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Letter Fifteen

ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE,
AND HOW THE MAN GRING SHOWED ME
THE GARMENTS OF THE ELLEWOMEN

4 March 1890  Pioneer

AFTER MUCH DALLYING and more climbing we came to a pass like all the Bolan Passes in the world, and the Black Canyon of the Gunnison called they it. We had been climbing for very many hours and attained a modest elevation of some seven or eight thousand feet above the sea, when we entered a gorge, remote from the sun, where the rocks were two thousand feet sheer and where a rock-splintered river roared and howled about ten feet below a track, which latter seemed to have been built on the simple principle of dropping miscellaneous dirt into the river and pinning a few rails a-top. There was a glory and a wonder and a mystery about that mad ride which I felt keenly (you will find it properly dressed up in the guide-books), until I had to stop to offer prayers for the safety of the train. There was no hope of seeing the track two hundred yards ahead. We seemed to be running into the bowels of the earth at the invitation of an irresponsible stream. Then the solid rock would open and disclose a curve of awful twistfulness. Then the driver put on all steam and we would go round that curve on one wheel chiefly, the Gunnison River gnashing its teeth enviously below and then when the scared heart had slid down from the open mouth, the process would begin again. The cars overhung the edge of the water, and if a single one of the spiked rails had chosen to spread nothing in the wide world could have saved us from drowning and crippling. I knew we should damage something in the end—the somber horrors of the gorge, the rush of the
jade-green water below and the cheerful tales told by the conductor made me certain of the catastrophe. The conductor said that though the line was reasonably safe in summer, in spring, when the grip of the long cruel frost was relaxing, riven fragments of rock disturbed by the vibration of the train would casually crash into the cars and then—“and then there was no more of thee and me.” The conductor may have been a liar, but don’t attempt the Black Canyon of the Gunnison in spring.  

We had just cleared the Black Canyon and another gorge, and were sailing out into open country nine thousand feet above the level of the sea, when we came most suddenly round a corner upon a causeway across a waste water—half dam and half quarry-pool. The locomotive gave one wild “Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!” but it was too late. He was a beautiful bull and goodness only knows why he had chosen the track for a constitutional with wife. She was flung to the left, but the cow-catcher caught him and, turning him round, heaved him shoulder deep into the pool. The expression of blank, blind bewilderment on his bovine, jovine face was wonderful to behold. He was not angry. I don’t think he was even scared, though he must have traversed ten yards through the air without touching the earth. All he wanted to know was:—“Will somebody have the goodness to tell a respectable old gentleman what in the world or out of it has occurred?” And five minutes later the stream that had been snapping at our heels in the gorges split itself into a dozen silver threads on a breezy upland and became an innocent trout beck, and we halted at a half-dead city, the name of which does not remain with me. It had originally been built on the crest of a wave of prosperity. Once ten thousand people had walked its streets; but the boom had collapsed. The great brick houses and the greater factories were empty. The population lived in little timber shanties on the fringes of the deserted town. There were some railway workshops and things, and the hotel (whose pavement formed the platform of the railway) contained one hundred and more rooms—chiefly vacant. The place in its half-inhabitedness was more desolate than Amber or Chitor. But a man said:—“Trout—six pounds—two miles away,” and the Sorrowful Man and myself went in search of ‘em. The town was ringed by a circle of hills all alive with little thunder storms that
broke across the soft green of the plain in wisps and washes of smoke and amber.

To our tiny party associated himself a lawyer from Chicago. We foregathered on the question of flies, but I didn’t expect to meet Elijah Pogram in the flesh. He delivered orations on the future of England and America and of the Great Federation that the years will bring forth when America and England will belt the globe with their linked hands. According to the notions of the British he made an ass of himself, but for all his high-falutin he talked sense. I might knock through England on a four months’ tour till I found a man capable of putting into words the passionate patriotism that possessed the little Chicago lawyer. And he was a man with points, for he offered me three days’ shooting in Illinois if I would step out of my path a little. I might travel for ten years up and down England ere I found a man who would give a complete stranger so much as a sandwich, and for twenty ere I squeezed as much enthusiasm out of a Britisher. But I didn’t shoot. He and I talked politics and trout-flies all one sultry day as we wandered up and down the shallows of the stream aforesaid. Little fish are sweet. I spent two hours whipping a ripple for a fish that I knew was there, and in the pasture-scented dusk caught a three-pounder on a ragged old brown hackle and landed him after ten minutes’ excited argument. He was a beauty. If ever any man works the Western trout streams he would do well methinks to bring out with him the dingiest flies he possesses. The natives laugh at the tiny English hooks, but they hold well, and duns and drabs and sober greys seem to take the aesthetic tastes of the trout. For salmon (but don’t say that I told you) use the spoon—gold on one side, silver on the other. It is as killing as is a similar article with fish of another calibre. Also the natives seem to use much too coarse tackle.

It was a search for a small boy who should know the river that revealed to me a new phase of life—slack, slovenly and shiftless but very interesting. There was a family in a packing case hut on the outskirts of the town. They had seen the city when it was on the boom and made pretence of being the metropolis of the Rockies; and when the boom was over they clung to the city in the days of its depression. She was affable but deeply coated with dirt; he was grim and grimy, and the little children were simply caked with filth of various descrip-
tions. But they lived in a certain sort of squalid luxury, six or eight of them in two rooms: and they enjoyed the local society. It was their eight-year-old son whom I strove to take out with me, but he had been catching trout all his life and “guessed he didn’t feel like coming” though I proffered him six shillings for what ought to have been a day’s pleasuring. “I’ll stay with Maw,” he said, and from that attitude I could not move him. Maw didn’t attempt to argue with him. “If he says he won’t come, he won’t,” she said, as though he were one of the elemental forces of nature instead of a spankable brat: and “Paw” lounging by the store refused to interfere. Maw told me that she had been a school-teacher in her not-so-distant youth, but she did not tell me what I was dying to know—how she had arrived at this mucky tenement at the back of beyond and why. Though preserving the prettinesses of her New England speech she had come to regard washing as a luxury. Paw chewed tobacco and spat from time to time. Yet when he opened his mouth for other purposes he spoke like a well-educated man. There was a story there, but I couldn’t get at it.

Next day the Man with the Sorrow and myself and a few others began the real ascent of the Rockies; up to that time our climbing didn’t count. The train ran violently up a steep place and was taken to pieces. Five cars were hitched on to two locomotives, and two cars to one locomotive. This seemed to be a kind and thoughtful act, but I was idiot enough to go forward and watch the coupling on of the two rear cars in which Caesar and his fortunes were to travel. Some one had lost or eaten the regularly ordained coupling, and a man picked up from the tailboard of the engine a single iron link about as thick as a fetter-link watch-chain, and “guessed it would do.” Get hauled up a Simla bud by the hook of a lady’s parasol if you wish to appreciate my sentiments when the cars moved up-hill and a link drew tight. Miles away and two thousand feet above our heads rose the shoulder of a hill epauletted with the long line of a snow-tunnel. The first section of the cars crawled a quarter of a mile ahead of us, the track snaked and looped behind and there was a black khud to the left. So we went up and up and up till the thin air grew thinner and the chunk, chunk, chunk of the labouring locomotive was answered by the oppressed beating of the exhausted heart. Through the chequed light and shade of the snow tunnels (horrible caverns of rude timbering)
we ground our way, halting now and again to allow a down-train to pass. One monster of forty mineral cars slid by scarce held by four locomotives, their brakes screaming and chur-thing in chorus; and in the end, after a glimpse at half America spread map-wise leagues below us, we halted at the head of the longest snow tunnel of all, on the crest of the divide between ten and eleven thousand feet above the level of the sea. The locomotive wished to draw breath, and the passengers to gather the flowers that nodded impertinently through the chinks of the boarding. A lady passenger’s nose began to bleed, and other ladies threw themselves down on the seats and gasped with the gasping train, while a wind as keen as a knife edge rioted down the grimy tunnel.

Then, dispatching a pilot-engine to clear the way, we began the downward portion of the journey with every available brake on and frequent shrieks, till after some hours we reached the level plain and later the city of Denver, where the Man with the Sorrow went his way and left me to journey on to Omaha alone after one hasty glance at Denver. The pulse of that town was too like the rushing mighty wind in the rocky mountain tunnel. It made me tired because complete strangers desired me to do something to mines which were in mountains and to purchase building blocks upon inaccessible cliffs; and once, a Fie! Fie! [woman] urged that I should supply her with strong drinks. I had almost forgotten that such attacks were possible in any land, for the outward and visible signs of public morality in American towns are generally safe-guarded. For that I respect this people. Omaha, Nebraska, was but a halting-place on the road to Chicago, but it revealed to me horrors that I would not wittingly have missed. The city to casual investigation seemed to be populated entirely by Germans, Poles, Slavs, Hungarians, Croats, Magyars and all the scum of the Eastern European States, but it must have been laid out by Americans, for no other people would cut the roaring traffic of a main street with two streams of railway lines each some eight or nine tracks wide, and cheerfully drive tramcars across the metals. Every now and again they have horrible railway-crossing accidents at Omaha, but nobody seems to think of building an overhead bridge. That would interfere with the vested interests of the undertakers.

Be blessed to hear some details of one of that class.
There was a shop the like of which I had never seen before for its windows were filled with dress-coats for men and dresses for women. But the studs of the shirt were made of stamped cloth upon the shirt front and there were no trousers to those coats—nothing but a sweep of cheap black cloth falling like an abbé’s frock. In the doorway sat a young man reading Pollock’s *Course of Time,* and by that I knew that he was an undertaker. His name was Gring, which is a beautiful name, and I talked to him on the mysteries of his craft. He was an enthusiast and an artist. I told him how corpses were burnt in India. Said he: “We’re vastly superior. We hold—that is to say embalm—our dead. So!” Whereon he produced the horrible weapons of his trade and most practically showed me how you “held” a man back from that corruption which is his birthright. “And I wish I would live a few generations just to see how my people keep. But I’m sure it’s all right. Nothing can touch ‘em after I’ve embalmed ‘em.” Then he displayed one of those ghastly dress suits, and when I laid a shuddering hand upon it behold it crumbled to nothing, for the white linen was sewn on to the black cloth and—there was no back to it. That was the horror. The garment was a shell. “We dress a man in that,” said Gring, laying it out tastily on the counter. “As you see here, our caskets have a plate glass window in front” (Oh me, but that window in the coffin was fitted with plush like a brougham window!) “and you don’t see anything below the level of the man’s waistcoat. Consequently…” He unrolled the terrible cheap black cloth that falls down over the stark feet, and I jumped back. “Of course a man can be dressed in his own clothes if he likes, but these are the regular things: and for women look at this.” He took up the body of a high-necked dinner dress in subdued lilac, slashed and puffed and bedeviled with black, but, like the dress suit, backless and below the waist turning to shroud.

“That’s for an old maid. But for young girls we give white with imitation pearls round the neck. That looks very pretty through the window of the casket—you see there’s a cushion for the head—with flowers banked all round.” Can you imagine anything more awful than to take your last rest as much of a dead fraud as ever you were a living lie—to go into the darkness one half of you shaved, trimmed and dressed for an evening party, while the other half—the half that your friends cannot see—is enwrapped in a flapping black sheet?
I know a little bit about burial customs in various places in the world, and I tried hard to make Mr. Gring comprehend dimly the awful heathendom that he was responsible for—the grotesquerie, the giggling horror of it all. But he couldn’t see it even when he showed me a little boy’s last suit, he couldn’t see it. He said it was quite right to embalm, and trick out and hypocritically bedizen the poor innocent dead in their superior cushioned and pillowed caskets with the window in front.

Bury me, cased in canvas like a fishing-rod, in the deep sea; burn me on a back-water of the Hughli with half a maund of damp wood and no ghi; pin me under a Pullman car and let the lighted stove do its worst; sizzle me with a fallen electric wire or whelm me in the sludge of a broken river dam; but may I never go down to the pit grinning out of a plate-glass window, in a backless dress coat and the front half of a black saloo dressing-gown—not though I were “held” against the ravage of the grave for ever and ever. Amen!