanged for local produce. But the little boys of the place have a great weakness for the bullion of the Gentiles. It is not pleasant to be taken round a township with your guide stopping before every third house to say: “That’s where Elder so and so kept Amelia Bathershins, his fifth wife—no his third. Amelia she was took on after Keziah, but Keziah was the Elder’s pet an’ he didn’t dare to let Amelia come across Keziah for fear of her spilin’ Keziah’s beauty.” The Mussulmans are quite right. The minute that all the domestic details of polygamy are discussed in the mouths of the people, that institution is ready to fall. I shook off my guide when he had told me his very last doubtful tale, and went on alone. An or-
dered peace and a perfection of quiet luxury is the note of the city of
Salt Lake. The houses stand in generous and well-groomed grass
plots, none very much worse or better than their neighbours. Creep-
ers grow over the house fronts and there is a very pleasant music of
wind among the trees in the vast empty streets with smell of hay and
the flowers of summer.

On a tableland overlooking all the city stands the U. S. garrison of
infantry and artillery. The State of Utah can do nearly anything it
pleases until that much-to-be-desired hour when the Gentile vote
shall quietly swamp out Mormonism, but the garrison is kept there in
case of accidents. The big, shark-mouthed, pig-eared, heavy-boned
farmers sometimes take to their creed with wildest fanaticism, and in
past years have made life excessively unpleasant for the Gentile
when he was few in the land. But to-day, so far from killing openly or
secretly or burning Gentile farms, it is all the Mormon dares do to fee-
bly try to boycott the interloper. His journals preach defiance to the
United States Government and in the Tabernacle of a Sunday the
preachers follow suit. When I went there the place was full of people
who would have been much better for a washing. A man rose up and
told them that they were the chosen of God, the elect of Israel, that
they were to obey their priest and that there was a good time coming. I
fancy that they had heard all this before so many times it produced no
impression whatever; even as the sublimest mysteries of another
Faith lose salt through constant iteration. They breathed heavily
through their noses and stared straight in front of them—impassive
as flatfish.

And that evening I went up to the garrison post—one of the most
coveted of all the army commands—and overlooked the City of the
Saints as it lay in the circle of its forbidding hills. You can speculate a
good deal about the mass of human misery, the loves frustrated, the
gentle hearts broken and the strong souls twisted from the law of life
to a fiercer following of the law of death, that the hills have seen. How
must it have been in the old days when the footsore emigrants broke
through into the circle and knew that they were cut off from hope of
return or sight of friends—were handed over to the power of the
fiends that called themselves priests of the Most High? “But for the
grace of God there goes Richard Baxter,”15 as the eminent divine once
said. It seemed good that fate did not order me to be a brick in the upbuilding of the Mormon Church that has so aptly established herself by the borders of a lake bitter, salt, and hopeless.