



July 09, 1866

Letter from George Kennan to Hattie Kennan, July 9, 1866

Citation:

"Letter from George Kennan to Hattie Kennan, July 9, 1866," July 09, 1866, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Box 1, Folder 1, George Kennan Papers, Manuscript and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. Published in the "Siberian Letters of George Kennan, the Elder, 1866-1867," Susan Smith-Peter, Kennan Institute Occasional Paper #30 (May 2016).
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134078>

Summary:

During the Russian-American Telegraph Expedition to Siberia, American explorer George Kennan writes to his sister in a light and playful letter. The letter lacks the final part and signature.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

- English Transcription

Ghijigha Light House Head of Ghijighinski Gulf A.E.S.

Monday July 9th 1866

My Dear Sister Hattie,

I have been waiting anxiously and impatiently three interminable months for the arrival of those ----- (imagine some forcible expletive) vessels of ours, with some intelligence from home and friends, and have postponed writing you from time to time thinking that I should soon receive letters, and could then write more understandingly and in a vein better suited to the circumstances of my correspondents, which I have no doubt are considerably altered since last advices. For instance (by way of illustration you know) I don't know but that in the thirteen months which have elapsed since I left America, you have passed through all the successive stages of contemplation, admiration, declaration, consultation, acceptance, preparation, consummation congratulation, and felicitation and have gone to live in the country and settled down into a sober staid married lady; in which case you see the nonsensical raillery and fun of a hare brained brother, wouldn't be at all appropriate to your altered views tastes and circumstances, and I doubt whether it would receive even that small degree of appreciation which it deserves. Something in the shape of a treatise on Domestic economy now, or a few moral axioms to be applied to the management of a household together with some reflections upon the responsibilities, mutual relations and duties appertaining to the state of matrimony would be just the thing. I've got the outline of such a letter all elaborately drawn in my mind now ready for any emergency. Under the present circumstances however I don't know what kind of better to write, gay lively, sensible (perhaps my temperament and disposition however put the latter out of question) or grave quiet and reflective to suit the mood you may be in. If I write in accordance with my mood at present it will be a disagreeable letter, for I am in anything but an amiable one on account of the non arrival of these confounded vessels for which we have waited in breathless expectation since the first of May. The brig "Hattie Jackson" arrived from San Francisco here more than three weeks since, but to my intense disappointment there were no letters for me. "Hine illae lachimae."^[1] Unless my friends send me some token of remembrance soon, they need expect no more lively brilliant sparkling effusion from the Siberian exile. He will conclude that he lives no more in the memory of men, and will retire from the classic precincts and gay society of the Ghijigha Light House to the seclusion of the Korak yurt in the mountains, where he will spend the balance of his days meditation upon the shortness of human memory and the uncertainty of postal communication and Western Union telegraph vessels. - Tak i boodet.^[2]

Ghijigha Light House N.E. Siberia

In the first month of the arrival of our vessels

And the seventh day

1866

The uselessness in this country of any artificial method of computing time has induced me to date my letter from the arrival of our vessels just as the Romans dated from the "founding of the city" or the Mahomedans from the "Hegira" the events in all three cases being those of the greatest importance in the history of the individuals. The fact is I don't know exactly what day it is and that's the nearest approximation I can make to it. I sat down this PM to write an answer to Ella Doolittle's letter which I never received but as the said answer must be a sober sensible sort of production as that isn't my forte I'm not making as rapid progress as desirable & I've concluded to suspend operations temporarily and enliven my ideas a little by writing to you -You must feel highly flattered that I write all my sensible letters to somebody else and inflict all my nonsense upon you, & I must confess it isn't a very grateful return for many good sisterly letters you have written me, but you may console yourself with the thought that in the feebly careless letters you receive from me you get a better, more accurate picture of your brother's thoughts & feelings than you would form innumerable reams of common place sentiment elaborately expressed in unexceptionable

language. You see more of the personality of the writer and that for me is the greatest charm of letters. Should any of my correspondents prefer the style which I have adopted [Editor's note: part torn off], which I want them they have only to advise me of the fact and I shall take great pleasure in complying with their wishes. I am more at home in the former style than the latter-

I cannot tell you how much pleasure your good letters have given me. The amount of enjoyment which I have extracted from them up to the present moment is almost beyond computation but as I have only read them five times of course there remains a good deal for future extraction. The letters which I received at San Francisco fifteen months ago I read at Ghijigha for almost the fortieth time only a day or two before our vessels arrived and they were not exhausted then by any means, although the absence of any later ones, and the prospect that I wouldn't get any later ones, made the perusal of them anything but exhilarating and enlivening exercise- Dodd wouldn't read his, declaring that if he did he should be homesick for a week & knowing that such would be the case I wouldn't urge him for in that frame of mind he is anything but agreeable society.- Perhaps you feel some curiosity to know who this Dodd, who has my "fidus Achates"³¹ for the last year and to whom you find such numerous reflections in my letters is. "He was born in the year 1842 of rich but respectable parents" in the suburbs of the city of Trenton N.J. Like Shakespeare and many other characters of renown his early history is involved in obscurity, but from the scanty information at the disposal of his biographer it may be inferred that he early exhibited evidences of that talent for consuming eatables, and that bashfulness in the presence of, and aversion for the society of the fair sex, which have since rendered him conspicuous and made him a shining light among good livers and confirmed bachelors. He made his first appearance upon the stage of active life at Petropavloski Kamchatka; a somewhat limited theatre for the full exercise and display of his abilities, but one which he enlivened with his presence and adorned with his talents during a period of six years. Notwithstanding the latter of the above mentioned traits of character, he always continued to be the center of attraction in the most refined Kamchadal society, a fact which is to be attributed to his personal beauty and inherent excellence ^{of character} rather than to any effort which he made to assume that position.- Upon the arrival at Petropavloski of the Russian American Telegraph Expedition, the Chief of that enterprise lost no time in making so valuable an acquisition as Mr. Dodd to his party; a fact which speaks equally well for his own discernment and for Mr. Dodd's worth. Since that time Mr. Dodd has been engaged in explorations in Northern Siberia under the direction of Mr. George Kennan a young and talented officer of the exploration whose name is doubtless familiar to our readers in connection with the scarcity of dried fish in North East Siberia, apprehensions having been expressed that the present year's supply will be inadequate to meet his wants.- Under the direction of one whose tastes and habits were so congenial Mr. Dodd passed a pleasant year, carrying the grace polish and easy suavity of civilized life in ^{to} Korak yourts & Tchucktchi tents & doing much by example & exhortation to rescue those people from barbarism & diffuse among them the amenities of civilization. Upon his return to Ghijigha he received as a recognition of his valuable services the appointment of "Section Superintendent" of the "Land Section" of the Northern Division comprising the country between Ghijigha and Anadyrsk a position which none can doubt he will fill with ability and credit to himself and to the Company. At this point we are compelled to bring our short biographical notice to a close, with many wishes for the success and happiness of its subject & with the prediction that the talents which have raised him to his present position of importance and influence will sustain and elevate him to still greater reputation and eminence. We feel assured that our readers will join us in the hearty wish that "long may he wave."

Daily Ghijigha Herald of Progress –

There! Who will say that the local editor of the "Ghijigha Herald of Progress" can't write a biography. I calmly point to the above as documentary evidence that he can. The editor wishes me to state for the benefit of the public that applications for written biographies will meet with prompt attention upon as reasonable terms as are consistent with the present advanced price of dried fish seals blubber and the other necessaries of life. Satisfaction guaranteed or money refunded. A few dried fish will be taken in part payment if offered at an early period. Ha Ha. I copied that "biography" from the style of a "puff" which Mr. Knapp received in the "Ohio State Journal" at Columbus while I

was there. He will remember it. Of course it's a caricature of Mr. Dodd.

Presuming upon his superior knowledge of Russian he was indulged lately to an unwarranted extent in making fun of me to the Russian and native ladies and I feel perfectly justified in taking such satisfaction as I can. It's a fact though about his bashfulness. If he comes home with me I'll cure him of that. I would send you a photograph of him but he has none. We have travelled together now just a year and I have found him to be true in danger, cheerful under hardships which would have daunted a weaker spirit and a ~~tr~~ good friend always-

A little later

I have just been reading over your letters again and the Major remarks upon observing the smile on my face that "they appear to give me a great deal of satisfaction." They do, with one exception. You seem to feel so much anxiety about my safety. I have already written in a letter to you all, everything which I could think of that would relieve your fears. You have never known me to deceive you, believe me when I tell you that I do not consider myself in one particle more danger here next winter than I would be at home. I did think last fall that the journey which I was about to undertake to the northward was something serious and I wrote home under that impression; - more's the pity- but after thorough experience I have become convinced of what I have written you above, that we are all as safe here as we would be anywhere. If any one gets to sympathizing with you in a mournful sort of way about your brother's danger, terrible hardships, "delicate constitution" and all that sort of thing making you feel anxious and uncomfortable without any reason for it laugh at them as I would if I were there and come home and read this letter.

I have been in danger only two or three times since I came to this country and these were under circumstances which will probably never occur again. Of these occasions -- once on the Samanea Mountains, once on the Tigil Mountains and once at the mouth of the Anadyr I have written you full accounts. But I positively won't write anymore if it makes you anxious. I feel like a criminal now, for having written you, as I suppose I must have done, last winter something to increase your fears. As for my inability to live though a second winter I could laugh at the idea did you not treat it so seriously. Why my dear "Harriet" there isn't half as much danger of my not living though next winter as there was of my not living through the last winter which I spent in Cincinnati, & no one thought the danger then was so imminent as to call for anxiety. And furthermore I had much rather spend another winter here than another such as that there. Believe me I am in earnest. Don't let your imagination picture me as freezing to death or starving to death on any of these desolate steppes: Think of me if you like dancing at a native ball to the music of a two stringed guitar three pewter spoons and a comb or sitting with Dodd on a Korak yourt.

^[1] Latin: Hence these tears.

^[2] Russian: So it will be.