Kipling's America
edited by D. H. Stewart

Published by ELT Press

Stewart, edited by D. H.
Kipling's America: Travel Letters, 1889-1895.
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Letter Three

WHAT RUDYARD KIPLING SAW
ON HIS WAY BACK FROM JAPAN

The gull shall whistle in his wake, and the blind wave break in fire:
He shall fulfill God’s utmost will, unknowing His desire;
And he shall see old planets pass and alien star arise,
And give the gale his reckless sail in shadow of new skies.
Strong lust of gear shall drive him out and hunger arm his hand
To wring his food from a desert rude, his foothold from the sand.
His neighbors’ smoke shall vex his eyes, their voices break his rest:
He shall go forth till south is north, sullen and dispossessed.
He shall desire loneliness, and his desire shall bring
Hard on his heels a thousand wheels, a people, and a king.
He shall come back on his own track and by his scarce cool camp
There shall he meet the roaring street, the derrick, and the stamp;
For he must blaze a nation’s ways with hatchet and with brand,
Till on his last won wilderness an empire’s bulwarks stand.
—The Foreloeper

23 November 1892   New York Sun

... LET US RETURN to the new towns. Three times within one year
did fortune come knocking to the door of a man I know. Once at Seat-
tle, when that town was a gray blur after a fire; once at Tacoma, in the
days when the steam-tram ran off the rails twice a week; and once at
Spokane Falls. But in the roar of the land boom he did not hear her,
and she went away, leaving him only a tenderness akin to weakness
for all new towns, and a desire, mercifully limited by lack of money, to
gamble in every one of them. Of all the excitements that life offers
there are few to be compared with the whirl of a red-hot boom; also it

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is strictly moral, because you do fairly earn your unearned increment by labour and perspiration and sitting up far into the night—by working like a fiend, as all pioneers must work. And consider all that is in it. The headlong stampede to the new place; the money dashed down like counters for merest daily bread; the arrival of the piled cars whence the raw material of a city—men, lumber, and shingle—are shot on to the not yet nailed platform; the slashing out and pegging down of roads across the blank face of the wilderness; the heaving up amid shouts and yells of the city’s one electric light—a raw sizzling arc atop of an untacked [unbarked] pine pole; the sweating, jostling mob at the sale of town lots; the roar of “Let the woman have it.” That stops all bidding when the one other woman in the place puts her price on a plot; the packed real estate offices; the real estate agents themselves, lost novelists of prodigious imagination; the gorgeous pink and blue map of the town, hung up in the bar-room, with every railroad from Portland to Portland meeting in its heart; the misspelled curse against “This dam hole in the ground” scrawled on the flank of a strayed freight car by some man who had lost his money and gone away; the conferences at street corners of syndicates six hours established by men not 25 years old; the outspoken contempt for the next town, also “on the boom,” and therefore utterly vile; the unceasing tramp of heavy feet on the board pavement, where stranger sometimes turns on stranger in an agony of conviction, and, shaking him by the shoulder, shouts in his ear, “By G—d! Isn’t it grand? Isn’t it glorious?” and, last, the sleep of utterly worn-out men, three in each room of the shanty hotel: “All meals $2. All drinks 35 cents. No washing done here. The manager is not responsible for anything.” Does the bald catalogue of these recitals leave you cold? It is possible; but it is also possible after three days in a new town to set the full half of a truck load of Archbishops fighting for corner lots as they never fought for mitre or crozier. There is a contagion in a boom as irresistible as that of a panic in a theatre.

After a while things settle down, and then the carpenter, who is also an architect, can lay his bare arms across the bar and sell them to the highest bidder, for the houses are coming up like toadstools after rain. The men who do not build cheer those who do, in that building means backing your belief in your town—yours to you and peculiarly.
Confound all other towns whatsoever! Behind the crowd of business men, the weekly town paper plays as a stockwhip plays on a mob of cattle. There is honour, heaped extravagant, imperial for the good—the employer of labour, the builder of stores, the spender of money; there is abuse, savage and outrageous, for the bad, the man who “buys out of the town,” the man who intends to go, the sitter on the fence; with persuasion and invitation in prose, verse, and zincograph for all that outside world which prefers to live in cities other than Ours.

Now the editor, as often as not, begins as a mercenary and ends as a patriot. This, too, is all of a piece with human nature. A few years later, if Providence is good, comes the return for judicious investment. Perhaps the town has stood the test of the boom, and that which was clapboard is now Milwaukee brick or dressed stone, vile in design but permanent. The shanty hotel is the Something House, with accommodation for two hundred guests. The manager, who served you in his shirt-sleeves as his own hotel clerk, is gorgeous in broadcloth, and needs to be reminded of the first meeting. Suburban villas, more or less, adorn the flats, from which the liveliest fancy (and fancy was free in the early days) hung back. Horse cars jingle where the prairie schooner used to stick fast in the mud hole, scooped to that end opposite the saloon; and there is a Belt Electric Service paying fabulous dividends. Then do you, feeling older than Methuselah and twice as important, go forth and patronize things in general, while the manager tells you exactly what sort of millionaire you would have been if you had “stayed by the town.”

Or else—the bottom has tumbled out of the boom, and the town new made is dead—dead as a young man’s corpse laid out in the morning. Success was not justified by success. Of ten thousand not three hundred remain, and these live in huts on the outskirts of the brick streets. The hotel, with its suites of musty rooms, is a big tomb; the factory chimneys are cold; the villas have no glass in them and the fireweed glows in the center of the driveways, mocking the arrogant advertisements in the empty shops. There is nothing to do except to catch trout in the stream that was to have been defiled by the city sewage. A two-pounder lies fanning himself just in the cool of the
main culvert, where the alders have crept up to the city wall. You pay your money and, more or less, you take your choice.

By the time that man has seen these things and a few others that go with a boom he may say that he has lived, and talk with his enemies in the gate. He has heard the Arabian Nights retold and knows the inward kernel of that romance, which some little folk say is vanished. Here they lie in their false teeth, for Cortes is not dead, nor Drake, and Sir Philip Sydney dies every few months if you know where to look. The adventurers and Captains courageous of old have only changed their dress a little and altered their employment to suit the world in which they move. . . .