

August 21, 1867

Letter from George Kennan to Emma Hitchcock, August 21, 1867

Citation:

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Summary:

American explorer George Kennan writes to his cousin Emma Hitchcock, describing the sudden arrival of ships in Siberia with the news that the Russian-American Telegraph Expedition is to cease operations. Although Western Union had ordered this in October 1866, word did not reach Kennan until July 1867, nearly a year later. This letter is lacking the final pages and signature.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

- English Transcription

Barque "Onward"

At Sea off Yamsk bay

August 21, 1867

Dear Cousin Emma,

Your welcome letter written I suppose some time during the year of 1865, (it was not dated) reached me per barque "Onward" about a month since, after having been once around the globe, experiencing a variety of adventures and vicissitudes which do not commonly fall to the lot of letters. How many unimaginative dead letter office clerks, and stolid Russian Government censors had puzzled over the contents before it reached my hands I don't know. It seems they found nothing treasonable in it if it was addressed to a Siberian exile, for they forwarded it on to Nikolawsk and from there to America from which country it came to across the broad Pacific. I can only conjecture in what parts of the world it has been forwarded from the curious foreign post marks and half legible writing with which the envelope is adorned. "Aachen Bromberg Eydkuhnen", Moskrae, Perm & Nicolaevsk seem to be a few of the places at which it has stopped, though where in the name of all that's geographical they are I confess my ignorance.

The long, long months which elapsed after the breaking up of winter wore wearily away with us in the expectation of vessels from America or something which should put a little life into that antiquated old settlement, Ghijiga. Day after day we climbed the steep bluff to the Light House and cast longing glances over the wide expanse of the water between the Matuga and Cape Catherine but only to turn away with a deep sigh of disappointment over the hope deferred, which makes the heart sick. Occasionally the flutter of a sea bird's wing or the looming up of an iceberg on the distant horizon would cause our hearts to leap into our throats for an instant with joyful anticipations of news and letters from the dear ones who live in "God's Country" but as the object faded away into indistinctness and finally disappeared in the blue sky, our hopes sank again even lower than before, and with slow steps and gloomy countenances we returned to our cheerless quarters.

On the afternoon of July 9th, as I sat writing at my little green table I was aroused by an exultant "hurrah" from the summit of the bluff and glanced out of the window just in time to see Fawcett waving his hat from a projecting point of the hill and Lewis coming down at a perfectly reckless speed his head at least a yard in advance of his feet which were vainly endeavoring by terrific strides to keep that portion of his body from distancing them entirely. It was evident that something had happened and I rushed out to demand an explanation. Out of breath from the violence of his exertions Lewis could only gasp out "A ship" pointing at the same time in the direction of Cape Catherine. It was the work of only a minute to rush up the bluff to the little log tower dignified with the same name of "Light House" from which were plainly to be seen the upper yards of a large square rigged vessel standing directly in before the wind. As the whaling fleet had long before left that vicinity we at once decided that it must be one of the Company's vessels and cartridges were hastily prepared to fire signal guns. Fearful that if we once took our eyes from her swelling sails she would vanish into thin air like the Phantom Ship or be transformed into a delusive iceberg we remained on the bluff until the fading twilight and rising mists of evening hid her from sight and the mosquitoes presuming upon our indifference to their reconnaissances made an attack in force which compelled us to seek the shelter of the house. The vessel proved to be the Company's barque "Onward" from San Francisco and brought the unexpected and disheartening news of the abandonment of our line. I ordered her at once to Okhotsk where Major Abasa then was, and sailed on her myself intending to hand in my reports & accounts, and leave for home at once via Irkoutsk & St. Petersburg. A despatch however which Major Abasa received two days after our arrival requesting his immediate presence in St. Petersburg completely all my plans for reaching home by Christmas, and threw upon me all the labor of collecting our scattered parties, settling accounts and closing out our business. Long experience however has taught me to bear disappointment philosophically and I submitted to the extension of my exile with as good a grace as possible. Major A and I left Okhotsk on the same day, he for St. Petersburg and I for Yamsk Ghijiga and intervening

points where we have parties and stores. After collecting them I shall return on the "Onward" to Okhotsk, despatch the vessel to San Francisco and await at the former place orders from St. Petersburg. I hope to be home via the latter place some time in February but of course it is very uncertain. I shall certainly reach America before summer.

I suppose our folks are in high state of excitement about this time over my expected arrival in September or October and they will be greatly disappointed to learn that I shall not be there to spend Christmas. It cannot be helped, I am much disappointed as they. Who can tell one Christmas where he shall spend the next? January 1st, 1864 New Years Day I spent at home, New Years Day 1865 I was riding a refractory mule through the dense tropical forests of lowery Nicaragua stopping here and there to pick oranges by the roadside, or to admire the flashing green and golden plumage of a beautiful bird or the green vines hanging in dense masses from the tree tops.

January 1st, 1866 I was far away on the bare desolate snow steppes of Siberia, crouching though the long Arctic night round the camp fire, whose heat was hardly felt in the deadly chill of 50 degrees below zero. I have watched the old year out and the new year in many times but none will remain longer in my memory than the clear cold starry night on the Nalgimski Steppe, under the frowning brow of Mt. Nalgim. New Years Eve 1867 found me again by the camp fire on the banks of the Paren River with a furious north easter roaring a deep diapason through the tree tops and whirling the snow in dense clouds over our heads. I awoke on New Years morning buried deep in a shroud of snow. New Years Day 1868 will find me –where?

I hope in St. Petersburg on my way home. I shall then have completed the circuit of the world and travelled enough to my content my restless spirit for a while. I shall devote my time principally to visiting my friends, becoming civilized, and enjoying once more the amenities of social life. Perhaps it would interest you my dear Coz to know what a sojourner in this dismal country misses most, for what he feels the most intense longing. It is not as you might imagine the material comforts of life such as comfortable house, a warm fireside, or a good dinner. These things or being deprived of these is a mere trifle. I miss most music and conversation. I never before realized how essential both are to life and I never knew how dearly I loved music until I heard last summer the brass band of the Russian Corvette "Varag". We had gone on board of her in the evening and were waked most unexpectedly the following morning by the strains of "Hail Columbia" from the powerful band of twenty pieces. We were all fairly electrified, and hardly breathed until the martial air was ended and the instruments took up the softer notes of the prison song in "Travatore" the music dying away over the still waters of the gulf and the louder passages echoing faintly from the high bluffs of Matuga.

Never before had these bluffs sent back the airs of "Travatore and Riggoletta" ^[1] and they probably never will again. I believe last winter I would have travelled on dog sledges five versts to hear the Corvettes band play the Faust March, the Anvil Chorus, and some of the beautiful airs from Martha.^[2] That day on the "Varag" will long be remembered as a white day in my dreary calendar. When we left the vessel and she steamed slowly out her band playing "Ever be happy and blest as thou art."^[3] I confess I felt a choking sensation in my throat and as the waving caps on her quarter decks could no longer be seen, we all turned away with gloomy countenances and silently turned our faces toward that dismal lighthouse feeling bluer than we had for so many a long month before. You who live in a land of society and music do not realize what blessings you enjoy. Travel for two months as I did last winter with a band of dirty savage Koraks over the vast snowy steppes between Ghijiga and Anadyrsk without a soul to talk with and never once hearing your own language, live for a week or ten days in a black cold smoky underground hut without books, with no society save that of two or three old Korak women, and with a howling snow storm raging outside and see if you wouldn't change places with almost anyone in the world.

^[1] Kennan means here Giuseppe Verdi's *Il Trovatore* and *Rigoletto*.

^[2] The Faust March is from Hector Berlioz' *La damnation de Faust* and the Anvil March is from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*,

while *Martha* is a romantic opera

^[3] Here Kennan means the song “Ever be happy and light as thou art” from the Pirate’s Chorus of *The Enchantress*, an opera by M.W. Balfe (1808-1870).