



Adventures in the Rocky Mountains



GREAT JOURNEYS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson
Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia
Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Mairangi Bay, Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains first published 1879

These extracts first published in Penguin Books 2007

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ISBN: 978-0-141-96327-3

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Isabella Lucy Bird (1831–1904) was the daughter of a clergyman and grew up in Tattenhall, Cheshire. Early in life she suffered from a spinal complaint and in 1854 she was sent by her doctor to America and Canada to improve her health. She continued to suffer from back trouble, depression and insomnia until, at the age of forty, she set off for Australia and Hawaii where her health miraculously improved and she climbed the world's largest volcano. In 1873, Isabella Bird set off for the Rocky Mountains. At that time, Colorado, where she stayed longest, was an untamed territory outside the Union, its virgin lands inhabited by hard-living, hard-drinking pioneer settlers who had only recently and brutally seized them from the Indians. Isabella's intrepid journeys within this fantastic landscape are relayed in the form of vivid letters she wrote to her adored sister, Henrietta.

Letter I

Lake Tahoe, September 2

I have found a dream of beauty at which one might look all one's life and sigh. Not lovable, like the Sandwich Islands,¹ but beautiful in its own way! A strictly North American beauty – snow-splotched mountains, huge pines, red-woods, sugar pines, silver spruce; a crystalline atmosphere, waves of the richest colour; and a pine-hung lake which mirrors all beauty on its surface. Lake Tahoe is before me, a sheet of water twenty-two miles long by ten broad, and in some places 1700 feet deep. It lies at a height of 6000 feet, and the snow-crowned summits which wall it in are from 8000 to 11,000 feet in altitude. The air is keen and elastic. There is no sound but the distant and slightly musical ring of the lumberer's axe.

It is a weariness to go back, even in thought, to the clang of San Francisco, which I left in its cold morning fog early yesterday, driving to the Oakland ferry through streets with sidewalks heaped with thousands of cantaloupe and water-melons, tomatoes, cucumbers, squashes, pears, grapes, peaches, apricots, – all of startling size as compared with any I ever saw before. Other streets were piled with sacks of flour, left out all night, owing to the security from rain at this season. I pass hastily over the early part of the journey, the crossing the bay in a fog as chill as November, the number of 'lunch baskets,' which gave the car the look of conveying a great picnic party, the last view of the Pacific, on which I had looked for nearly a year, the fierce sunshine and brilliant sky inland, the look of long *rainlessness*, which one may not call drought, the valleys with sides crimson with the poison oak, the dusty vineyards, with great purple clusters thick among the leaves, and between the vines great dusty melons lying on the dusty earth. From off the boundless harvest-fields the grain was carried in June, and it is now stacked in sacks along the track, awaiting freighting. California is a 'land flowing with milk and honey.' The barns are bursting with fullness. In the dusty orchards the apple and pear branches are supported, that they may not break down under the weight of fruit; melons, tomatoes, and squashes of gigantic size lie almost unheeded on the ground; fat cattle, gorged almost to repletion shade themselves under the oaks; superb 'red' horses shine, not with grooming, but with condition; and thriving farms everywhere show on what a solid basis the prosperity of the 'Golden State' is founded. Very uninviting, however rich, was the blazing Sacramento Valley, and very repulsive the city of Sacramento, which, at a distance of 125 miles from the Pacific, has an elevation of only thirty feet. The mercury stood at 103° in the shade, and the fine white dust was stifling.

In the late afternoon we began the ascent of the Sierras, whose saw-like points had been in sight for many miles. The dusty fertility was all left behind, the country became rocky and gravelly, and deeply scored by streams bearing the muddy wash of the mountain gold-mines down to the muddier Sacramento. There were long broken ridges and deep ravines, the ridges becoming longer, the ravines deeper, the pines thicker and larger, as we ascended into a cool atmosphere of exquisite purity, and before six P.M. the last traces of cultivation and the last hardwood trees were left behind.

At Colfax, a station at a height of 2400 feet, I got out and walked the length of the train.

First came two great gaudy engines, the Grizzly Bear and the White Fox, with their respective tenders loaded with logs of wood, the engines with great, solitary, reflecting lamps in front above the cow-guards, a quantity of polished brass-work, comfortable glass houses, and well-stuffed seats for the engine-drivers. The engines and tenders were succeeded by a baggage-car, a mail-car, and Wells, Fargo, and Co.'s express-car, the latter loaded with bullion and valuable parcels, and in charge of two 'express agents.' Each of these cars is forty-five feet long. Then came two cars loaded with peaches and grapes; then two 'silver palace' cars, each sixty feet long; then a smoking-car, at that time occupied mainly by Chinamen; and then five ordinary passenger-cars, with platforms like all the others, making altogether a train about 700 feet in length. The platforms of the four front cars were clustered over with Digger Indians, with their squaws, children, and gear. They are perfect savages, without any aptitude for even aboriginal civilisation, and are altogether the most degraded of the ill-fated tribes which are dying out before the white races. They were all very diminutive, five feet one inch being, I should think, about the average height, with flat noses, wide mouths, and black hair cut straight above the eyes and hanging lank and long at the back and sides. The squaws wore their hair thickly plastered with pitch, and a broad band of the same across their noses and cheeks. They carried their infants on their backs, strapped to boards. The clothing of both sexes was a ragged, dirty combination of coarse woollen cloth and hide, the moccasins being unornamented. They were all hideous and filthy, and swarming with vermin. The men carried short bows and arrows, one of them, who appeared to be the chief, having a lynx's skin for a quiver. A few had fishing-tackle, but the bystanders said that they lived almost entirely upon grasshoppers. They were a most impressive incongruity in the midst of the tokens of an omnipotent civilisation.

The light of the sinking sun from that time glorified the Sierras, and as the dew fell, aromatic odours made the still air sweet. On a single track, sometimes carried on a narrow ledge excavated from the mountain side by men lowered from the top in baskets, overhanging ravines from 2000 to 3000 feet deep, the monster train *snaked* its way upwards stopping sometimes in front of a few frame houses, at others where nothing was to be seen but a log cabin with a few Chinamen hanging about it, but where trails on the sides of the ravines pointed to a gold country above and below. So sharp and frequent are the curves on some parts of the ascent, that on looking out of the window one could seldom see more than a part of the train at once. At Cape Horn, where the track curves round the ledge of a precipice 2500 feet in depth, it is correct to be frightened, and a fashion of holding the breath and shutting the eyes prevails, but my fears were reserved for the crossing of a trestle-bridge over a very deep chasm, which is itself approached by a sharp curve. This bridge appeared to be overlapped by the cars so as to produce the effect of looking down directly into a wild gulch, with a torrent raging along it at an immense depth below.

Shivering in the keen, frosty air near the summit-pass of the Sierras, we entered the 'snow sheds,' wooden galleries, which for about fifty miles shut out all the splendid views of the region, as given in dioramas, not even allowing a glimpse of 'the Gem of the Sierras,' the lovely Donner Lake. One of these sheds is twenty-seven miles long. In a few hours the mercury had fallen from 103° to 29°, and we had ascended 6987 feet in 105 miles! After passing through the sheds, we had several grand views of a pine-forest on fire before reaching Truckee at 11 P.M., having travelled 258 miles. Truckee, the centre of the 'lumbering region'

of the Sierras, is usually spoken of as 'a rough mountain town,' and Mr W. had told me that all the roughs of the district congregated there, that there were nightly pistol affrays in bar-rooms, etc., but as he admitted that a lady was sure of respect, and Mr G. strongly advised me to stay and see the lakes, I got out, much dazed, and very stupid with sleep, envying the people in the sleeping-car, who were already unconscious on their luxurious couches. The car drew up in a street – if street that could be called which was only a wide, cleared space, intersected by rails, with here and there a stump, and great piles of sawn logs bulking big in the moonlight, and a number of irregular clap-board, steep-roofed houses, many of them with open fronts, glaring with light and crowded with men. We had pulled up at the door of a rough Western hotel, with a partially open front, being a bar-room crowded with men drinking and smoking, and the space between it and the cars was a moving mass of loafers and passengers. On the tracks, engines, tolling heavy bells, were mightily moving, the glare from their cyclopean eyes dulling the light of a forest which was burning fitfully on a mountain side; and on open spaces great fires of pine-logs were burning cheerily, with groups of men round them. A band was playing noisily, and the unholy sound of tom-toms was not far off. Mountains – the sierras of many a fireside dream – seemed to wall in the town, and great pines stood out, sharp and clear cut, against a sky in which a moon and stars were shining frostily.

It was a sharp frost at that great height, and when an 'irrepressible nigger,' who seemed to represent the hotel establishment, deposited me and my carpet-bag in a room which answered for 'the parlour,' I was glad to find some remains of pine knots still alight in the stove. A man came in and said that when the cars were gone he would try to get me a room, but they were so full that it would be a very poor one. The crowd was solely masculine. It was then 11.30 P.M., and I had not had a meal since 6 A.M.; but when I asked hopefully for a hot supper, with tea, I was told that no supper could be got at that hour; but in half an hour the same man returned with a small cup of cold, weak tea, and a small slice of bread, which looked as if it had been much handled.

I asked the negro factotum about the hire of horses, and presently a man came in from the bar who, he said, could supply my needs. This man, the very type of a western pioneer, bowed, threw himself into a rocking-chair, drew a spittoon beside him, cut a fresh quid of tobacco, began to chew energetically, and put his feet, cased in miry high boots, into which his trousers were tucked, on the top of the stove. He said he had horses which would both 'lope' and trot, that some ladies preferred the Mexican saddle, that I could ride alone in perfect safety; and after a route had been devised, I hired a horse for two days. This man wore a pioneer's badge as one of the earliest settlers of California, but he had moved on as one place after another had become too civilised for him, 'but nothing,' he added, 'was likely to change much in Truckee.' I was afterwards told that the usual regular hours of sleep are not observed there. The accommodation is too limited for the population of 2000, which is masculine mainly, and is liable to frequent temporary additions, and beds are occupied continuously, though by different occupants, throughout the greater part of the twenty-four hours. Consequently I found the bed and room allotted to me quite tumbled-looking. Men's coats and sticks were hanging up, miry boots were littered about, and a rifle was in one corner. There was no window to the outer air, but I slept soundly, being only once awoken by an increase of the same din in which I had fallen asleep, varied by three pistol-shots fired in

rapid succession.

This morning Truckee wore a totally different aspect. The crowds of the night before had disappeared. There were heaps of ashes where the fires had been. A sleepy German waiter seemed the only person about the premises, the open drinking-saloons were nearly empty, and only a few sleepy-looking loafers hung about in what is called the street. It might have been Sunday; but they say that it brings a great accession of throng and jollity. Public worship has died out at present; work is discontinued on Sunday, but the day is given up to pleasure. Putting a minimum of indispensables into a bag, and slipping on my Hawaiian riding-dress over a silk skirt, and a dust-cloak over all, I stealthily crossed the *plaza* to the livery-stable, the largest building in Truckee, where twelve fine horses were stabled in stalls on each side of a broad drive. My friend of the evening before showed me his 'rig,' three velvet-covered side-saddles almost without horns. Some ladies, he said, used the horn of the Mexican saddle, but none 'in this part' rode cavalier fashion. I felt abashed. I could not ride any distance in the conventional mode, and was just going to give up this splendid 'ravage,' when the man said, 'Ride your own fashion; here, at Truckee, if anywhere in the world, people can do as they like.' Blissful Truckee! In no time a large grey horse was 'rigged out' in a handsome silver-bossed Mexican saddle, with ornamental leather tassels hanging from the stirrup-guards, and a housing of black bear's-skin. I strapped my silk skirt on the saddle, deposited my cloak in the corn-bin, and was safely on the horse's back before his owner had time to devise any way of mounting me. Neither he nor any of the loafers who had assembled showed the slightest sign of astonishment, but all were as respectful as possible.

Once on horseback my embarrassment disappeared, and I rode through Truckee, whose irregular, steep-roofed house and shanties, set down in a clearing, and surrounded closely by mountain and forest, looked like a temporary encampment, passed under the Pacific Railroad, and then for twelve miles followed the windings of the Truckee river, a clear, rushing, mountain stream, in which immense pine logs had gone aground not to be floated off till the next freshet, a loud-tongued, rollicking stream of ice-cold water, on whose banks no ferns or trailers hang, and which leaves no greeness along its turbulent progress. All was bright with that brilliancy of sky and atmosphere, that blaze of sunshine and universal glitter which I never saw till I came to California, combined with an elasticity in the air which removes all lassitude, and gives one spirit enough for anything. On either side of the Truckee great sierras rose like walls, castellated, embattled, rifted, skirted and crowned with pines of enormous size, the walls now and then breaking apart to show some snow-slashed peak rising into a heaven of intense, unclouded, sunny blue. At this altitude of 6000 feet one must learn to be content with varieties of *conifereæ*, for, except for aspens, which spring up in some places where the pines have been cleared away, and for cotton-woods, which at a lower level fringe the streams, there is nothing but the bear cherry, the raspberry, the gooseberry, the wild grape, and the wild currant. None of these grew near the Truckee, but I feasted my eye on pines which, though not so large as the *Wellingtonia* of the Yosemite, are really gigantic, attaining a height of 250 feet, their huge stems, the warm red of cedar wood, rising straight and branchless for a third of their height, their diameter from seven to fifteen feet, their shape that of a larch, but with the needles long and dark, and cones a foot long. Pines cleft the sky; they were massed wherever level ground occurred; they stood over the Truckee at right angles, or lay across it in prostrate grandeur. Their stumps and carcasses were

everywhere; and smooth 'shoots' on the sierras marked where they were shot down as 'felled timber,' to be floated off by the river. To them this wild region owes its scattered population and the sharp ring of the lumberer's axe mingles with the cries of wild beasts and the roar of mountain torrents.

The track is a soft, natural, waggon road, very pleasant to ride on. The horse was much too big for me, and had plans of his own; but now and then, where the ground admitted of it, I tried his heavy 'lope' with much amusement. I met nobody, and passed nothing on the road but a freight waggon, drawn by twenty-two oxen, guided by three fine-looking young men, who had some difficulty in making room for me to pass their awkward convoy. After I had ridden about ten miles the road went up a steep hill in the forest, turned abruptly, and through the blue gloom of the great pines which rose from the ravine in which the river was then hid, came glimpses of two mountains, about 11,000 feet in height, whose bald grey summits were crowned with pure snow. It was one of those glorious surprises in scenery which make one feel as if one must bow down and worship. The forest was thick, and had an undergrowth of dwarf spruce and brambles, but as the horse had become fidgety and 'scary' on the track, I turned off in the idea of taking a short cut, and was sitting carelessly, shortening my stirrup, when a great, dark, hairy beast rose, crashing and snorting, out of the tangle just in front of me. I had only a glimpse of him, and thought that my imagination had magnified a wild boar, but it was a bear. The horse snorted and plunged violently, as if he would go down to the river, and then turned, still plunging, up a steep bank, when, finding that I must come off, I threw myself off on the right side, where the ground rose considerably, so that I had not far to fall. I got up covered with dust, but neither shaken nor bruised. It was truly grotesque and humiliating. The bear ran in one direction, and the horse in another. I hurried after the latter, and twice he stopped till I was close to him, then turned round and cantered away. After walking about a mile in deep dust, I picked up first the saddle-blanket and next my bag, and soon came upon the horse, standing facing me, and shaking all over. I thought I should catch him then, but when I went up to him he turned round, threw up his heels several times, rushed off the track, galloped in circles, bucking, kicking, and plunging for some time, and then throwing up his heels as an act of final defiance, went off at full speed in the direction of Truckee, with the saddle over his shoulder and the great wooden stirrups thumping his sides, while I trudged ignominiously along in the dust, laboriously carrying the bag and saddle-blanket.

I walked for nearly an hour, heated and hungry, when to my joy I saw the ox-team halted across the top of a gorge, and one of the teamsters leading the horse towards me. The young man said that, seeing the horse coming, they had drawn the team across the road to stop him and remembering that he had passed them with a lady on him, they feared that there had been an accident, and had just saddled one of their own horses to go in search of me. He brought me some water to wash the dust from my face, and re-saddled the horse, but the animal snorted and plunged for some time before he would let me mount, and then sidled along in such a nervous and scared way, that the teamster walked for some distance by me to see that I was 'all right.' He said that the woods in the neighbourhood of Tahoe had been full of brown and grizzly bears for some days, but that no one was in any danger from them. I took a long gallop beyond the scene of my tumble to quiet the horse, who was most restless and troublesome.

Then the scenery became truly magnificent and bright with life. Crested blue-jays darted through the dark pines, squirrels in hundreds scampered through the forest, red dragon-flies flashed like 'living light,' exquisite chipmonks ran across the track, but only a dusty blue lupin here and there reminded me of earth's fairer children. Then the river became broad and still, and mirrored in its transparent depths regal pines, straight as an arrow, with rich yellow and green lichen clinging to their stems, and firs and balsam-pines filling up the spaces between them, the gorge opened, and this mountain-girdled lake lay before me, with its margin broken up into bays and promontories, most picturesquely clothed by huge sugar-pines. It lay dimpling and scintillating beneath the noonday sun, as entirely unspoilt as fifteen years ago, when its pure loveliness was known only to trappers and Indians. One man lives on it the whole year round; otherwise early October strips its shores of their few inhabitants and thereafter, for seven months, it is rarely accessible except on snow-shoes. It never freezes. In the dense forests which bound it, and drape two-thirds of its gaunt sierras, are hordes of grizzlies, brown bears, wolves, elk, deer, chipmonks, martens, minks, skunks, foxes, squirrels, and snakes. On its margin I found an irregular wooden inn, with a lumber-waggon at the door, on which was the carcass of a large grizzly bear, shot behind the house this morning. I had intended to ride ten miles farther, but finding that the trail in some places was a 'blind' one, and being bewitched by the beauty and serenity of Tahoe, I have remained here sketching, revelling in the view from the verandah, and strolling in the forest. At this height there is frost every night of the year, and my fingers are benumbed.

The beauty is entrancing. The sinking sun is out of sight behind the western sierras, and all the pine-hung promontories on the side of the water are rich indigo, just reddened with lake deepening here and there into Tyrian purple. The peaks above, which still catch the sun, are bright rose-red, and all the mountains on the other side are pink; and pink, too, are the far-off summits on which the snow-drifts rest. Indigo, red, and orange tints stain the still water, which lies solemn and dark against the shore, under the shadow of stately pines. An hour later, and a moon nearly full – not a pale, flat disc, but a radiant sphere – has wheeled up into the flushed sky. The sunset has passed through every stage of beauty, through every glory of colour, through riot and triumph, through pathos and tenderness, into a long, dreamy, painless rest, succeeded by the profound solemnity of the moonlight, and a stillness broken only by the night cries of beasts in the aromatic forests.

Cheyenne, Wyoming, September 7

I dreamt of bears so vividly that I woke with a furry death-hug at my throat, but feeling quite refreshed. When I mounted my horse after breakfast the sun was high and the air so keen and intoxicating that, giving the animal his head, I galloped up and down hill, feeling completely tireless. Truly, that air is the elixir of life. I had a glorious ride back to Truckee. The road was not as solitary as the day before. In a deep part of the forest the horse snorted and reared, and I saw a cinnamon-coloured bear with two cubs cross the track ahead of me. I tried to keep the horse quiet that the mother might acquit me of any designs upon her lolloping children, but I was glad when the ungainly, long-haired party crossed the river. Then I met a team, the driver of which stopped and said he was glad that I had not gone to Cornelian Bay; it was such a bad trail, and hoped I had enjoyed Tahoe. The driver of another team stopped and asked if I had seen any bears. Then a man heavily armed, a hunter probably, asked me if I were the English tourist who had 'happened on' a 'grizzlie' yesterday. Then I saw a lumberjack taking his dinner on a rock in the river, who 'touched his hat' and brought me a draught of ice-cold water, which I could hardly drink owing to the fractiousness of the horse, and gathered me some mountain pinks, which I admired. I mention these little incidents to indicate the habit of respectful courtesy to women which prevails in that region. These men might have been excused for speaking in a somewhat free-and-easy tone to a lady riding alone, and in an unwonted fashion. Womanly dignity and manly respect for women are the salt of society in this wild West.

My horse was so excitable that I avoided the centre of Truckee, and skulked through a collection of Chinamen's shanties to the stable, where a prodigious roan horse, standing seventeen hands high, was produced for my ride to the Donner Lake. I asked the owner, who was as interested in my enjoying myself as a West Highlander might have been, if there were not ruffians about who might make an evening ride dangerous. A story was current of a man having ridden through Truckee two evenings before with a chopped-up human body in a sack behind the saddle, and hosts of stories of ruffianism are located there, rightly or wrongly. This man said, 'There's a bad breed of ruffians, but the ugliest among them all won't touch you. There's nothing Western folk admire so much as pluck in a woman.' I had to get on a barrel before I could reach the stirrup, and when I was mounted my feet only came half-way down the horse's sides. I felt like a fly on him. The road at first lay through a valley without a river, but some swampishness nourished some rank swamp-grass, the first *green* grass I have seen in America; and the pines, with their red stems, looked beautiful rising out of it. I hurried along, and came upon the Donner Lake quite suddenly, to be completely smitten by its beauty. It is only about three miles long by one and a half broad, and lies hidden away among mountains, with no dwellings on its shores but some deserted lumberers' cabins. Its loneliness pleased me well. I did not see man, beast, or bird from the time I left Truckee till I returned. The mountains, which rise abruptly from the margin, are covered with dense pine-forests, through which, here and there, strange forms of bare grey rock, castellated, or

needle-like, protrude themselves. On the opposite side, at a height of about 6000 feet, a grey ascending line, from which rumbling, incoherent sounds occasionally proceeded, is seen through the pines. This is one of the snow-sheds of the Pacific Railroad, which shuts out from travellers all that I was seeing. The lake is called after Mr Donner, who, with his family, arrived at the Truckee river in the fall of the year, in company with a party of emigrants bound for California. Being encumbered with many cattle, he let the company pass on, and, with his own party of sixteen souls, which included his wife and four children, encamped by the lake. In the morning they found themselves surrounded by an expanse of snow, and after some consultation it was agreed that the whole party except Mr Donner, who was unwell, his wife, and a German friend, should take the horses and attempt to cross the mountain, which after much peril, they succeeded in doing; but, as the storm continued for several weeks, it was impossible for any rescue party to succour the three who had been left behind. In the early spring, when the snow was hard enough for travelling, a party started in quest, expecting to find the snow-bound alive and well, as they had cattle enough for their support, and, after weeks of toil and exposure, they scaled the Sierras and reached the Donner Lake. On arriving at the camp they opened the rude door, and there, sitting before the fire, they found the German, holding a roasted human arm and hand, which he was greedily eating. The rescue party overpowered him, and with difficulty tore the arm from him. A short search discovered the body of the lady, minus the arm, frozen in the snow, round, plump, and fair, showing that she was in perfect health when she met her fate. The rescuers returned to California, taking the German with them, whose story was that Mr Donner died in the fall, and that the cattle escaped, leaving them but little food, and that when this was exhausted Mrs Donner died. The story never gained any credence, and the truth oozed out that the German had murdered the husband, then brutally murdered the wife, and had seized upon Donner's money. There were, however, no witnesses, and the murderer escaped with the enforced surrender of the money to the Donner orphans.

This tragic story filled my mind as I rode towards the head of the lake, which became every moment grander and more unutterably lovely. The sun was setting fast, and against his golden light green promontories, wooded with stately pines, stood out one beyond another in a medium of dark rich blue, while grey bleached summits, peaked, turreted, and snow-slashed, were piled above them, gleaming with amber light. Darker grew the blue gloom, the dew fell heavily, aromatic odours floated on the air, and still the lofty peaks glowed with living light, till in one second it died off from them, leaving them with the ashy paleness of a dead face. It was dark and cold under the mountain shadows, the frosty chill of the high altitude wrapped me round, the solitude was overwhelming, and I reluctantly turned my horse's head towards Truckee, often looking back to the ashy summits in their unearthly fascination. Eastwards the look of the scenery was changing every moment, while the lake for long remained 'one burnished sheet of living gold,' and Truckee lay utterly out of sight in a hollow filled with lake and cobalt. Before long a carnival of colour began which I can only describe as delirious, intoxicating, a hardly bearable joy, a tender anguish, an indescribable yearning, an unearthly music, rich in love and worship. It lasted considerably more than an hour, and though the road was growing very dark, and the train which was to take me thence was fast climbing the Sierras, I could not ride faster than a walk.

The eastward mountains, which had been grey, blushed pale pink, the pink deepened into

rose, and the rose into crimson, and then all solidity etherealised away and became clear and pure as an amethyst, while all the waving ranges and the broken pine-clothed ridges below etherealised too, but into a dark rich blue, and a strange effect of atmosphere blended the whole into one perfect picture. It changed, deepened, reddened, melted, growing more and more wonderful, while under the pines it was night, till, having displayed itself for an hour, the jewelled peaks suddenly became like those of the sierras, wan as the face of death. Far later the cold golden light lingered in the west, with pines in relief against its purity, and where the rose light had glowed in the east, a huge moon upheaved itself, and the red flicker of forest fires luridly streaked the mountain sides near and far off. I realised that night had come with its *eeriness*, and putting my great horse into a gallop I clung on to him till I pulled him up in Truckee, which was at the height of its evening revelries – fires blazing out of doors, bar-rooms and saloons crammed, lights glaring, gaming-tables thronged, fiddle and banjo in frightful discord, and the air ringing with ribaldry and profanity.

Letter III

Cheyenne, Wyoming, September 8

Cheyenne is described as 'a God-forsaken, God-forgotten place.' That it forgets God is written on its face. It owes its existence to the railroad, and has diminished in population, but is a depôt for a large amount of the necessaries of life which are distributed through the scantily settled districts within distances of 300 miles by 'freight waggons,' each drawn by four or six horses or mules, or double that number of oxen. At times over 100 waggons, with double the number of teamsters, are in Cheyenne at once. A short time ago it was a perfect pandemonium, mainly inhabited by rowdies and desperadoes, the scum of advancing civilisation; and murders, stabbings, shootings, and pistol affrays were at times events of almost hourly occurrence in its drinking dens. But in the West, when things reach their worst a sharp and sure remedy is provided. Those settlers who find the state of matters intolerable organise themselves into a Vigilance Committee. 'Judge Lynch,' with a few feet of rope, appears on the scene, the majority crystallises round the supporters of order, warnings are issued to obnoxious people, simply bearing a scrawl of a tree with a man dangling from it, with such words as 'Clear out of this by 6 A.M., or –.' A number of the worst desperadoes are tried by a yet more summary process than a drumhead court-martial, 'strung up,' and buried ignominiously. I have been told that 120 ruffians were disposed of in this way here in a single fortnight. Cheyenne is now as safe as Hilo, and the interval between the most desperate lawlessness and the time when United States law, with its corruption and feebleness, comes upon the scene is one of comparative security and good order. Piety is not the *forte* of Cheyenne. The roads resound with atrocious profanity, and the rowdyism of the saloons and bar-rooms is repressed, not extirpated.

[...]

Fort Collins, September 10

It gave me a strange sensation to embark upon the Plains. Plains, plains everywhere, plains generally level, but elsewhere rolling in long undulations, like the waves of a sea which had fallen asleep. They are covered thinly with buff grass, the withered stalks of flowers, Spanish bayonet, and a small beehive-shaped cactus. One could gallop all over them.

They are peopled with large villages of what are called prairie dogs, because they utter a short, sharp bark, but the dogs are, in reality, marmots. We passed numbers of these villages which are composed of raised circular orifices, about eighteen inches in diameter, with sloping passages leading downwards for five or six feet. Hundreds of these burrows are placed together. On nearly every rim a small furry reddish-buff beast sat on his hind legs, looking, so far as head went, much like a young seal. These creatures were acting as sentinels, and sunning themselves. As we passed, each gave a warning yelp, shook its tail, and, with a ludicrous flourish of its hind legs, dived into its hole. The appearance of hundred

of these creatures, each eighteen inches long, sitting like dogs begging, with their paws down and all turned sunwards, is most grotesque. The Wish-ton-Wish has few enemies, and is a most prolific animal. From its enormous increase, and the energy and extent of its burrowing operations, one can fancy that in the course of years the prairies will be seriously injured, as it honeycombs the ground, and renders it unsafe for horses. The burrows seem usually to be shared by owls, and many of the people insist that a rattlesnake is also an inmate, but I hope for the sake of the harmless, cheery little prairie dog, that this unwelcome fellowship is a myth.

[...]

It is the election day for the Territory, and men were galloping over the prairie to register their votes. The three in the waggon talked politics the whole time. They spoke openly and shamelessly of the prices given for votes; and apparently there was not a politician on either side who was not accused of degrading corruption. We saw a convoy of 5000 head of Texan cattle travelling from Southern Texas to Iowa. They had been nine months on the way! They were under the charge of twenty mounted *vacheros*, heavily armed, and a light waggon accompanied them, full of extra rifles and ammunition, not unnecessary, for the Indians are raiding in all directions, maddened by the reckless and useless slaughter of the buffalo, which is their chief subsistence. On the plains are herds of wild horses, buffalo, deer, and antelope; and in the mountains, bears, wolves, deer, elk, mountain lions, bison, and mountain sheep. You see a rifle in every waggon, as people always hope to fall in with game.

By the time we reached Fort Collins I was sick and dizzy with the heat of the sun, and not disposed to be pleased with a most unpleasing place. It was a military post, but at present consists of a few frame houses put down recently on the bare and burning plain. The settlers have 'great expectations,' but of what? The mountains look hardly nearer than from Greeley, one only realises their vicinity by the loss of their higher peaks. This house is freer from bugs than the one at Greeley, but full of flies. These new settlements are altogether revolting, entirely utilitarian, given up to talk of dollars as well as to making them, with coarse speech, coarse food, coarse everything, nothing wherewith to satisfy the higher cravings if they exist, nothing on which the eye can rest with pleasure. The lower floor of this inn swarms with locusts in addition to thousands of black flies. The latter cover the ground and rise buzzing from it as you walk.

Letter IV

Canyon, September 12

I was actually so dull and tired that I deliberately slept away the afternoon in order to forge the heat and flies. Thirty men in working clothes, silent and sad-looking, came in to supper. The beef was tough and greasy, the butter had turned to oil, and beef and butter were black with living, drowned, and half-drowned flies. The greasy table-cloth was black also with flies and I did not wonder that the guests looked melancholy and quickly escaped. I failed to get a horse, but was strongly recommended to come here and board with a settler, who, they said, had a saw-mill and took boarders. The person who recommended it so strongly gave me a note of introduction, and told me that it was in a grand part of the mountains, where many people had been camping out all the summer for the benefit of their health. The idea of a boarding-house, as I know them in America, was rather formidable in the present state of my wardrobe, and I decided on bringing my carpet-bag, as well as my pack, lest I should be rejected for my bad clothes. Early the next morning I left in a buggy drawn by light *broncos* and driven by a profoundly melancholy young man. He had never been to the canyon; there was no road. We met nobody, saw nothing except antelope in the distance, and he became more melancholy and lost his way, driving hither and thither for about twenty miles till we came upon an old trail which eventually brought us to a fertile 'bottom,' where hay and barley were being harvested, and five or six frame houses looked cheerful. I had been recommended to two of these, which professed to take in strangers, but one was full of reapers, and in the other a child was dead. So I took the buggy on, glad to leave the glaring, prosaic settlement behind. There was a most curious loneliness about the journey up to that time. Except for the huge barrier to the right, the boundless prairies were everywhere, and it was like being at sea without a compass. The wheels made neither sound nor indentation as we drove over the short, dry grass, and there was no cheerful clatter of horses' hoofs. The sky was cloudy and the air hot and still. In one place we passed the carcass of a mule, and a number of vultures soared up from it, to descend again immediately. Skeletons and bones of animals were often to be seen. A range of low, grassy hills, called the Foot Hills, rose from the plain, featureless and monotonous, except where streams, fed by the snows of the higher regions, had cut their way through them. Confessedly bewildered, and more melancholy than ever, the driver turned up one of the widest of these entrances, and in another hour the Foot Hills lay between us and the prairie sea, and a higher and broken range, with pitch pines of average size, was revealed behind them. These Foot Hills, which swell up uninterestingly from the plains on their eastern side, on their western have the appearance of having broken off from the next range, and the break is abrupt, and takes the form of walls and terraces of rock of the most brilliant colour, weathered and stained by ores, and, even under the grey sky, dazzling to the eyes. The driver thought he had understood the directions given, but he was stupid, and once we lost some miles by arriving at a river too rough and deep to be forded, and again we were brought up by an impassable canyon. He grew frightened about his horses, and said no money would ever tempt him into the mountains again; but average

intelligence would have made it all easy.

The solitude was becoming sombre, when, after driving for nine hours, and travelling at the least forty-five miles, without any sign of fatigue on the part of the *Broncos*, we came to a stream, by the side of which we drove along a definite track, till we came to a sort of tripartite valley, with a majestic crooked canyon 2000 feet deep opening upon it. A rushing stream roared through it, and the Rocky Mountains, with pines scattered over them, came down upon it. A little farther, and the canyon became utterly inaccessible. This was exciting here was an inner world. A rough and shaky bridge, made of the outsides of pines laid upon some unsecured logs, crossed the river. The *Broncos* stopped and smelt it, not liking it, but some encouraging speech induced them to go over. On the other side was a log cabin, partially ruinous, and the very rudest I ever saw, its roof of plastered mud being broken into large holes. It stood close to the water among some cotton-wood trees. A little higher there was a very primitive saw-mill, also out of repair, with some logs lying about. An emigrant waggon and a forlorn tent, with a camp-fire and a pot, were in the foreground, but there was no trace of the boarding-house, of which I stood a little in dread. The driver went for further directions to the log-cabin, and returned with a grim smile deepening the melancholy of his face to say it was Mr Chalmers's, but there was no accommodation for such as him, much less for me! This was truly 'a sell.' I got down and found a single room of the rudest kind, with the wall at one end partially broken down, holes in the roof, holes for windows, and no furniture but two chairs and two unplanned wooden shelves, with some sacks of straw upon them for beds. There was an adjacent cabin room, with a stove, benches, and table, where they cooked and ate, but this was all. A hard, sad-looking woman looked at me measuringly. She said that they sold milk and butter to parties who camped in the canyon, that they had never had any boarders but two asthmatic old ladies, but they would take me for five dollars per week if I 'would make myself agreeable.' The horses had to be fed, and I sat down on a box, had some dried beef and milk, and considered the matter. If I went back to Fort Collins I thought, I was farther from a mountain life, and had no choice but Denver, a place from which I shrank, or to take the cars for New York. Here the life was rough, rougher than any I had ever seen, and the people repelled me by their faces and manners; but if I could rough it for a few days, I might, I thought, get over canyons and all other difficulties into Estes Park, which has become the goal of my journey and hopes. So I decided to remain.

September 16

Five days here, and I am no nearer Estes Park. How the days pass I know not; I am weary of the limitations of this existence. This is 'a life in which nothing ever happens.' When the buggy disappeared, I felt as if I had cut the bridge behind me. I sat down and knitted for some time – my usual resource under discouraging circumstances. I really did not know how I should get on. There was no table, no bed, no basin, no towel, no glass, no window, no fastening on the door. The roof was in holes, the logs were unchinked, and one end of the cabin was partially removed! Life was reduced to its simplest elements. I went out; the family all had something to do, and took no notice of me. I went back, and then an awkward girl of sixteen, with uncombed hair, and a painful repulsiveness of face and air, sat on a log for half an hour and stared at me. I tried to draw her into talk, but she twirled her fingers

and replied snappishly in monosyllables. Could I by any effort 'make myself agreeable?' I wondered. The day went on. I put on my Hawaiian dress, rolling up the sleeves to the elbow in an 'agreeable' fashion. Towards evening the family returned to feed, and pushed some dried beef and milk in at the door. They all slept under the trees, and before dark carried the sacks of straw out for their bedding. I followed their example that night, or rather watched Charles's Wain while they slept, but since then have slept on blankets on the floor under the roof. They have neither lamp nor candle, so if I want to do anything after dark I have to do by the unsteady light of pine knots. As the nights are cold, and free from bugs, and I do a good deal of manual labour, I sleep well. At dusk I make my bed on the floor, and draw a bucket of ice-cold water from the river; the family go to sleep under the trees, and I pile logs on the fire sufficient to burn half the night, for I assure you the solitude is *eerie* enough. There are unaccountable noises (wolves), rummagings under the floor, queer cries, and stealthy sounds of I know not what. One night a beast (fox or skunk) rushed in at the open end of [the] cabin, and fled through the window, almost brushing my face, and on another, the head and three or four inches of the body of a snake were protruded through a chink of the floor close to me, to my extreme disgust. My mirror is the polished inside of my watchcase. At sunrise Mrs Chalmers comes in – if coming into a nearly open shed can be called *in* – and makes a fire, because she thinks me too stupid to do it, and mine is the family room; and by seven I am dressed, have folded the blankets, and swept the floor, and then she puts some milk and bread or stirabout on a box by the door. After breakfast I draw more water, and wash one or two garments daily, taking care that there are no witnesses of my inexperience. Yesterday a calf sucked one into hopeless rags. The rest of the day I spend in mending, knitting, writing to you, and the various odds and ends which arise when one has to do all for oneself. At twelve and six some food is put on the box by the door, and at dusk we make up our beds. A distressed emigrant woman has just given birth to a child in a temporary shanty by the river, and I go to help her each day. I have made the acquaintance of all the careworn struggling settlers within a walk. All have come for health, and most have found or are finding it, even if they have no better shelter than a waggon tilt or a blanket on sticks laid across four poles. The climate of Colorado is considered the finest in North America, and consumptives, asthmatics, dyspeptics, and sufferers from nervous diseases, are here in hundreds and thousands, either trying the 'camp cure' for three or four months, or settling here permanently. People can safely sleep out of doors for six months of the year. The plains are from 4000 to 6000 feet high, and some of the settled 'parks,' or mountain valleys, are from 8000 to 10,000. The air, besides being much rarefied, is very dry. The rainfall is far below the average, dews are rare, and fogs nearly unknown. The sunshine is bright and almost constant, and three-fourths of the days are cloudless. The milk, beef, and bread are good. The climate is neither so hot in summer nor so cold in winter as that of the States, and when the days are hot the nights are cool. Snow rarely lies on the lower ranges, and horses and cattle don't require to be either fed or housed during the winter. Of course the rarefied air quickens respiration. All this is from hearsay. I am not under favourable circumstances, either for mind or body, and at present I feel a singular lassitude and difficulty in taking exercise, but this is said to be the milder form of the affection known on higher altitudes as *soroche*, or 'mountain sickness,' and is only temporary. I am forming a plan for getting farther into the mountains, and hope that my next letter will be more lively. I killed a rattlesnake

this morning close to the cabin, and have taken its rattle, which has eleven joints. My life is embittered by the abundance of these reptiles – rattlesnakes and moccasin snakes, both deadly, carpet snakes and ‘green racers,’ reputed dangerous, water snakes, tree snakes, and mouse snakes, harmless but abominable. Seven rattlesnakes have been killed just outside the cabin since I came. A snake, three feet long, was found coiled under the pillow of the sick woman. I see snakes in all withered twigs, and am ready to flee at ‘the sound of a shaken leaf.’ And besides snakes, the earth and air are alive and noisy with forms of insect life, large and small, stinging, humming, buzzing, striking, rasping, devouring!

Nameless Region, Rocky Mountains, September

This is indeed far removed. It seems farther away from you than any place I have been to yet, except the frozen top of the volcano of Mauna Loa. It is so little profaned by man that if one were compelled to live here in solitude one might truly say of the bears, deer, and elk which abound, 'Their tameness is shocking to me.' It is the world of 'big game.' Just now a heavy-headed elk, with much-branched horns fully three feet long, stood and looked at me, and then quietly trotted away. He was so near that I heard the grass, crisp with hoar frost, crackle under his feet. Bears stripped the cherry-bushes within a few yards of us last night. Now two lovely blue birds, with crests on their heads, are picking about within a stone's-throw. This is 'The Great Lone Land,' until lately the hunting-ground of the Indians, and not yet settled or traversed, or likely to be so, owing to the want of water. A solitary hunter has built a log cabin up here, which he occupies for a few weeks for the purpose of elk-hunting, but all the region is unsurveyed, and mostly unexplored. It is 7 A.M. The sun has not yet risen high enough to melt the hoar-frost, and the air is clear, bright, and cold. The stillness is profound. I hear nothing but the far-off mysterious roaring of a river in a deep canyon, which we spent two hours last night in trying to find. The horses are lost, and if I were disposed to retort upon my companions the term they invariably apply to me, I should now write, with bitter emphasis, '*that man*' and '*that woman*' have gone in search of them.

The scenery up here is glorious, combining sublimity with beauty, and in the elastic air fatigue has dropped off from me. This is no region for tourists and women, only for a few elk and bear hunters at times, and its unprofaned freshness gives me new life. I cannot by any words give you an idea of scenery so different from any that you or I have ever seen. This is an upland valley of grass and flowers, of glades and sloping lawns, and cherry-fringed beds of dry streams, and clumps of pines artistically placed, and mountain sides densely pine-clad, the pines breaking into fringes as they come down upon the 'park,' and the mountains breaking into pinnacles of bold grey rock as they pierce the blue of the sky. A single dell of bright green grass, on which dwarf clumps of the scarlet poison-oak look like beds of geraniums, slopes towards the west, as if it must lead to the river which we seek. Deep, vast canyons, all trending westwards, lie in purple gloom. Pine-clad ranges, rising into the blasted top of Storm Peak, all run westwards too, and all the beauty and glory are but the frame out of which rises – heaven-piercing, pure in its pearly lustre, as glorious a mountain as the sun tinges red in either hemisphere – the splintered, pinnacled, lonely, ghastly, imposing, double-peaked summit of Long's Peak, the Mont Blanc of Northern Colorado.

This is a view to which nothing needs to be added. This is truly the 'lodge in some vast wilderness' for which one often sighs when in the midst of 'a bustle at once sordid and trivial.' In spite of Dr Johnson, these 'monstrous protuberances' do 'inflammate the imagination and elevate the understanding.' This scenery satisfies my soul. Now, the Rocky Mountains realise – nay, exceed – the dream of my childhood. It is magnificent, and the air is life-giving. I should like to spend some time in these higher regions, but I know that this will turn out an

abortive expedition, owing to the stupidity and pigheadedness of Chalmers.

There is a most romantic place called Estes Park, at a height of 7500 feet, which can be reached by going down to the plains and then striking up the St Vrain Canyon, but this is a distance of 55 miles, and as Chalmers was confident that he could take me over the mountains, a distance, as he supposed, of about 20 miles, we left at mid-day yesterday, with the fervent hope, on my part, that I might not return. Mrs C. was busy the whole of Tuesday in preparing what she called 'grub,' which, together with 'plenty of bedding,' was to be carried on a pack mule; but when we started I was disgusted to find that Chalmers was on what should have been the pack animal, and that two thickly-quilted cotton 'spreads' had been disposed of under my saddle, making it broad, high, and uncomfortable. Any human being must have laughed to see an expedition start so grotesquely 'ill found.' I had a very old iron-grey horse, whose lower lip hung down feebly, showing his few teeth, while his fore-legs stuck out forwards, and matter ran from both his nearly-blind eyes. It is a kindness to bring him up to abundant pasture. My saddle is an old McLellan cavalry saddle, with a battered brass peak, and the bridle is a rotten leather strap on one side and a strand of rope on the other. The cotton quilts covered the Rosinante from mane to tail. Mrs C. wore an old print skirt, an old short-gown, a print apron, and a sun-bonnet, with the flap coming down to her waist, and looked as careworn and clean as she always does. The inside horn of her saddle was broken; to the outside one hung a saucepan and a bundle of clothes. The one girth was nearly at the breaking-point when we started.

My pack, with my well-worn umbrella upon it, was behind my saddle. I wore my Hawaiian riding-dress, with a handkerchief tied over my face and the sun-cover of my umbrella folded and tied over my hat, for the sun was very fierce. The queerest figure of all was the would-be guide. With his one eye, his gaunt, lean form, and his torn clothes, he looked more like a strolling tinker than the honest worthy settler that he is. He bestrode rather than rode a gaunt mule, whose tail hair had all been shaven off, except a tuft for a tassel at the end. Two flour bags which leaked were tied on behind the saddle, two quilts were under it, and my canvas bag, a battered canteen, a frying-pan, and two lariats hung from the horn. On one foot C. wore an old high boot, into which his trouser was tucked, and on the other an old brogue, through which his toes protruded.

We had an ascent of four hours through a ravine which gradually opened out upon this beautiful 'park,' but we rode through it for some miles before the view burst upon us. The vastness of this range, like astronomical distances, can hardly be conceived of. At this place, suppose, it is not less than 250 miles wide, and with hardly a break in its continuity, it stretches almost from the Arctic Circle to the Straits of Magellan. From the top of Long's Peak, within a short distance, twenty-two summits, each above 12,000 feet in height, are visible, and the Snowy Range, the backbone or 'divide' of the continent, is seen snaking distinctly through the wilderness of ranges, with its waters starting for either ocean. From the first ridge we crossed after leaving Canyon we had a singular view of range beyond range cleft by deep canyons, and abounding in elliptical valleys, richly grassed. The slopes of all the hills, as far as one could see, were waving with fine grass ready for the scythe, but the food of wild animals only. All these ridges are heavily timbered with pitch pines, and where they come down on the grassy slopes they look as if the trees had been arranged by a landscape gardener. Far off, through an opening in a canyon, we saw the prairie simulating the ocean.

Far off, through an opening in another direction, was the glistening outline of the Snowy Range. But still, till we reached this place, it was monotonous, though grand as a whole: a grey-green or buff-grey, with outbreaks of brilliantly-coloured rock, only varied by the black green of pines, which are not the stately pyramidal pines of the Sierra Nevada, but much resemble the natural Scotch fir. Not many miles from us is North Park, a great tract of land said to be rich in gold, but those who have gone to 'prospect' have seldom returned, the region being the home of tribes of Indians who live in perpetual hostility to the whites and to each other.

At this great height, and most artistically situated, we came upon a rude log camp tenanted in winter by an elk hunter, but now deserted. Chalmers without any scruple picked the padlock; we lighted a fire, made some tea, and fried some bacon, and after a good meal mounted again and started for Estes Park. For four weary hours we searched hither and thither along every indentation of the ground which might be supposed to slope towards the Big Thompson River, which we knew had to be forded. Still, as the quest grew more tedious Long's Peak stood before us as a landmark in purple glory; and still at his feet lay a hollow filled with deep blue atmosphere, where I knew that Estes Park must lie, and still between us and it lay never-lessening miles of inaccessibility, and the sun was ever westering, and the shadows ever lengthening, and Chalmers, who had started confident, bumptious, blatant, was ever becoming more bewildered, and his wife's thin voice more piping and discontented, and my stumbling horse more insecure, and I more determined (as I am at this moment) that somehow or other I would reach that blue hollow, and even stand on Long's Peak where the snow was glittering. Affairs were becoming serious, and Chalmers's incompetence a source of real peril, when, after an exploring expedition, he returned more bumptious than ever, saying he knew it would be all right, he had found a trail, and we could get across the river by dark and camp out for the night. So he led us into a steep, deep, rough ravine, where we had to dismount, for trees were lying across it everywhere, and there was almost no footing on the great slabs of shelving rock. Yet there was a trail, tolerably well worn, and the branches and twigs near the ground were well broken back. Ah! it was a wild place. My horse fell first, rolling over twice, and breaking off a part of the saddle, in his second roll knocking me over a shelf of three feet of descent. Then Mrs C.'s horse and the mule fell on the top of each other, and on recovering themselves bit each other savagely. The ravine became a wild gulch, the dry bed of some awful torrent; there were huge shelves of rock, great overhanging walls of rock, great prostrate trees, cedar spikes and cacti to wound the feet, and then a precipice fully 500 feet deep! The trail was a trail made by bears in search of bear cherries, which abounded!

It was getting dusk as we had to struggle up the rough gulch we had so fatuously descended. The horses fell several times; I could hardly get mine up at all, though I helped him as much as I could; I was cut and bruised, scratched and torn. A spine of a cactus penetrated my foot, and some vicious thing cut the back of my neck. Poor Mrs C. was much bruised, and I pitied her, for she got no fun out of it as I did. It was an awful climb. When we got out of the gulch, C. was so confused that he took the wrong direction, and after an hour of vague wandering was only recalled to the right one by my pertinacious assertions acting on his weak brain. I was inclined to be angry with the incompetent braggart, who had boasted that he could take us to Estes Park 'blindfold;' but I was sorry for him too, so said nothing,

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