

February 1866

Letter from George Kennan to Hattie Kennan, January 31- February 12, 1866

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Summary:

During the Russian-American Telegraph Expedition to Siberia, American explorer George Kennan writes to his sister. Here, he contrasts the ethereal beauty of Siberian nature with the filthy interior of a subterranean dwelling of the settled Koryak, a Siberian Native tribe. Kennan strongly preferred what he called the "wandering Koraks," who he saw as manly, strong, and independent, unlike the settled Koraks, who he felt had received the vices of civilization but none of the virtues.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

Head Quarters Asiatic Division
Ghijiga N.E. Siberia
Jan 31st - Feb. 12th [18]66

My Dear Sister Hattie;

My last letter to you was written I believe in a snowstorm on the Paren River where I passed one night on my way to "Camp Kennan" Tilghai River the present situation of Lieut Sanfords party. The letter was neither very long nor very interesting as of course it naturally would not be under such circumstances. I wrote it more as a curiosity and with a view to pass away the long long Arctic night then with any expectation that it would prove especially interesting. It's not everyday however that you that you receive a letter written in a Siberian snowstorm a hundred miles from the nearest house. On my return to Ghijiga I met with a variety of not very pleasant adventures some of which I propose to relate for your amusement. Acting upon Sanford's suggestion I'll the sketch "Telegraphing in Siberia." You can put it with my other sketches and you will eventually have quite a series. The descriptions of scenery etc. in the following you can rely upon as accurate. I have not tried to exaggerate or color them at all.

Telegraphing in Siberia
Part II

A torn leaf from the notebook of a Telegrapher

It was a clear and intensely cold morning on the coast of Penjinsk Gulf. Although it was nearly ten o'clock the sun had not yet risen but the single white star in the east quivered faintly and more faintly in the widening orange of dawn, and the snowy mountains of Kamenoi came out in more and more distinct relief against the deepening flush of daylight. A profound silence reigned around the lonely "yourt" in the woods which skirted the river and but for the loaded sledges which stood among the trees and the dogs curled up like black balls on the snow one would not have imagined that the huge snow drift before him was a human habitation. The scene was distinctively Siberian in every characteristic - the wonderfully clear transparent atmosphere, the dense grey mist hanging motionless over the open water of the gulf, the vast snowy steppe stretching away from the fringe of timber to the white spectral mountains in the distance, the dogs and sledges grouped carelessly here and there among the trees in the foreground, all composed a picture which has no counterpart outside of North Eastern Asia. As a glittering segment of the sun appeared between the distant cloud like peaks of Kamenoi the scene was one of enchanting beauty. The horizontal rays of light colored by some subtle influence of atmosphere seemed not merely to throw an external flush upon the objects which they touched but to fairly transfuse and imbue them with a deep glow to their very centre as if the rosy light was internal and shone out through a translucent medium. The elms around the yourt covered heavily with frost by the vapor from the open water of the gulf were lit up with a glory indescribable. Not only did every branch and delicate twig flash and sparkle like a string of jewels but seemed imbued by the red light of sunrise with color like rose quartz. The elm which overhung the yourt was one intricate network of rose color relieved by dazzling flashes of light as the gentle morning air stirred the branches. It was the very apotheosis of a tree. As the increasing light brought out more clearly the outlines of the mountains on the western horizon they too seemed touched with the wand of an enchanter and assumed a series of fantastic and constantly varying shapes as beautiful in coloring as they were novel in form - colossal pillars sculptured from rose quartz stretched up apparently thousands of feet into the air, mountains appeared inverted upon mountains and lower down a perfect chaos of startling precipices huge jagged rocks and picturesque valleys. While watching and admiring these the pillars would gradually unite their tops and form a Titanic arch like the portal of heaven through which appeared the blue of the sky beyond. Then the whole would melt imperceptibly into an extensive fortress with

massive bastions and buttresses, flanking towers & deep embrasures, salient and reentering angles whose shadows and perspective were as natural as reality itself. Imagine this magnificent mirage suffused with a soft rose color by the rays of the rising sun and the reader will be able perhaps to form a faint idea of ones of the most beautiful of northern phenomena. Nothing which I have ever seen in the north surpasses it in beauty except the Auroral display of February 1865.

Our little party however had but a short time to indulge in admiration keen as might be their appreciation of the beautiful since we were to start on that day for the Paren River distant forty versts^[1] across the steppe. The aesthetical therefore gave way to the practical and we were soon engaged in the prosaic every day duty of harnessing dogs packing sledges and preparing amid general confusion for a start. One by one the sledges departed with their loads and the long line wound in a torturous course across the steppe toward the Korak village of Kuil. Perhaps I ought to apologise for using the word village to designate the settlement of Kuil. I have no reason for so doing except that as it resembles nothing else on earth it must be a village Webster and all other lexicographers to the contrary notwithstanding. At first sight the traveller imagines that he looks upon a collection of Titanic hourglasses rudely constructed of wood which at some remote period had been expanded laterally by vertical pressure & reduced to a state of rickety dilapidation in the process. He examines them perhaps with the curiosity of an antiquarian as relics of some past age and unknown people but the idea of their present habitation by human beings hardly suggests itself to him. Upon being informed that the nondescript structure before him is a house, the wondering traveller enquires very naturally for the door. His greasy skin clad guide points with a broad grin of amusement to a smooth black pole set at an angle from the ground to the upper edge of the rickety hourglass. Perplexed to know what connection there is between a pole and a door he perhaps hesitates until his guide with a dexterity only to be acquired by long practice, climbs the pole and looks back at him from the summit with a few unintelligible words of gibberish which evidentially means "come up". Very easy to say, but, for one whose early gymnastic education has been neglected, very difficult to accomplish. With shortened breath and dirty hands however he gains the summit only in time to see his guide disappear through a round black holes like the mouth of a chimney out of which the smoke is pouring in dense black clouds. Stif led and blinded by the smoke he follows the example of his leader & lowers himself into the hole with a well founded apprehension of bringing up eventually either in an oven or a fire place. Trusting blindly however to good luck he slides down another oily pole until his feet meet Terra firma where, as he opens his fearful eyes to ascertainment his situation he is saluted with a chorus of drawling "zda-ro-o-o-va-a-a's"^[2] from half a dozen skinny greasy old women who sit cross-legged on a raised platform around the fire sewing fur clothes. -The interior of a Korak yourt presents a strange and not very inviting appearance to a person who more fortunate than myself has never become accustomed to its dirt smoke and frigid atmosphere. It receives its only light and that of a cheerless gloomy character through the round hole above, which serves as window door and chimney and which is reached by a round log standing perpendicularly in the center.

The beams rafters and logs which compose the yourt are all of a glossy blackness from the smoke in which they are constantly enveloped. A wooden platform raised about a foot from the earth extends out from the walls on three sides to a width of six feet leaving an open spot eight or ten feet in diameter in the center for the fire and a huge copper kettle of melting snow. On the platform are pitched square skin tents called "pologs" which serve as sleeping apartments and as for inmates and as a refuge from the smoke which is sometimes almost unendurable. These "pologs" are lighted and warmed by a burning wick of dried moss floating in a pan of seal fat. A little circle of stones on the ground forms the fireplace over which is usually simmering a kettle of fish or reindeer meat which with youkala seals blubber and brain oil forms the Korak bill of fare. Everything that one sees and touches is dirty and greasy - The yourt of our old Korak friend Cheekin where our party stopped to drink tea presented upon our arrival an unusually repulsive appearance. On one side of the

fire lay a huge dead seal in the process of thawing out while three or four women with arms bare and bloodied to the shoulder were engaged in cutting up a second. Beside the platform reposed a dog with a litter of young puppies whose squealing and whining mingled melodiously with the yells of two frantic babies and the horrible guttural lullaby of some old hag in one of the pologs. I slid down the log into the yourt and stood for a moment undecided whether to remain or to make a speedy exit. While deliberating upon the matter S - came down the pole like a falling star striking an unwary Korak who stood underneath on the head and doubling him up like an interrogation point. After a moment's consultation we concluded to put aside our fastidiousness (what little we had left) and remain. As S.- remarked we had travelled too long in Siberia to yield to any such feelings of delicacy now. In a few moments Cheekin set before us on the head of an old barrel a tempting lunch of pine seeds and raw fish and even carried his hospitality to the extent of offering us a blubber stew with brain oil accompaniments. Highly as we appreciated his motives we felt compelled to decline the latter delicacy with thanks. Such sybaritic luxuries if indulged in are apt to unfit a man for the hardships incident to the lot of the explorer and make him discontented with the plainer fare of his everyday life. With rare thoughtfulness our host Cheekin brought literature to enliven our banquet in the shape of an old torn copy of the "London Illustrated News" from which we learned that "on Wednesday the Her Majesty the Queen rode out in her coach and four accompanied by the Countess of Salisbury" and that "the Prince of Wales rode horseback with his first equerry in waiting and a few gentlemen." Of course this information gave us the most intense satisfaction. After doing ample justice to the banquet of this modern Sucullus we bade all the old women "Tahum" and achieved the ascent of the chimney - If the tears that were rolling down our cheeks were any criterion the parting with those old women was a heart rending one ----

T. i tak dalshe[3]

[1] A verst is equivalent to 0.6629 miles.

[2] Russian: Greetings.

[3] Russian: And so on and so forth.