

Letter to John Washington, 18 December 1858

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[0001]

Tette 18th Dec^r 1858

My Dear Captain Washington

We went up to examine
Kebra basa as soon as we were all
safely housed in the house of
the Commandant, and while the
water in the Zambesi was at its
lowest. We collected all the in-
formation we could in Tette
and that was just nothing more
than the Portuguese writers all
asserted on the same sort of
testimony. "An obstruction to
navigation" "a number of rocks
jutting out of the water across the
stream" - only one man had
gone beyond the entrance, and we
steamed up 4 miles beyond and
found that the affair is an
obstruction to navigation in
what - canoes only. The difficulty
consists in the Zambesi being
confined by mountains to
a bed about 1/4 mile broad
This bed which we shall call
[0002]
the flood bed is covered with enormous
boulders black glazed & slippery - porphery & syenite twisted & huddled
together in every possible way
form the subsoil (!) and in it
winding from side to side there
is a groove or rut 30 or 40 yards
wide & as we sailed up the man
at the lead kept calling out "No
bottom at ten fathoms". the walls
generally perpendicular are worn
into potholes and rise from about
30 to 80 or more feet high.
there are rocky islands in it
which increase the force of the
current and as ~~both~~[neither] canoes &

this feeble vessel cannot stem
a four knot current. It is Kaora
-basa, it is "cut the toil" (of paddling)
and they cut their [way] over the level
Shidima country instead. The cant
paddle against 4 knots, nor punt
at 60 ft. nor tow at a height
of 80 over jagged & slippery rocks
hence the "obstruction to navigation"
We did not wish to go up now so
when we came to a four knot
current we left the vessel and went
[0003]

forward to examine on foot. We
found one rapid the fall in which
was 5 ft. but when we returned
the river had risen three or four
and the place was level. But
fancy the effect of a perpendicular
rise of clear eighty feet. We
measured it carefully at different
places and this must take place
before the upper flood bed is
covered. The worst cataract of
all comes down at an angle
of 30° but I stood in a pothole
which is annually submerged
30 feet and dropped down a
measuring tape 53 ft to the water
There cannot be a vestige of
broken water at 40 ft rise
and there the water stands long
for the black glaze reaches that
height. This last or the only
cataract worth the name is
called Morumbua and immense
difficulty we had in getting there
climbing as hard as we could
over stones & rocks so hot we
could not hold the hand on them
[0004]

for an instant we could not make
more than one mile in three
hours. four Makololo went with
us and shewed their horny soles
blistered & the blisters broken. Our
strong boots wore through the soles
in a fortnight and that fortnight
made us all return lean & haggard
as if recovering from severe
illness. In truth it was the hardest

bit of travel I ever went through &
I feel sure that had we come this
way in 1856 I never should have
reach Tette. The mountains are
upwards of 2000 ft and very steep
but the steepest bit of all is just
at Marumbua. the side walls rise
up from 300 to 600 perpendicularly
- no line could be carried past
but we are all of opinion that a
good strong steamer - capable of
going 12 or 14 knots would walk
through in flood with ease. B. did
us an immensity of harm by
rejecting the Ban - we could have taken
up all our luggage between 25 & 30
tons at one trip & then gone on to
Sekeletu with all the Makalolo. We
are now working below the rapid
[0005]

Have been prevented by an unusual
scarcity of food the consequence of
want of rain last year from
sending off branch explorations
but by February the young
corn will ripen, & we may
go to Manica & Gorongozo. This
partly from Tette, is also written
on our way down river to
ascend the Shire which is said
to come from Lake Nyanja.

Next letter we hope to give you
some information about that
part Thornton reports having
found three seams of coal
near Tette - 1st 7 ft thick, 2^d
13 feet 6in, 3^d - 25 feet thick
all in fine cliff sections
the last was fired by lightning
a few years ago and burned
for a long time. There is
no lack of harmony among
us but I have to speak
cautiously now for I found
out that while I was truly &
[0006]

faithfully reporting the same before
our naval officer was dogging my
steps to every one with whom I happened
to talk with "What was he talking about"
We are, thank God, favoured with

good health. We have had no fever except among the Kroomen and I would prefer Englishmen to them as more safe and effective. We take no quinine up at Tette. We slept without cover during the whole fortnight of exploring the rapids and generally did not draw on the blanket till morning. We have had nothing but colds modified a little by the malaria of the Delta Baines had a slight sunstroke but is now quite well. I send you a tracing of the river above Tette by D^r Kirk a worthy good fellow as ever lived. They all work at anything they are desired to do without hesitation

Should the Government send us out another vessel there are various matters you might send us too I scarcely expect it this flood but if in time for next January our two years supplies may [0007] be getting low. The man Evans who supplied the last did very well - the meal alone being badly soldered was wasted on the Quay at Liverpool M^r J. A. Turner M. P. for Manchester would supply the cloth to our advantage We are not by any means out of anything of importance now but looking forward it may be well to suggest some addition By the way I made a mistake about sugar the natives do make it near to this and I bought 6 pots at the rate of two yards of calico or say a shilling for 20 lbs. We have put up our little engine - saw mill & sugar mill at Tette to shew what can be done. Major Secard carried them up for us - the Buaze is ripe in February - the seed D^r Kirk says is full of oleaginous matter & the Portuguese say it gives good oil for painting Coming back to the affair of the vessel - M^r Rae with a second

engineer & Roe the leading stoker
[0008]
would manage the engines - one
of the Makololo makes an excellent
stoker. I think we have proved
that with due exercise & other precautions
you need not fear for Europeans
when they get beyond the Delta - D^r Kirk
and I have had uninterrupted good
health.

I know you will do what you
can to forward our plans and besides
aiding in the arrangements necessary
I hope you will not allow any of our
matters to fall into the hands of M^r
Laird. this is the shabbiest engine
ever turned out of shop. M^r Medlycott
of the Lynx tried her without an ounce
of cargo and a brisk breeze held her
paddles so that we stood still. You remember
my protesting against the want of power
and M^r M. Laird said "O steam is very
little understood". One can understand
a little when obliged to spend half our
time in wood cutting. We are now
less than 1/16 of an inch thick and
dare not tow her up the rapids - carrying
is an absolute impossibility. It must
be done over mountains which cost
us three hours to cut a path over for ourselves

Thanks for your kind little notes - the sun's places came too
late for this year. Remember me please kindly to M^{rs} W.

David Livingstone