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Letter Sixteen

HOW I STRUCK CHICAGO, AND HOW CHICAGO
STRUCK ME. OF RELIGION, POLITICS AND
PIG-STICKING, —AND THE INCARNATION
OF THE CITY AMONG THE SHAMBLES

“I know thy cunning and thy greed,
Thy hard high lust and willful deed,
And all thy glory loves to tell
Of specious gifts material.”

18 March 1890  Pioneer

I HAVE STRUCK a city—a real city—and they call it Chicago. The other places do not count. San Francisco was a pleasure-resort as well as a city, and Salt Lake was a phenomenon. This place is the first American city I have encountered. It holds rather more than a million people with bodies, and stands on the same sort of soil as Calcutta. Having seen it I urgently desire never to see it again. It is inhabited by savages. Its water is the water of the Hugli, and its air is dirt. Also it says that it is the “boss” town of America.

I do not believe that it has anything to do with this country. They told me to go to the Palmer House, which is a gilded and mirrored rabbit-warren, and there I found a huge hall of tessellated marble crammed with people talking about money, and spitting about everywhere. Other barbarians charged in and out of this inferno with letters and telegrams in their hands, and yet others shouted at each other. A man who had drunk quite as much as was good for him told me that this was “the finest hotel in the finest city on God A’mighty’s
earth.” By the way, when an American wishes to indicate the next
country or State he says, “God A’mighty’s earth.” This prevents dis-
cussion and flatters his vanity.

Then I went out into the streets, which are long and flat and with-
out end. And verily it is not a good thing to live in the East for any
length of time. Your ideas grow to clash with those held by every
right-thinking white man. I looked down interminable vistas flanked
with nine, ten and fifteen storied houses, and crowded with men and
women, and the show impressed me with a great horror. Except in
London—and I have forgotten what London is like—I had never seen
so many white people together, and never such a collection of miser-
ables. There was no colour in the street and no beauty—only a maze of
wire-ropes overhead and dirty stone flagging underfoot. A cab-driver
volunteered to show me the glory of the town for so much an hour and
with him I wandered far. He conceived that all this turmoil and
squash was a thing to be reverently admired, that it was good to huddle
men together in fifteen layers, one atop of the other, and to dig
holes in the ground for offices. He said that Chicago was a live town,
and that all the creatures hurrying by me were engaged in business.
That is to say they were trying to make some money that they might
not die through lack of food to put into their bellies. He took me to ca-
nals, black as ink, and filled with untold abominations, and bade me
watch the stream of traffic across the bridges. He then took me into a
saloon, and while I drank, made me note that the floor was covered
with coins sunk into cement. A Hottentot would not have been guilty
of this sort of barbarism. The coins made an effect pretty enough, but
the man who put them there had no thought to beauty and therefore
he was a savage. Then my cab-driver showed me business blocks, gay
with signs and studded with fantastic and absurd advertisements of
goods, and looking down the long street so adorned it was as though
each vender stood at his door howling: “For the sake of money employ
or buy of me and me only!” Have you ever seen a crowd at a famine re-
 lief distribution? You know then how the men leap into the air,
stretching out their arms above the crowd in the hope of being seen;
while the women do dolorously slap the stomachs of their children
and whimper. I had sooner watch famine relief than the white man
engaged in what he calls legitimate competition. The one I under-
stand. The other makes me ill. And the cabman said that these things were the proof of progress, and by that I knew he had been reading his newspaper, as every intelligent American should. The papers tell their clientele in language fitted to their comprehension that the snarling together of telegraph wires, the heaving up of houses and the making of money is progress.

I spent ten hours in that huge wilderness, wandering through scores of miles of these terrible streets, and jostling some few hundred thousand of these terrible people who talked paisa bat through their noses. The cabman left me: but after a while I picked up another man who was full of figures, and into my ears he poured them as occasion required or the big blank factories suggested. Here they turned out so many hundred thousand dollars' worth of such and such an article; there so many million other things; this house was worth so many million dollars; that one so many million more or less. It was like listening to a child babbling of its hoard of shells. It was like watching a fool playing with buttons. But I was expected to do more than listen or watch. He demanded that I should admire: and the utmost that I could say was: —“Are these things so? Then I am very sorry for you.” That made him angry and he said that insular envy made me unresponsive. So you see I could not make him understand.

About four and a half hours after Adam was turned out of the garden of Eden he felt hungry, and so, bidding Eve take care that her head was not broken by the descending fruit, shinned up a cocoa-nut palm. That hurt his legs, cut his breast, and made him breathe heavily, and Eve was tormented with fear lest her lord should miss his footing and so bring the tragedy of this world to an end ere the curtain had fairly risen. Had I met Adam then I should have been sorry for him. To-day I find eleven hundred thousand of his sons just as far advanced as their father in the art of getting food, and immeasurably inferior to him in that they think that their palm trees lead straight to the skies. Consequently I am sorry in rather more than a million different ways. In the East bread comes naturally even to the poorest by a little scratching or the gift of a friend not quite so poor. In less favoured countries one is apt to forget. Then I went to bed. And that was on a Saturday night.
Sunday brought me the queerest experience of all—a revelation of barbarism complete. I found a place that was officially described as a church. It was a circus really, but that the worshippers did not know. There were flowers all about the building which was fitted up with plush and stained oak and much luxury, including twisted brass candlesticks of severest Gothic design. To these things and congregation of savages entered suddenly a wonderful man completely in the confidence of their God, whom he treated colloquially and exploited very much as a newspaper reporter would exploit a foreign potentate. But unlike the newspaper reporter, he never allowed his listeners to forget that he and not He was the center of attraction. With a voice of silver and with imagery borrowed from the auction-room he built up for his hearers a heaven on the lines of the Palmer House (but with all the gilding real gold and all the plate-glass diamond) and set in the center of it a loud-voiced, argumentative and very shrewd creation that he called God. One sentence at this point caught my delighted ear. It was apropos of some question of the Judgment and ran: —“No! I tell you God doesn’t do business that way.” He was giving them a deity whom they could comprehend, in a gold and jewel heaven in which they could take a natural interest. He interlarded his performance with the slang of the streets, the counter and the Exchange, and he said that religion ought to enter into daily life. Consequently I presume he introduced it as daily life—his own and the life of his friends.

Then I escaped before the blessing, desiring no benediction at such hands. But the persons who listened seemed to enjoy themselves and I understood that I had met with a popular preacher. Later on when I had perused the sermons of a gentleman called Talmage and some others, I perceived that I had been listening to a very mild specimen. Yet that man, with his brutal gold and silver idols, his hands-in-pocket-cigar-in-mouth-and-hat-on-the-back-of-the-head style of dealing with the sacred vessels would count himself spiritually quite competent to send a mission to convert the Indians. All that Sunday I listened to people who said that the mere fact of spiking down strips of iron to wood and getting a steam and iron thing to run along them was progress. That the telephone was progress, and the network of wires overhead was progress. They repeated their statements again and again. One of them took me to their city hall and board of trade
works and pointed it out with pride. It was very ugly but very big, and the streets in front of it were narrow and unclean. When I saw the faces of the men who did business in that building I felt that there had been a mistake in their billeting.

By the way, ‘tis a consolation to feel that I am not writing to an English audience. Then should I have to fall into feigned ecstasies over the marvelous progress of Chicago since the days of the great fire, to allude casually to the raising of the entire city so many feet above the level of the lake which it faces, and generally to grovel before the golden calf. But you who are desperately poor, and therefore by these standards of no account, know things and will understand when I write that they have managed to get a million of men together on flat land and that the bulk of these men appear to be lower than mahajans and not so companionable as a Punjabi jat after harvest. But I don’t think it was the blind hurry of the people, their argot, and their grand ignorance of things beyond their immediate interests that depressed me so much as a study of the daily papers of Chicago. Imprimis, there was some sort of dispute between New York and Chicago as to which town should give an exhibition of products to be hereafter holden, and through the medium of their more dignified journals the two cities were ya-hooing and hi-yi-ing at each other like opposition newsboys. They called it humour, but it sounded like something quite different. That was only the first trouble. The second lay in the tone of the productions. Leading articles which include gems such as:—

“Back of such and such a place,” or “We noticed, Tuesday, such an event,” or “don’t” for “does not” are things to be accepted with thankfulness. All that made me want to cry was that, in these papers, were faithfully reproduced all the war-cries and “back-talk” of the Palmer House bar, the slang of the barbers’ shops, the mental elevation and integrity of the Pullman car porter, the dignity of the Dime Museum and the accuracy of the excited fishwife. I am sternly forbidden to believe that the paper educates the public. Then I am compelled to believe that the public educate the paper, yet suicides on the press are rare.

Just when the sense of unreality and oppression were strongest upon me, and when I most wanted help, a man sat at my side and began to talk what he called politics. I had chanced to pay about six shil-
lings for a traveling cap worth eighteen pence and he made of the fact a text for a sermon. He said that this was a rich country and that the people liked to pay two hundred per cent on the value of a thing. They could afford it. He said that the Government imposed a protective duty of from ten to seventy per cent on foreign made articles, and that the American manufacturer consequently could sell his goods for a healthy sum. Thus an imported hat would, with duty, cost two guineas. The American manufacturer would make a hat for seventeen shillings and sell it for one pound fifteen. In these things, he said, lay the greatness of America and the effectiveness of England. Competition between factory and factory kept the prices down to decent limits, but I was never to forget that this people were a rich people, not like the pauper Continentals, and that they enjoyed paying duties. To my weak intellect this seemed rather like juggling with counters. Everything that I have yet purchased costs about twice as much as it would in England, and when native-made is of inferior quality. Moreover since these lines were first thought of I have visited a gentleman who owned a factory which used to produce things. He owned the factory still. Not a man was in it, but he was drawing a handsome income from a syndicate of firms for keeping it closed in order that it might not produce things. This man said that if protection were abandoned, a tide of pauper labour would flood the country, and as I looked at his factory I thought how entirely better it was to have no labour of any kind whatever rather than face so horrible a future. Meantime, do you remember that this peculiar country enjoys paying money for value not received. I am an alien and for the life of me cannot see why six shillings should be paid for eighteen-penny caps or eight shillings for half-crown cigar-cases. When the country fills up to a decently populated level a few million people who are not aliens will be smitten with the same sort of blindness.

But my friend’s assertion somehow thoroughly suited the grotesque ferocity of Chicago. See now and judge! In the village of Isser Jang on the road to Montgomery there be four changar women who winnow corn—some seventy bushels a year. Beyond their hut lives Puran Dass, the money lender, who on good security lends as much as five thousand rupees in a year. Jowala Singh, the lohar, mends the village ploughs—some thirty, broken at the share, in three hundred and
sixty-five days: and Hukm Chund, who is letter-writer and head of
the little club under the travellers’ tree, generally keeps the village
posted in such gossip as the Nai and the Dhai have not yet made pub-
lic property. Chicago husks and winnows her wheat by the million
bushels, a hundred banks lend hundreds of millions of dollars in the
year, and scores of factories turn out plough gear and machinery by
steam. Scores of daily papers do work which Hukm Chund and the
Nai and the Dhai perform, with due regard for public opinion, in the
village of Isser Jang. So far as manufactures go, the difference be-
tween Chicago on the lake and Isser Jang on the Montgomery road is
one of degree only, and not of kind. As far as the understanding of
the uses of life goes Isser Jang, for all its seasonal cholera, has the ad-

tage over Chicago. Jowala Singh knows and takes care to avoid the
three or four ghoul-haunted fields on the outskirts of the village; but
he is not urged by millions of devils to run about all day in the sun and
swear that his ploughshares are the best in the Punjab; nor does
Puran Dass fly forth in a ekke [cart] more than once or twice a year,
and he knows, on a pinch, how to use the railway and the telegraph as
well as any son of Israel in Chicago. But this is absurd. The East is not
the West and these men must continue to deal with the machinery of
life, and to call it progress. Their very preachers dare not rebuke
them. They gloss over the hunting for money and the thrice sharp-
ened bitterness of Adam’s curse by saying that such things dower a
man with a larger range of thoughts and higher aspirations. They do
not say: “Free yourselves from your own slavery,” but rather, “If you
can possibly manage it, do not set quite so much store on the things of

this world.” And they do not know what the things of this world are.

I went off to see cattle killed by way of clearing my head, which, as
you will perceive, was getting muddled. They say every Englishman
goes to the Chicago stock-yards. You shall find them about six miles
from the city: and once having seen them will never forget the sight.
As far as the eye can reach stretches a township of cattle-pens, cun-
ningly divided into blocks so that the animals of any pen can be
speedily driven out close to an inclined timber path which leads to an
elevated covered way straddling high above the pens. These viaducts
are two-storied. On the upper storey tramp the doomed cattle, stolidly
for the most part. On the lower, with a scuffling of sharp hooves and
multitudinous yells, run the pigs. The same end is appointed for each. Thus you will see the gangs of cattle waiting their turn—as they wait sometimes for days; and they need not be distressed by the sight of their fellows running about in the fear of death. All they know is that a man on horseback causes their next-door neighbours to move by means of a whip. Certain bars and fences are unshipped and, behold, that crowd have gone up the mouth of a sloping tunnel and return no more. It is different with pigs. They shriek back the news of the exodus to their friends, and a hundred pens skirl responsive. It was to the pigs I first addressed myself. Selecting a viaduct which was full of them, as I could hear though I could not see, I marked a somber building whereto it ran, and went there, not unalarmed by stray cattle who had managed to escape from their proper quarters. A pleasant smell of brine warned me of what was coming. I entered the factory and found it full of pork in barrels, and on another storey more pork unbarrelled, and in a huge room, the halves of swine for whose behoof great lumps of ice were being pitched in at the window. That room was the mortuary chamber where the pigs lie for a little while in state ere they begin their progress through such passages as kings may sometimes travel. Turning a corner and not noting an overhead arrangement of greased rail, wheel and pulley I ran into the arms of four eviscerated carcases, all pure white and of a human aspect, being pushed by a man clad in vehement red. When I leaped aside, the floor was slippery under me. Also there was a flavour of farmyard in my nostrils and the shouting of a multitude in my ears. But there was no joy in that shouting. Twelve men stood in two lines—six a-side. Between them and overhead ran the railway of death that had nearly shunted me through the window. Each man carried a knife, the sleeves of his shirt were cut off at the elbows, and from bosom to heel he was blood-red. Beyond this perspective was a column of steam and beyond that was where I worked my awe struck way unwilling to touch beam or wall, but almost unable to keep my footing on the slime. The atmosphere was stifling as a night in the Rains by reason of the steam and the crowd. I climbed to the beginning of things and, perched upon a narrow beam, overlooked very nearly all the pigs ever bred in Wisconsin. They had just been shot out of the mouth of the viaduct and huddled together in a large pen. Thence they were flicked
persuasively a few at a time into a smaller chamber, and there a man
fixed tackle on their hinder legs so that they rose in the air suspended
from the railway of death. Oh! It was then they shrieked and called on
their mothers and made promises of amendment, till the tackle-man
punted them in their backs, and they slid head down into a brick
floored passage, very like a big kitchen sink that was blood-red. There
awaited them a red man with a knife which he passed jauntily
through their throats, and the full voiced shriek became a sputter,
and there a fall as of heavily tropical rain and the red man who was
backed against the passage wall, you will understand, stood clear of
the wildly kicking hooves and passed his hand over his eyes not from
any feeling of compassion but because the spurted blood was in his
eyes, and he had barely time to stick the next arrival. Then that first
stuck swine dropped, still kicking, into a great vat of boiling water
and spoke no more words but wallowed in obedience to some unseen
machinery and presently came forth at the lower end of the vat and
was heaved on the blades of a blunt paddle wheel, things which said
“Hough! Hough! Hough!” and skelped all the hair off him except that
little a couple of men with knives could remove. Then he was again
hitched by the heels to that said [sd] railway and passed down the
line of the twelve men—each man with a knife—losing with each man
a certain amount of his individuality which was taken away in a
wheelbarrow, and when he reached the last man he was very beauti-
ful to behold but excessively unstuffed and limp. Preponderance of in-
dividuality was ever a bar to foreign travel. That pig could have been
in no case to visit you in India had he not parted with some of his most
cherished notions.

The dissecting part impressed me not so much as the slaying. They
were so excessively alive, these pigs. And then they were so exces-
sively dead, and the man in the dripping, clammy, hot passage did not
seem to care, and ere the blood of such an one had ceased to foam on
the floor such another and four friends with him had shrieked and
died. But a pig is only the unclean animal—the forbidden of the
Prophet. I was destined to make rather a queer discovery when I went
over to the cattle slaughter. All the buildings here were on a much
larger scale and there was no sound of trouble, but I could smell the
salt reek of blood before I set foot in the place. The cattle did not come
directly through the viaduct as the pigs had done. They debouched into a yard by the hundred, and they were big red brutes carrying much flesh. In the center of that yard stood a red Texan steer with a headstall on his wicked head. No man controlled him. He was, so to speak, picking his teeth and whistling in an open byre of his own when the cattle arrived. As soon as the first one had fearfully quitted the viaduct, this red devil put his hands in his pockets and slouched across the yard, no man guiding him. Then he lowed something to the effect that he was the regularly appointed guide of the establishment and would show them round. They were country folk but they knew how to behave; and so followed Judas some hundred strong, patiently and with a look of bland wonder in their faces. I saw his broad back jogging in advance of them, up a lime-washed incline where I was forbidden to follow. Then a door shut, and in a minute back came Judas with the air of a virtuous plough bullock and took up his place in his byre. Somebody laughed across the yard, but I heard no sound of cattle from the big brick building into which the mob had disappeared. Only Judas chewed the cud with a malignant satisfaction, and so I knew there was trouble and ran round to the front of the factory and so entered and stood aghast.

Who takes count of the prejudices that we absorb through the skin, by way of our surroundings? It was not the spectacle that impressed me. The first thought that almost spoke itself aloud was: “They are killing kine,” and it was a shock. The pigs were nobody’s concern, but cattle—the brothers of the cow, the sacred cow—were quite otherwise. The next time an M.P. tells me that India either Sultanizes or Brahminizes a man, I shall believe about half what he says. It is unpleasant to watch the slaughter of cattle when one has laughed at the notion for a few years. I could not see actually what was done in the first instance because the row of stalls in which they lay was separated from me by fifty impassable feet of butchers and slung carcasses. All I know is that men swung open the doors of a stall as occasion required, and there lay two steers already stunned, and breathing heavily. These two they pole-axed, and half raising them by tackle they cut their throats. Two men skinned each carcase, somebody cut off the head, and in half a minute more the overhead rail carried two sides of beef to their appointed place. There was clamour enough in
the operating room, but from the waiting cattle, invisible on the other side of the line of pens, never a sound. They went to their death, trusting Judas, without a word. They were slain at the rate of five a minute, and if the pig-men were spattered with blood, their butchers were bathed in it. The blood ran in muttering gutters. There was no place for hand or foot that was not coated with thicknesses of dried blood and the stench of it in the nostrils bred fear.

And then the same merciful Providence that has showered good things on my path throughout sent me an embodiment of the city of Chicago so that I might remember it for ever. Women come sometimes to see the slaughter, as they would come to see the slaughter of men. And there entered that vermillion hall a young woman of large mould, with brilliantly scarlet lips, and heavy eyebrows and dark hair that came in a “widow’s peak” on the forehead. She was well and healthy and alive exceedingly, and she was dressed in flaming red and black and her feet (know you that the feet of American women are like unto the feet of fairies?) her feet I say were cased in red leather shoes. She stood in a patch of sunlight, the red blood under her shoes, the vivid carcases stacked round her, a bullock bleeding its life away not six feet away from her and the death factory roaring all round her. She looked curiously, with hard bold eyes, and was not ashamed.

Then said I: —“This is a special Sending. I have seen the City of Chicago.” And I went away to get peace and rest.