Letter Seventeen

HOW I FOUND PEACE AT MUSQUASH
ON THE MONONGAHELA

“How I found peace at Musquash
On the Monongahela”

“Prince, blown by many a western breeze
Our vessels greet you, treasure-laden;
We send them all—but best of these
A free and frank young Yankee maiden.”

25 March 1890  Pioneer

It is a mean thing and an unhandsome to “do” a continent in five hundred mile jumps. But after those swine and bullocks at Chicago I felt as though complete change of air would be good. The United States at present hinge in or about Chicago, as a double-leaved screen hinges. To be sure the tiny New England States call a trip to Pennsylvania “going west,” but the larger minded citizen seems to reckon his longitude from Chicago “Eelenoy.” Twenty years hence the center of population—that shaded square on the census map—will have shifted men say far west of Chicago. Twenty years later it will be on the Pacific slope. Twenty years after that America will begin to crowd up and there will be some trouble. People will demand manufactured goods for their reduced-establishment households at the cheapest possible rates, and the cry that the land is rich enough to afford protection will cease with great abruptness. At present it is the ryot—the farmer—who pays most dearly for the luxury of high prices. In the old days when the land was fresh and there was plenty of it and it cropped like the Garden of Eden, he did not mind paying. Now there is not so much free land, and the old acres are needing stimulants, which cost money, and the ryot, who pays for everything, is beginning
to ask questions. Also the great American nation, which individually never shuts a door behind its noble self, very seldom attempts to put back anything that it has taken from Nature’s shelves. It grabs all it can and moves on. But the moving-on is nearly finished and the grabbing must stop, and then the Federal Government will have to establish a Woods and Forests Department the like of which was never seen in the world before. And all the people who have been accustomed to take, hack, mangle and burn timber as they please will object, with shots and protestations, to this infringement of their rights. That will be the beginning of a great many salutary reforms consequently on the crowding up. The nigger will breed bounteously, and he will have to be reckoned with; and the manufacturer will have to be contented with smaller profits, and he will have to be reckoned with; and the railways will no longer rule the countries through which they run, and they will have to be reckoned with. And nobody will approve of it in the least.

Yes: it will be a spectacle for all the world to watch, this big, slashing colt of a nation, that has got off with a flying start on a freshly littered course being pulled back to the ruck by that very mutton-fisted jockey Necessity. There will be excitement in America when a few score millions of “sovereigns” discover that what they considered the outcome of their own Government is but the rapidly diminishing bounty of Nature; and that if they want to get on comfortably they must tackle every single problem from labour to finance humbly, without gasconade and afresh. But at present they look “that all the to-morrows shall be as to-day,” and if you argue with them they say that the Democratic Idea will keep things going. They believe in that Idea, and the less well-informed fortify themselves in their belief by curious assertions as to the despotism that exists in England. This is pure provincialism of course; but it is very funny to listen to, especially when you compare the theory with the practice (pistol, chiefly) as proven in the newspapers. I have striven zealously to find out where the central authority of the land lies. It isn’t at Washington, because the Federal Government can’t do anything to the States save run *dak* and collect a Federal *takkus* or two. It isn’t in the States, because the townships can do as they like; and it isn’t in the townships, because these are bossed by alien voters or rings of patriotic home-
bred citizens. And it certainly is not in the citizens, because they are governed and coerced by an almost despotist power of public opinion as represented by their papers, preachers or local society. I found one man who told me that if anything went wrong in this huge congress of kings—if there was a split or an upheaval or a smash—the people in detail would be subject to the Idea of the sovereign people in mass. This is a survival from the Civil War when, you remember, the people in a majority did with guns and swords slay and wound the people in detail. All the same the notion seems very much like the worship by the savage of the unloaded rifle as it leans against the wall.

But the men and women set us an example in patriotism. They buck like Walers; but they believe in their land and its future and its honour and its glory, and they are not ashamed to say so. From the largest to the least runs this same proud, passionate conviction to which I take off my hat and for which I love them. An average English householder seems to regard his country as an abstraction that ought to supply him with certain temporal advantages in the way of policemen and fire-brigades. The cockney cad simply cannot understand what the word means. The bloomin’ toffs he knows and the law, and the soldiers that supply him with a spectacle in the Parks; but he would howl in your face at the notion of any duty being owed by himself to his land. Pick an American of the second generation anywhere you please—from the cab-rank, the porter’s room or the plough-tail—‘specially the plough-tail—and that man will make you understand in five minutes that he understands what manner of thing his Republic is. He might laugh at a law that didn’t suit his convenience, draw your eye-teeth in a bargain, and applaud ‘cuteness on the outer verge of swindling: but you should hear him stand up and sing:—

“My country ‘tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing!”

I have heard a few thousand of them engaged in that employment. I respect him. There is too much Romeo and too little balcony about our National Anthem. With the American article it is all balcony. There must be born a poet who shall give the English the song of their own country—which is to say of about half the world. Remains then only to compose the greatest song of all—The Saga of the Anglo-
Saxon all round the earth—a paean that shall combine the terrible slow swing of the Battle Hymn of the Republic (which, if you know not, get chanted to you) with “Britannia Needs no Bulwarks,” the skirl of the British Grenadiers with that perfect quickstep, “Marching through Georgia” and at the end the wail of the Dead March. For We, even We, who share the earth between us as no gods have ever shared it, we also are mortal in the matter of our single selves. Will any one take the contract?

It was with these rambling notions that I arrived at the infinite peace of the tiny township of Musquash on the Monongahela River, and here I eat salt and for that reason the name is veiled. The clang and tumult of Chicago belonged to another world with which I had no concern. Imagine a rolling, wooded English landscape, under softest of blue skies, dotted at three mile intervals with fat little, quiet little villages or aggressive little manufacturing towns that the trees and folds of the hills mercifully prevented from betraying their presence unseemly. The golden-rod blazed in the pastures against the green of the mulleins, and the cows picked their way home through the twisted paths between the blackberry bushes. All summer was on the orchards, and the apples—such apples as we dream of when we eat the woolly imitations of Kashmir—were ripe and toothsome. It was good to lie in a hammock with half-shut eyes, and in the utter stillness, to hear the apples dropping from the trees, and the tinkle of the cowbells as the cows walked statelily down the main-road of the village. Everybody in that restful place seemed to have just as much as he wanted—videlicet, a house with all comfortable appliances, a big or little verandah wherein to spend the day, a neatly shaved garden with a wild wealth of flowers, some cows and an orchard. Everybody knew everybody else intimately, and what they did not know, the local daily paper—a daily for a village of twelve hundred people—supplied. There was a court-house where justice was done, and a jail where some very enviable prisoners lived, and there were four or five churches of four or five denominations. Also it was impossible to buy openly any liquor in the little paradise. But, and this is a very serious but, you could by procuring a medical certificate get strong drinks from the chemist. This was nasty, for a chemist ought only to supply “pink pegs,” and the bulk of the medical certificates were procured for
base ends. That is the disadvantage of prohibition. It makes a man who wants a drink a shirker and a contriver, which things are not good for the soul of a man, and presently, ‘specially if he be young, causes him to believe that he may just as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb; and the end of that young man is not pretty. Far be it from me to prejudice the idyllic arrangements of Musquash; but nothing except a rattling fall will persuade an average colt that a fence is not meant to be jumped over; whereas if he be turned out into the open he learns to carry himself with discretion. One heard a good deal of this same dread of drink in Musquash, and even the maidens seemed to know too much about its effects upon certain unregenerate youths, who, if they had been once made thoroughly, effectually and insistently drunk—with a tepid brandy and soda thrust before their goose fleshed noses on the terrible next morning—would perhaps have seen the futility of their ways. It was a sin by certain cannons to imbibe lager and—expero crede—you can get dropsy on that stuff long before you can get drunk. “But what man knows his mind?” Besides, it was all their own affair. The little community seemed to be as self-contained as an Indian village. Had the rest of the land sunk under the sea, Musquash would have gone on asking for no orders, sending its sons to school in order to make them “good citizens,” which is the constant prayer of the American father, settling its own road-making, local cesses, town-lot arbitrations, and internal government by ballot and vote and due respect to the voices of the headmen (which is the salvation of the ballot), until such time as all should take their places in the cemetery appointed for their faith. Here were Americans and no aliens—men ruling themselves by themselves and for themselves, and their wives and their children—in peace, order, and decency.

But what went straightest to this heart, though they did not know it, was that they were Methody folk for the most part—ay, Methody as ever trod a Yorkshire Moor or drove on a Sunday to some chapel of the Faith in the Dales. The old Methody talk was there, with the discipline whereby the souls of the just are, sometimes to their intense vexation, made perfect on this earth in order that they may “take out their letters and live and die in good standing.” If you don’t know the talk you won’t know what that means. The discipline, or discipline, is no thing to be trifled with, and its working among a congregation de-
pends entirely upon the tact, humanity and sympathy of the leader who works it. He, knowing what youth’s desires are, can turn the soul in the direction of good gently, instead of wrenching it savagely towards the right path only to see it break away quivering and scared. The arm of the Discipline is long. A maiden told me, as a new and strange fact and one that would interest a foreigner, of a friend of hers who had once been admonished by some elders somewhere—not in Musquash—for the heinous crime of dancing. She, the friend, did not in the least like it. She would not. Can’t you imagine the delightful results of a formal wigging administered by a youngish and austere elder who was not accustomed to make allowances for the natural dancing instincts of the young of the human animal? The hot irons that are held forth to scare may also sear, as those who have ever lain under an unfortunate exposition of the old Faith can attest.¹⁰

But it was all immensely interesting—the absolutely fresh, wholesome, sweet life that paid due reverence to the things of the next world, but took good care to get enough tennis in the cool of the evening; that concerned itself as honestly and thoroughly with the daily round, the trivial task (and that same task is anything but trivial when you are “helped” by an American “help”) as with the salvation of the soul. I had the honour of meeting in the flesh, even as Miss Louisa Alcott¹¹ drew them, Meg and Joe and Beth and Amy whom you ought to know. There was no affectation or concealment in their lives who had nothing to conceal. There were many “little women” in that place, because even as is the case in England, the boys had gone out to seek their fortunes. Some were working in the thundering, clangring city only thirty miles away, others had removed to the infinite West, and others had disappeared in the languid, lazy South; and the maidens waited their return, as is the custom of maidens all over the world. Then the boys would come back in the soft sunlight, chiefly attired in careful raiment, their tongues cleansed of evil-words and discourtesy. They had just come to look—bless their carefully groomed heads—so they had, and the maidens in white dresses glimmered like ghosts on the stoop and received them according to their merits. Mamma had nothing to do with this, nor papa either, for he was down-town trying to drive reason into the head of a land surveyor; and all down the shaded, lazy, intimate street you heard the garden gates click and
clash, as the mood of the man varied, and bursts of pleasant laughter where three or four—be sure the white muslins were among them—discussed a picnic past or a buggy-drive to come. Then the couples went their ways and talked together till the young men had to go at last on account of the trains, and all trooped joyously down to the station and thought no harm of it. And, indeed, why should they? From her fifteenth year the American maiden moves among “the boys” as a sister among brothers. They are her servants to take her out riding, which is driving, to give her flowers and candy. The last two items are expensive, which is good for the young man, as teaching him to value friendship that costs a little in cash and may necessitate economy on the cigar side. As to the maiden she is taught to respect herself, that her fate is in her own hands, and that she is the more stringently bound by the very measure of the liberty which is so freely accorded to her. Wherefore, in her own language, “she has a lovely time” with about two or three hundred boys who have sisters of their own, and a very accurate perception that if they were unworthy of their trust a syndicate of other boys would probably pass them into a world where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage—much less preliminary palaver. And so time passes till the maiden knows the other side of the house, knows that a man is not a demi-god nor a mysteriously veiled monster, but an average, egotistical, vain, glutinous, but on the whole companionable, sort of person, to be soothed, fed, and managed—knowledge that does not come to her sister in England till after a few years of matrimony. And then she makes her choice. The Golden Light touches eyes that are full of comprehension; but the light is golden none the less, for she makes just the same sweet, irrational choices that an English girl does—with this advantage: she knows a little more, has experience in entertaining, insight into the businesses, employs and shouks of men, gathered from countless talks with the boys and causers intimes with the other girls who find time at those mysterious conclaves to discuss what Tom, Ted, Stuke or Jack have been doing in real-estate, improved ditto, wires, oil, or that desirable business known as “kew-pon-cutting”—Anglice, living on your revenues. Thus it happens that she is a companion, in the fullest sense of the word of the man she weds, zealous for the interest of the firm, to be consulted in time of stress and to be called
upon for help and sympathy in time of danger. Pleasant it is that one heart should beat for you; but it is better when the head above that heart has been thinking hard on your behalf and the lips, that are also very pleasant to kiss, give wise counsel.

When the American maiden—I speak now for the rank and file of that noble army—is once married, why, bus, hogya! She has had her lovely time. It may have been five, seven or ten years according to circumstances. She abdicates promptly with startling speed, and her place knows her no more except as with her husband. The Queen is dead, or looking after the house. This same household work seems to be the thing that ages the American woman. She is infamously “helped” by the Irish trollop and the nigger alike. It is not fair upon her, because she has to do three parts of the housework herself and in dry, nerve-straining air the “chores” are a burden. Be thankful, O my people, for Mauz Baksh, Kadir Baksh, and the ayah while they are with you. They are twice as handy as the unkempt slatterns of the furnished apartments to which you will return, Commissioners though you be; and five times as clever as the Amelia Araminta Rebellia Secessia Jackson (coloured) under whose ineptitude and insolence the young American housewife groans and the special horror of the nigger is—well, I am not of a sensitive nose—it has sniffed many things; but there was a nigger in the course of my wanderings that did me the honour of cleaning my room, and by reason of the abhorrent whiff of the chain-gang, the musty reek of the slave dhow, I could not enter that room for twenty minutes. It was ghastly, and what made it worse was the poor creature’s excessive Europeanisation, and her airs. But all this is far enough from peaceful, placid Musquash and its boundless cordiality, its simple, genuine hospitality and its—what’s the French word that just covers all?—gra—gracieuse-ness isn’t it? Oh be good to an American wherever you meet him. Put him up for the club and he will hold you listening till three in the morning; give him the best tent, and the gram-fed sheep. I have incurred a debt of salt that I can never repay, but do you return it piece-meal to any of that Nation, and the account will be on my head till our paths in the world cross again. He drinks iced water just as we do, but he doesn’t quite like our cigars. And how shall I finish the tale? Would it interest you to learn of the picnics in the hot, still woods that over-
hang the Monongahela, when those idiotic American buggies that can’t turn round got stuck among the brambles and all but capsized; of boating in the blazing sun on the river that but a little time before had cast at the feet of the horrified village the corpses of the Johnstown tragedy. I saw one, only one, remnant of that terrible wreck. He had been a minister. House, church, congregation, wife, and children had been swept away from him in one night of terror. He had no employment; he could have employed himself at nothing; but God had been very good to him. He sat in the sun and smiled a little weakly. It was on his poor blurred mind that something had happened—he was not sure what it was but undoubtedly something had occurred. One could only pray that the light would never return.

But there be many pictures on my mind. Of a huge manufacturing city of three hundred thousand souls lighted and warmed by natural gas, so that the great valley full of flaming furnaces sent up no smoke wreaths to the clear sky; of Musquash itself lighted by the same mysterious agency; flares of gas eight feet long, roaring day and night at the corners of the grass-grown streets because it wasn’t worth while to turn them out; of fleets of coal-flats being hauled down the river on an interminable journey to St. Louis; of factories nestling in woods where all the axe-handles and shovels in the world seemed to be manufactured daily; and last, of that quaint forgotten German community, the Brotherhood of Perpetual Separation, who founded themselves when the State was yet young and land cheap, and are now dying out because they will neither marry nor give in marriage and their recruits are very few. The advance in the value of land has almost smothered these poor old people in a golden affluence that they never intended. They live in a little village where the houses are built old Dutch fashion, with their front doors away from the road and cobbled paths all about. The cloistered peace of Musquash is metropolitan riot beside the hush of that village. And there is also a lovetale tucked away among the flowers. It has taken seventy years in the telling, for the brother and sister loved each other well, but they loved their duty to the brotherhood more. So they have lived and still do live, seeing each other daily and separated for all time. Any trouble that might have been is altogether wiped out of their faces, which are as calm as those of very little children. To the uninitiated those con-
stant ones resemble extremely old people in garments of even older cut. But they love each other, and that seems to bring one back quite naturally to the girls and the boys in Musquash. The boys were nice boys—graduates of Yale of course: you mustn’t mention Harvard here—but none the less skilled in business, in stocks and shares, the boring for oil, and the sale of everything that can be sold by one sinner to another. Skilled, too, in base-ball, big shouldered, with straight eyes and square chins—but not above occasional diversion and mild orgies. They will make good citizens and possess the earth, and eventually wed one of the nice white muslin dresses wherein beats a stout and a wise little heart to guide the well-poised head under its crop of curly hair brought low down on the forehead. There are worse things in this world than being “one of the boys” in Musquash—much worse.

The Professor says so; and I think he ought to know.17