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Letter One

IN SIGHT OF MONADNOCK

17 April 1892  New York Sun

AFTER THE GLOOM of gray Atlantic weather our ship came to America in a flood of winter sunshine that made unaccustomed eyelids blink; and the New Yorker, who is nothing if not modest, said, “This isn’t a sample of our really fine days: wait until such and such times come, or go to such and such a quarter of the city.” We were content and more than content to drift aimlessly up and down the brilliant streets, wondering a little why the finest light should be wasted on the worst pavements in the world; to walk round and round Madison Square, because that was full of beautifully dressed babies playing counting-out games, or to gaze reverently at the broad shouldered, pug-nosed Irish New York policemen. Wherever we went there was the sun, lavish and unstinted, working nine hours a day—with the colour and the clean-cut lines of perspective that he makes. That any one should dare to call this climate muggy, yea, even “sub-tropical,” was a shock. There came such a man, and he said: “Go north if you want weather—weather that is weather. Go to New England.”

So New York passed away upon a sunny afternoon, with her roar and rattle, her complex smells, her triply overheated rooms, and much too energetic inhabitants, while the train went north to the lands where the snow lay. It came in one sweep—almost, it seemed, in one turn of the wheels—covering the winter-killed grass and turning the frozen ponds, that looked so white under the shadow of lean trees, into pools of ink.

As the light closed in a little wooden town, white, cloaked, and dumb, slid past the windows and the strong light of the car lamps fell
upon a sleigh (the driver furred and muffled to his nose) turning the corner of a street. Now, the sleigh of a picture book, however well one knows it, is altogether different from the thing in real life, a means of conveyance at a journey’s end, but it is well not to be overcurious in the matter, for the same American who has been telling you at length how he once followed a kilted Scots soldier from Chelsea to the Tower, out of pure wonder and curiosity at his bare knees and sporran, will laugh at your interest in “just a cutter.”

The staff of the train—surely the great American nation would be lost if deprived of the ennobling society of brakeman, conductor, Pullman car conductor, Negro porter, and newsboy—told pleasant tales, as they spread themselves at ease in the smoking compartment, of snowings up on the line to Montreal, of desperate attacks—four engines together and a snow-plough in front—on drifts thirty feet high, and the pleasure of walking along the tops of goods wagons to brake a train with the thermometer thirty below freezing. “It comes cheaper to kill men that way than to put air brakes on freight cars,” said the brakeman.

Thirty below freezing! It was inconceivable till one stepped out into it at midnight and the first shock of that clear, still air took away the breath as a plunge into sea-water does. A walrus sitting on a wool-pack was our host in his sleigh, and he wrapped us in hairy goatskin coats, caps that came down over the ears, buffalo robes and blankets, and yet more buffalo robes till we, too, looked like walruses and moved almost as gracefully. The night was as keen as the edge of a newly ground sword, breath froze on the coat lapels in snow; the nose became without sensation, and the eyes wept bitterly because the horses were in a hurry to get home, and whirling through air at zero brings tears. But for the jingle of the sleigh bells the ride might have taken place in a dream, for there was no sound of hoofs upon the snow, the runners sighed a little now and again as they glided over an inequality, and all the sheeted hills round about were dumb as death. Only the Connecticut River kept up its heart and a lane of black water through the packed ice. We could see the stream worrying round the heels of its small bergs. Elsewhere there was nothing but snow under the moon—snow drifted to the level of the stone fences or curling over their tops in a tip of frosted silver; snow banked high on either side of
the road or lying heavy on the pines and the hemlocks in the woods, where the air seemed, by comparison, as warm as a conservatory. It was beautiful beyond expression. Nature’s boldest sketch in black and white, done with a Japanese disregard of perspective and daringly altered from time to time by the restless pencils of the moon.

In the morning the other side of the picture was revealed in the colours of the sunlight. There was never a cloud in the sky that rested on the snow line of the horizon as a sapphire on white velvet. Hills of pure white or speckled and furred with woods rose up above the solid white levels of the fields, and the sun rioted over their embroideries till the eyes ached. Here and there on the exposed slopes the day’s warmth—the thermometer was nearly forty degrees—and the night’s cold had made a bald and shining crust upon the snow; but the most part was soft, powdered stuff, ready to catch the light on a thousand crystals and multiply it sevenfold. Through this magnificence, and thinking nothing of it, a wood sledge drawn by two shaggy red steers, the unbarked logs diamond-dusted with snow, shouldered down the road in a cloud of frosty breath. It is the mark of inexperience in this section of the country to confound a sleigh which you use for riding with the sledge that is devoted to heavy work; and it is, I believe, a still greater sign of worthlessness to think that oxen are driven, as they are in most places, by scientific twisting of the tail.³

The driver, with red mittens on his hands, felt overstockings that come up to his knees, and perhaps a silvery gray coon-skin coat on his back, walks beside, crying, “Gee! Haw!” even as is written in American stories. And the speech of the driver explains many things in regard to the dialect story which at its best is an inflection to many. Now that I have heard the long unhurried drawl of Vermont, my wonder is, not that the New England tales should be printed in what, for the sake of argument, we will call English and its type, but rather that they should not have appeared in Swedish or Russian. Our alphabet is too limited. This part of the country belongs, by laws unknown to the United States, but which obtain all the world over, to the New England story and the ladies who write it. You feel this in the air as soon as you see the white-painted wooden houses left out on the snow, the austere schoolhouse, and the people, the men of the farms, the women who work as hard as they, with, it may be, less enjoyment of

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life: the other houses, well-painted and quaintly roofed, that belong to Judge This, Lawyer That, and Banker Such-an-one; all powers in the giddy metropolis of six thousand folk over there by the railway station. More acutely still do you realize the atmosphere when you read in the local paper announcements of “chicken suppers” and “church sociables” to be given by such and such a denomination, sandwiched between paragraphs of genial and friendly interest, showing that the countryside live (and without slaying each other) on terms of terrifying intimacy.

The folk of the old rock, the dwellers in the older houses born and raised hereabouts, would not live out of the town for any consideration; and there are insane people from the South—men and women from Boston and the like—who actually build houses out in the open country, two and even three miles away from Main Street, which is nearly 400 yards long and the center of life and population. With the strangers, more particularly if they do not buy their groceries “in the Street,” which means and is the town, the town has little to do; but it knows everything and much more also that goes on among them. Their dresses, their cattle, their views, the manners of their children, their manner towards their servants, and every other conceivable thing is reported, digested, discussed, and rediscussed up and down Main Street. Now, the wisdom of Vermont, not being at all times equal to grasping all the problems of everybody else’s life with delicacy, sometimes makes pathetic mistakes and the town is set by the ears. You will see, therefore, that towns of a certain size do not materially differ all the world over. The talk of the men of the farms is of their farms—purchase, mortgage, and sale, recorded rights, boundary lines, and road tax. It was in the middle of New Zealand, on the edge of the wild horse plains, that I heard this talk last, when a man and his wife, twenty miles from the nearest neighbour, sat up half the night discussing just the same things that the men talked of in Main Street, Vermont, U.S.A.

There is one man in the State now who is much exercised over this place. He is a farm hand, raised in a hamlet fifteen or twenty miles from the nearest railway and, greatly daring, he has wandered here. The bustle and the turmoil of Main Street, the new glare of the electric lights, and the five-storeyed brick business block, frighten and
distress him much. He has taken service on a farm, well away from these delirious delights, and, says he, “I’ve been offered twenty-five dollars a month to work in a bakery at New York. But you don’t get me to no New York. I’ve seen this place an’ it just scares me.” His strength is in the drawing of hay and the feeding of cattle. Winter life on a farm does not mean the comparative idleness that is so much written of. Each hour seems to have its sixty minutes of work; for the cattle are housed and eat eternally; the colts must be turned out for their drink, and the ice broken for them if necessary; then ice must be stored for the summer use, and then the real work of hauling logs for firewood begins. New England depends for its fuel on the woods. The trees are “blazed” in the autumn just before the fall of the leaf, felled later, cut into four-foot lengths, and as soon as the friendly snow makes sledger possible, drawn down to the woodhouse. Afterwards the needs of the farm can be attended to, and a farm, like an arch, is never at rest. A little later will come maple sugar time, when the stately maples are tapped as the sap begins to stir, and beringed with absurd little buckets (a cow being milked into a thimble gives some idea of the disproportion) which are emptied into cauldrons. Afterwards (this is in the time of the “sugaring-off parties”) you pour the boiled syrup into tins full of fresh snow, where it hardens, and you pretend to help, and become very sticky and make love, boys and girls together. Even the introduction of patent sugar evaporators has not spoiled the love-making.

There is a certain scarcity of men to make love with; not so much in towns which have their own manufactories and lie within a lover’s Sabbath-day journey of New York, but in the farms and villages. The men have gone away—the young men are fighting for fortune further West, and the women remain—remain for ever as women must. On the farms, when the children depart, the old man and the old woman strive to hold things together without help, and the woman’s portion is work and monotony. Sometimes she goes mad to an extent which appreciably affects statistics and is put down in census reports. More often, let us hope, she only dies. In the villages, where the necessity for heavy work is not so urgent, the women find consolation in the formation of literary clubs and circles, and so gather to themselves a great deal of wisdom in their own way. That way is not altogether lovely.
They desire facts, and the knowledge that they are at a certain page in a German or an Italian book before a certain time, or that they have read the proper books in a proper way. At any rate they have something to do that seems as if they were doing something. It has been said that the New England stories are cramped and narrow. Even a far-off view of the iron-bound life whence they are drawn justifies the author. You can carve a nut in a thousand different ways, by reason of the hardness of the shell.

Twenty or thirty miles across the hills, on the way to the Green Mountains, lie some finished chapters of pitiful stories—a few score abandoned farms started in a lean land, held fiercely so long as there was any one to work them, and then left on the hill-sides. Beyond this desolation are woods where the bear and the deer still find peace, and sometimes even the beaver forgets that he is persecuted and dares to build his lodge. These things were told me by a man who loved the woods for their own sake and not for the sake of slaughter—a quiet, slow-spoken man of the West, who came across the drifts on snow-shoes and refrained from laughing when I borrowed his footwear and tried to walk. The gigantic lawn tennis bats strung with hide are not easy to maneuver. If you forget to keep the long heels down and trailing in the snow you turn over and become as a man who falls into deep water with a life-belt tied to his ankles. If you lose your balance do not attempt to recover it, but drop, half-sitting and half-kneeling, over as large an area as possible. When you have mastered the wolf step, can slide one shoe above the other deftly, that is to say, the sensation of paddling over a ten-foot-deep drift and taking short cuts by buried fences is worth the ankle-ache. The man from the West interpreted to me the signs on the snow and showed how a fox (this section of the country is full of foxes, and men shoot them because riding is impossible) leaves one kind of spoor, walking with circumspection as becomes a thief, and a dog, who has nothing to be ashamed of, but widens his four legs and plunges, another, how coons go to sleep for the winter, and squirrels too, and how the deer on the Canada border trample down deep paths that are called yards and are caught there by inquisitive men with cameras, who hold them by their tails when the deer have blundered into deep snow, and so photograph their frightened dignity. He told me of people, also—the manners and cus-
toms of New Englanders here, and how they blossom and develop in the Far West on the newer railway lines, when matters come very nearly to civil war between rival companies racing for the same canyon; how there is a country not very far away called Caledonia, populated by the Scotch, who can give points to a New Englander in a bargain, and how these same Scotch, Americans by birth, name their townships still after the cities of their thrifty race. It was all as new and delightful as the steady “scrunch” of the snowshoes and the dazzling silence of the hills.

Beyond the very furthest range where the pines turn to a faint blue haze against the white, one solitary peak—a real mountain and not a hill—showed like a gigantic thumb-nail pointing heavenward.

“And that’s Monadnock,” said the man from the West. “All the hills have Indian names. You left Wantastiquet on your right coming out of town.”

You know how it sometimes happens that a word shuttles in and out of many years, waking all sorts of incongruous associations. I had met Monadnock on paper in a shameless parody of Emerson’s style before ever style or verse had interest for me. But the word stuck because of a rhyme, in which some one was:

—crowned coeval
With Monadnock’s crest,
And my wings extended
Touch the East and West.7

Later the same word, pursued on the same principle as that blessed one Mesopotamia,8 led me to and through Emerson up to his poem on the peak itself—the wise old giant “busy with his sky affairs,”9 who makes us sane and sober and free from little things if we trust him. So Monadnock came to mean everything that was helpful, healing, and full of quiet, and when I saw him half across New Hampshire he did not fail. In that utter stillness a hemlock bough, over-weighted with snow, came down a foot or two with a tired little sigh; the snow slid off and the little branch flew nodding back to its fellows.

For the honour of Monadnock there was made that afternoon an image in snow of Gautama Buddha, something too squat and not altogether equal on both sides, but with an imperial and reposeful waist.
He faced towards the mountain, and presently some men in a woods-ledge came up the road and faced him. Now, the amazed comments of two Vermont farmers on the nature and properties of a swag-bellied god are worth hearing. They were not troubled about his race, for he was aggressively white; but rounded waists seemed to be out of fashion in Vermont. At least, they say so, with rare and curious oaths.

Next day all the idleness and trifling were drowned in a snowstorm that filled the hollows of the hills with whirling blue mist, bowed the branches in the woods till you ducked, but were powdered all the same when you drove through, and wiped out the sleighing tracks. Mother Nature is beautifully tidy if you leave her alone. She rounded off every angle, broke down every scarp, and tucked the white bed-clothes till not a wrinkle remained, up to the chins of the spruces and the hemlocks that would not go to sleep.

“Now,” said the man of the West, as we were driving to the station, and, alas! to New York, “all my snowshoe tracks are gone; but when that snow melts, a week hence, or a month hence, they’ll all come up again and show where I’ve been.” A curious idea, is it not? Imagine a murder committed in the lonely woods, a snowstorm that covers the tracks of the flying man before the avenger of blood has buried the body, and then a week later the withdrawal of the traitorous snow, revealing step by step the path Cain took—a six-inch deep trail of his snowshoes—each step a dark disk on the white till the very end.

There is so much, so very much to write, if it were worth while, about that queer little town by the railway station, with its life running, to all outward seeming, as smoothly as the hack coupes on their sleigh mounting, and within disturbed by the hatreds and troubles and jealousies that vex the minds of all but the gods. For instance—no, it is better to remember the lesson of Monadnock, and Emerson has said, “Zeus hates busy-bodies and people who do too much.”

That there are such folk a long nasal drawl across Main Street attests. A farmer is unhitching his horses from a post opposite a store. He stands with the tie rope in his hand and gives his opinion to his neighbour and the world generally:

“But them there Andersons, they ain’t got no notion of etikwette!”