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Letter From London

The first English soil that kisses the American foot is, almost from necessity, that of Liverpool—a wildly uninteresting commercial soil—a sordid earth, in which nothing but trade will flourish. Liverpool is the purgatory through which the departed Yankee must pass to reach the Paradise of London; from which, also, he must purchase the release of his own soul at a ruinous price—more, in fact, than the article is worth. In this purgatory, indeed, you are purged of nothing but your gold and your good patience. The tourist, if he be intelligent, will lose no time in exchanging the horrors of Liverpool for the delights of London—delights, however, from the full and satisfying enjoyment of which he is ever hindered by a haunting fever of impatience to go to Stratford-on-Avon. Until he shall have compassed the fulfilment of this wish, and attained to the true seventh heaven of his hope, the birth-and-burial-place of Shakespeare, the "educated American" is tormented with an inward flame, to which even the charms of the world's capital are but oil and resin.

For myself, I wrestled with my passion for months. It was easy enough to be amused in London during "the season," when I did not stop to think; the man whom London during the season would not somewhat amuse, must have something upon his conscience heavier than the worship of the great dead bard. But with the close of that charmed and charming period—when Westminster palace had become "a dead silence walled about with cold stones"—when the parks had become an habitation of the brooding philosopher and the aged single gentlemen (those owls and bats of society)—when, in short, all but a paltry three millions of unimportant people had fled the town—then the fit came strong upon me, and I yielded—I fell. I fell to packing my trunk.

By Rail

There are few experiences more delightful than travelling on one of the main lines of railway leading out of London; provided, of course, you go first class, and take along an easy conscience. The little cushioned compartment for six—it is ten to one you get it all to yourself and companion—is a wonder of cosy and comfortable privacy. And then the speed! Away you go, taking cities twenty leagues asunder at a single stride—reaching across the loveliest of spaces, and flashing past scores of big towns with never a slackening of the gait—gliding over green-sided rivers so quickly that the hues of bank and water are blended to the sight—sweeping along great parks, through which you catch dim glimpses of modern palace or an ancient ruin—ever and upon leaping over a smoking manufacturing town—actually plunging house-high through its forest of tall chimneys, and wondering how it happens that your engine does not tumble them about like ten-pins! And all this without the endless click-click, the bump, thunder and dust, the moan and rattle and crash to which you have been educated by the railways of your youth. You do not thunder across the country; you glide with a rocking motion which soothes like sleep. Shut your eyes and nothing shall persuade you that statute miles are being "payed out" astern at the rate of forty-five per hour.

A full-grown English railway is something of a marvel to a man of Western experience. It is, of course, a double track. It is practically without "joints," and "ballasted" like an asphalt pavement, for smoothness. The slopes are sodded from base to summit, and for long distances on either side the stations are planted with flowers—sometimes. It is enclosed with a hedge, or handsome stone wall. No other railway, and no wagon road—no foot-path, even—even it upon its own level; each has its bridge or its culvert of massive masonry, and the older ones are picturesque with clinging ivy. The way never lies through a town; it crosses above it on tall arches; and, as at the important stations, there must be scores of side-tracks, the structure is enormously wide, for their accommodation. In such cases the subjacent streets are long, dim tunnels, starred with perpetual gas-jets.

Should the engine-driver err, it will not be for lack of instruction. Planted alongside the metals, among the milestones, is all manner of information for his professional guidance—little boards inscribed with figures to indicate curves and their degree of curvature, other little boards to denote grades and their gradients; big boards telling him how fast to run and where to whistle. On long level reaches of air line, where there exists no necessity for these things, the monotony is pleasingly broken by other boards painted with the time of the day, quotations from Johnson's Dictionary are posted up; but there is a good deal of complaint among passengers that the driver never conforms to them. All these devices—I mean the hour of the day, the poetical quotations, the Scriptural texts, and the dictionary extracts—would be of great assistance were it not that the train is driven so fast as to render them quite invisible. At least I never could see them.

The Muse at Home

I had expected to find Stratford-on-Avon a mean little village, shabby and shrunken with age, and painfully dull. It is in reality one of the most pleasing of villages, excellently clean, and with the grace of a tender charm lingering about it—a something indefinable, which addresses itself to some inner sense, and which may or may not depend upon the nature of the spectator and the feelings inspired by the town's associations. Leaving the railway station one needs not proceed far without a reminder of the Master. He has but to follow his nose, and lo—"The Shakespearean Iron and Brass Foundry." A little further on the labouring muse has delivered the following.

"E. Beckett does live here,
Sweeps clean and not dear;
If your chimney is on fire,
He'll put it out, if you require."

There is no mistaking the locality; you are in the very workshop of Poesy. The poetical spirit of the place is infectious. It took so strong a hold upon me that, having lunched badly and at a swindling price, at "The Shakespeare Hotel," I left the following effusion upon a page of the "Visitors' Book."

"It nothing boots exchanging 'saws'
With canting dunces who proclaim
The lightness of the world's applause—
The worthlessness of human fame.
Fame valueless? They'll have it so—
They still will teach and preach the same—Until by chance they undergo
The cheating done in Shakespeare's name. Perhaps they then will bow them down,

And own there's profit in renown."

A Change of Base

Soon after the above lines were discovered by the landlord I left "The Shakespeare Hotel."

Revenge and Compensation

I straightway sent off may little epigram to a widely-circulating London journal—which didn't print it—and then, by the merest accident, blundered into the famous "Red Horse Inn," immortalized by Washington Irving in the Sketch Book. Mine host makes the most of this immortality, as you shall see. I took my meals in the "Irving Parlor," seated in the "Irving Chair," (duly labelled with a brass plate), stirred my fire with the "Irving Poker" ("Geoffrey Crayon's" sceptre), and gazed my fill at Irving in every style hanging against the papered walls. And *mirabile dictul* at the last I paid a most moderate bill for most comfortable and gentlemanly accommodations. It is not much to have sat in Irving's chair balancing Irving's poker; it is a mere trifle to have toasted my shins at the fireplace before which his were browned; to have slept in the bed which he occupied is barely worth mentioning; everybody visiting Stratford does some of these things. But, being an American and a stranger, to have shaken from my feet the dust of an English hotel without having previously shaken from my purse a double reckoning of sovereigns—to have got away without having been the victim of polite pillage and illimitable fraud, open and covert—this is an achievement upon which I reflect with some pride and a great deal of astonishment.

Impressions

After the thousand-and-one descriptions of Shakespeare's birthplace and tomb (thousand-and-two, counting Joaquin Miller's) I am not hot to describe them myself. In the first place, I do not care to provoke a comparison between myself and Washington Irving; secondly, I was not sufficiently observant of the old half-timbered house in Henley-street, and the rather uninteresting church on Avonside, to qualify myself for the work. I did not much mark these things; I did not much care for them. I had eyes for nothing in its outer aspect, and a heart for but one thought.

Never for one waking moment was that thought absent from my mind; and in my sleep it haunted me like a sad-eyed spectre. Whether gazing my shilling's worth at the Shakespeare relics in the Henley-street cottage—or standing where stood the Shakespeare mulberry tree (cut down by a vandal clergyman; may Heaven forgive his villain soul, as I do!)—or sauntering in the brown fields about Shottery—or tracking the late moon in the gleaming Avon—or bending with a full heart above the old tombstone with its terrible malediction—this saddest of reflections put up its piteous face in my soul, raised its solemn eyes and clasped its phantom hands in the agony of a dumb despair:

"Even he, alas! is dead! This Giant, from whose 'stupendous intellectual altitude' the difference between the highest and the lowest of us must have been imperceptible—who was higher above the highest than he above the lowest—in a world of men this first and only man—even he did die and rot; and here cowers his little heap of dust, guarded by his immortal curse!"

I am not exceptionally sentimental, nor I think, very impressible. I have seen hundreds die and forgot to grieve for them. I have stood at the graves of some of the world's greatest and best, and it never occurred to me to be sorry they were dead. It has seemed to me that Death, like the King, could do no wrong. But standing in the little old church on Avonside, with the ashes of that mighty brain beneath the soles of my feet, I could have wept for the dead man of two hundred and fifty years ago as for the grief "of an hour's age."

I think this is not a general, but an individual experience. I have remarked the Poet's admirers, and even his lovers, furbishing up the dull platitude that he still lives in his works—lives for posterity and eternity. How pitiable was the failure of this bastard consolation when now, in the presence of the dumb dust, I first realized its utter shallowness and mockery—the sounding brass of this tinkling sentiment! And how bitter seemed the unconscious satire of this expression in my little guidebook: "The tomb of the immortal Bard!" A tomb for an immortal! Heaven help us to better sense!

I hope to never again see Stratford; the two days of my visit were the saddest of my life. There was no spot to which I could escape—no corner into which I could cower and shut out the dread sense of helplessness, inspired by the spot where pitiless nature had reared her fairest son for the slaughter. In every street I heard, in fancy, his death-groan. In every field the wind whispered of his presence—and his absence. The very children playing by the wayside suggested unutterable things: thus had played their little ancestors when he passed—and passed away. A bald and bent old man whom I met in the churchyard roused my resentment like an insult. He seemed thrust upon my notice on purpose to recall the age at which death murdered my idol; the riper years accorded to the grosser clay were a shocking example of Nature's wicked partiality!

My New Shakespeare

In the well-known "Chandos" portrait, representing what seems to me the handsomest of human faces, the world recognizes its Shakespeare; in the bad old bust set into the wall above the poet's tomb I recognize mine. As a work of art it is beneath contempt; as a likeness it is probably quite as faulty. For these demerits I am deeply thankful; they have preserved it to Stratford like a copyright; and outside of that town its similitude is seldom seen. It is, therefore, peculiarly sacred from its associations. It becomes mingled in memory with the birthplace, the tomb, and all the hallowed objects about which cling the affections of half a world. And so, while the better and truer image remains what it always has been—an image, merely—this other is invested with a sanctity which there can be no after experiences to unsettle. It can never become so familiar to the sight as to generate indifference; and so it happens that he who has looked upon the poet's grave bears away with him a new and quickening conception of the poet's self—a mystery revealed only to the favoured ones who have penetrated to the Holy of Holies, and in which the vulgar world can have no share.

Touches of Nature

I did not visit Charlecote, where Shakespeare stole the deer, nor did I extend my pilgrimage to the crab-tree under which Will and his guzzling companions lay drunk. For me it is sufficient that he did steal a deer, and that he did get drunk; and I say shame upon the canting morality which has been at such pains to disprove these gratifying facts—which would fain sever the only links connecting us with this higher type of being! None may claim kinship with him in intellect, but in human weaknesses, and in the sins of the flesh, God be praised, he was our brother!

Shottery

This Shottery is a little village a mile from Stratford, and here it was that Ann Hathaway, aged twenty-five, wooed and won Will Shakespeare, aged eighteen; and in six months (another link, thank Heaven!) she bore him a daughter. Poor Ann sleeps unregarded alongside her lord, with a barbarous Latin inscription graven in brass above her breast. But all conscientious pilgrims walk across the fields to visit her old cottage, which seems about to sink into the ground under the weight of its thick thatch. Here they go to sit in the chimney corner where tradition politely says Will courted her, and to finger the product of her humble industry—an old patch-work bed-quilt, which she is positively known to have been supposed to make.

I cannot say I was much interested in Ann and her affairs. The visitor's book here was very much more to my mind; and therein, among a multitude of famous autographs I found those of General Sherman and Mark Twain. I could not repress a smile as I read the name of the grim, heartless, and unimaginative warrior recorded at this shrine of pure sentiment—a sentiment, too, of the sicklier sort. From Mark something like this was to be expected. I had met him a few evenings before in London. We had dined together at one of the literary clubs, and in response to a toast Mark had given the company a touching narration of his suffering in Central Africa in discovery of Dr. Livingstone! It was, therefore, not surprising that he should have penetrated as far as Shottery. He was probably looking for Sir John Franklin.

(Source: California Digital Newspaper Collection)