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Letter Twelve

ENDS WITH THE CANYON OF THE YELLOWSTONE,
THE MAIDEN FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE, LARRY,
“WRAP UP HIS TAIL,” TOM, THE OLD LADY FROM
CHICAGO, AND A FEW NATURAL PHENOMENA,
INCLUDING ONE BRITON

“What man would read and read the self-same faces
And like the marbles which the windmill grinds,
Rub smooth forever with the same smooth minds,
This year retracing last year’s, every year’s, dull traces,
When there are woods and unmanstifled places?”

Lowell

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a carter who brought his team and a
friend into the Yellowstone Park without due thought. Presently they
came upon a few of the natural beauties of the place and that carter
turned his team into his friend’s team howling: —“Get back o’ this,
Jim. All Hell’s alight under our noses.” And they call the place Hell’s
Halfacre to this day to witness if the carter lied. We, too, the old lady
from Chicago, her husband, Tom and the good little mares came to
Hell’s Halfacre, which is about sixty acres, and when Tom said:
“Would you like to drive over it?” we said: “Certainly no, and if you do
we shall report you to the authorities!” There was a plain, blistered
and peeled and abominable, and it was given over to the sportings
and spoutings of devils who threw mud and steam and dirt at each
other with whoops and halloos and bellowing curses. The place smelt
of the refuse of the Pit, and that odour mixed with the clean wholesome aroma of the pines in our nostrils throughout the day. Be it known that the Park is laid out, like Ollendorf,² in exercises of progressive difficulty. Hell’s Halfacre was a prelude to ten or twelve miles of geyser formation. We passed hot streams boiling in the forest; saw whiffs of steam beyond these and yet other whiffs breaking through the misty green hills in the far distance; we trampled on sulphur in crystals, and sniffed things much worse than any sulphur which is known to the upper world: and so, journeying bewildered with the novelty, came upon a park-like place where Tom suggested we should get out and play with the geysers on foot.

Imagine mighty green fields splattered with lime beds: all the flowers of the summer growing up to the very edge of the lime. That was the first glimpse of the geyser basins. The buggy had pulled up close to a rough, broken, blistered cone of stuff between ten and twenty feet high. There was trouble in that place—moaning, splashing, gurgling and the clank of machinery. A spurt of boiling water jumped into the air and a wash of water followed. I removed swiftly. The old lady from Chicago shrieked. “What a wicked waste,” said her husband. I think they call it the Riverside Geyser.³ Its spout was torn and ragged like the mouth of a gun when a shell has burst there. It grumbled madly for a moment or two and then was still. I crept over the steaming lime—it was the burning marl on which Satan lay⁴—and looked fearfully down its mouth. You should never look a gift-geyser in the mouth. I beheld a horrible slippery slimy funnel with water rising and falling ten feet at a time. Then the water rose to lip level with a rush and an infernal bubbling troubled this Devil’s Bethesda⁵ before the sullen heave of the crest of a wave lapped over the edge and made me run. Mark the nature of the human soul! I had begun with awe, not to say terror. I stepped back from the flanks of the Riverside Geyser saying: —“Pooh! Is that all it can do?” Yet, for aught I knew, the whole thing might have blown up at a minute’s notice; she, he or it being an arrangement of uncertain temper.

We drifted on up that miraculous valley. On either side of us were hills from a thousand to fifteen [hundred] feet high and wooded from crest to heel. As far as the eye could range forward were columns of steam in the air, misshapen lumps of lime, most like preadamite mon-
sters, still pools of turquoise blue, stretches of blue cornflowers, a river that coiled on itself twenty times, boulders of strange colours, and ridges of glaring, staring white.

The old lady from Chicago poked with her parasol at the pools as though they had been alive. On one particularly innocent-looking little puddle she turned her back for a moment and there rose behind her a twenty-foot column of water and steam. Then she shrieked and protested that “she never thought it would ha’ done it,” and the old man chewed his tobacco steadily and mourned for steam power wasted. I embraced the whitened stump of a middle-sized pine that had grown all too close to a hot pool’s lip, and the whole thing turned over under my hand as a tree would do in a nightmare. From right and left came the trumpetings of elephants at play. If the long-haired mammoth of the Science primers (he that was etched by primitive man) had broken out from the undergrowth I should not have been in the least surprised. Perfectly natural, too, was it that I should step into a pool of old dried blood rimmed with the nodding cornflowers; that the blood should change to ink even as I trod; and that ink and blood should be washed away in a spurt of boiling sulphurous water spat out from the lee of a bank of flowers. This sounds mad, doesn’t it?

A moon-faced trooper of German extraction—never was the Park so carefully patrolled—came up to inform us that as yet we had not seen any of the real geysers that they were all a mile or so up the valley, and tastefully scattered round the hotel in which we would rest for the night. America is a free country, but the citizens look down on the soldier. I had to entertain that trooper. The old lady from Chicago would have none of him; so we loafed along together, now across half-rotten pine logs sunk in swampy ground, anon over the ringing geyser formation, then pondering through river sand or brushing knee-deep through long grass.

“And why did you ‘list?’” said I.

The moonfaced one’s face began to work. I thought he would have a fit, but he told me a story instead—such a nice tale of a naughty little girl who wrote love-letters to two men at once. She was a simple village wife, but a wicked “Family Novelette” countess couldn’t have accomplished her ends better. She drove one man nearly wild with the pretty little treachery; and the other man abandoned her and came
West to forget the trickery. Moonface was that man. We rounded and limped over a low spur of hill and came out upon a field of aching snowy lime rolled in sheets, twisted into knots, riven with rents and diamonds and stars, stretching for more than half a mile in every direction. On this place of despair lay most of the big geysers who know when there is trouble in Krakatoa, who tell the pines when there is a cyclone on the Atlantic seashore, and who—are exhibited to visitors under pretty and fanciful names. The first mound that I encountered belonged to a goblin who was splashing in his tub. I heard him kick, pull a shower-bath on his shoulders, gasp, crack his joints and rub himself down with a towel; then he let the water out of the bath, as a thoughtful man should, and it all sank down out of sight till another goblin arrived. Yet they called this place the Lioness and the Cubs. It lies not very far from the Lion, which is a sullen roaring beast, and they say that when it is very active the other geysers presently follow suit. After Krakatoa all the geysers went mad together, spouting, spurting and bellowing till men feared that they would rip up the whole field. Mysterious sympathies exist among them, and when the Giantess speaks (of her more anon) they all hold their peace.

I was watching a solitary spring well within the line of the woods, catching at a pine branch overhead, when far across the fields and not more than a quarter of a mile from the hotel there stood up a plume of spun glass, iridescent and superb, against the sky. “That,” said the trooper, “is Old Faithful. He goes off every sixty-five minutes to the minute, plays for five minutes and sends up a column of water a hundred and fifty feet high. By the time you have looked at all the other geysers he will be ready to play.”

So we looked and we wondered at the Beehive, whose mouth is built up exactly like a hive; at the Turban (which is not in the least like a turban) and at many, many other geysers, hot holes, and springs. Some of them rumbled, some hissed, some went off spasmodically, and others lay still in sheets of sapphire and beryl.

Would you believe that even these terrible creatures have to be guarded by the troopers to prevent the irreverent American from chipping the cones to pieces, or, worse still, making the geysers sick? If you take of soft soap a small barrelful and drop it down a geyser’s mouth, that geyser will presently be forced to lay all before you and
for days afterwards will be of an irritated and inconstant stomach. When they told me the tale I was filled with sympathy. Now I wish that I had stolen soap and tried the experiment on some lonely little beast away in the woods. It sounds so probable and so human.

Yet he would be a bold man who would administer emetics to the Giantess. She is flat-lipped, having no mouth, she looks like a pool, fifty feet long and thirty wide, and there is no ornamentation about her. At irregular intervals she speaks and sends up a column of water over two hundred feet high to begin with, then she is angry for a day and a half—sometimes for two days. Owing to her peculiarity of going mad in the night not many people have seen the Giantess at her finest; but the clamour of her unrest, men say, shakes the wooden hotel and echoes like thunder among the hills. When I saw her, trouble was brewing. The pool bubbled seriously, and at five-minute intervals, sank a foot or two, then rose, washed over the rim and huge steam bubbles broke on the top. Just before an eruption the water entirely disappears from view. *Nota bene.* —Whenever you see the water die down in a geyser mouth get away as fast as you can. I saw a tiny little geyser suck in its breath in this way and instinct made me retire while it hooted after me.

Leaving the Giantess to swear and spit and thresh about, we went over to Old Faithful, who by reason of his faithfulness has benches close to him whence you may comfortably watch. At the appointed hour we hear the water flying up and down the mouth with the sob of a wave in a cave. Then came the preliminary gouts, then a roar and a rush, and that glittering column of diamonds rose, quivered a moment, and stood still for a minute. Then it broke, and the rest was a confused snarl of water not thirty feet high. All the young ladies—not more than twenty—in the tourist band remarked that it was “elegant,” and betook themselves to writing their names in the bottoms of shallow pools that showed the ground. Nature fixes the insult indelibly, and after years shall learn that “Hattie,” “Sadie,” “Maim,” “Sophie” and so forth, have taken out their hair-pins and scrawled in the face of Old Faithful.

The congregation returned to the hotel to put down their impressions in diaries and note-books which they wrote up ostentatiously in the verandahs. It was a sweltering hot day, albeit we stood somewhat
higher than the summit of Jakko, and I left that raw pine-creaking caravanserai for the cool shade of a clump of pines between whose trunks glimmered tents. A batch of troopers came down the road and flung themselves across country into their rough lines. Verily the 'Melican cavalryman can ride, though he keeps his accoutrements pig and his horse cow-fashion.

I was free of that camp in five minutes—free to play with the heavy lumpy carbines, to have the saddles stripped and punch the horses knowingly in the ribs. One of the men had been in the fight with "Wrap-up-his-Tail" before alluded to, and he told me how that great chief, his horse's tail tied up in red calico, swaggered in front of the U.S. cavalry, challenging all and sundry to single combat. But he was slain, and a few of his tribe with him. "There's no use in an Indian anyway," concluded my friend.

A couple of cowboys—real cowboys, not the Buffalo Bill article—jingled through the camp amid a shower of mild chaff. They were on their way to Cook City, I fancy, and I know that they never washed. But they were picturesque ruffians exceedingly, with their long spurs, hooded stirrups, slouch hats, fur weather-cloths over their knees, and pistol butts easy to hand.

"The cowboy's goin' under before long," said my friend. "Soon as the country's settled up he'll have to go. But he's mighty useful now. What should we do without the cowboy?"

"As how?" said I, and the camp laughed.

"He has the money. We have the skill. He comes in in winter to play poker at the military posts. We play poker—a few. When he's lost his money we make him drunk and let him go. Sometimes we get the wrong man." And he told a tale of an innocent cowboy who turned up, cleaned out, at a post, and played poker for thirty-six hours. But it was the post that was cleaned out when that long-haired Caucasian Ah Sin removed himself, heavy with everybody's pay, and declining the proffered liquor. "Naow," said the historian, "I don't play with no cowboy unless he's a little bit drunk first."

Ere I departed I gathered from more than one man the significant fact that up to one hundred yards he felt absolutely secure behind his revolver.
“In England, I understand,” quoth a limber youth from the South, 
“in England a man aren’t allowed to play with no firearms. He’s got to 
be taught all that when he enlists. I didn’t want much teaching how to 
shoot straight ‘fore I served Uncle Sam. And that’s just where it is. 
But you was talkin’ about your horse guards now?”

I explained briefly some peculiarities of equipment connected with 
our crackest crack cavalry. I grieve to say the camp roared.

“Take ‘em over swampy ground. Let ‘em run around a bit an’ work 
the starch out of ‘em an’ then, Almighty, if we wouldn’t plug ‘em at 
ease, I’d eat their horses!”

“But suppose they engaged in the open?” said I.

“Engage in Hades. Not if there was a tree trunk within twenty 
miles they couldn’t engage in the open!”

Gentlemen, the officers, have you ever seriously considered the ex-
istence on earth subsequent to the year 1864 of cavalry who by prefer-
ence would fight in timber? The evident sincerity of the proposition 
made me think hard as I moved over to the hotel and joined a party 
exploration, which, diving into the woods, unearthed a pit pool of 
burningest water fringed with jet black sand—all the ground near by 
being pure white. But miracles pall when they arrive at the rate of 
twenty a day. A flaming dragon-fly flew over the pool, reeled and 
dropped on the water, dying without a quiver of his gorgeous wings; 
and the pool said nothing whatever, but sent its thin steam wreaths 
up to the burning sky. I prefer pools that talk.

There was a maiden—a very little maiden—who had just stepped 
out of one of Mr. James’s novels. She owned a delightful mother and 
an equally delightful father, a heavy-eyed, slow-voiced man of fi-
nance. The parents thought that their daughter wanted change. She 
lived in New Hampshire. Accordingly, she had dragged them up to 
Alaska, to the Yosemite Valley, and was now returning leisurely via 
the Yellowstone just in time for the tail end of the summer season at 
Saratoga. We had met once or twice before in the Park, and I had been 
amazed and amused at her critical commendation of the wonders 
that she saw. From that very resolute little mouth I received a lecture 
on American literature, the nature and inwardness of Washington so-
 ciety, the precise value of Cable’s works as compared with Uncle Re-
 mus Harris, and a few other things that had nothing whatever to do
with geysers, but were altogether delightful. Now an English maiden who had stumbled on a dust-grimed, lime-washed, sun-peeled, collarless wanderer come from and going to goodness knows where, would, her mother inciting her and her father brandishing his umbrella, have regarded him as a dissolute adventurer—a person to be disregarded. Not so those delightful people from New Hampshire. They were good enough to treat me—it sounds almost incredible—as a human being, possibly respectable, probably not in immediate need of financial assistance. Papa talked pleasantly and to the point. The little maiden strove valiantly with the accent of her birth and that of her reading, and mamma smiled benignly in the background. Balance this with a story of a young English idiot I met knocking about inside his high collars, attended by a valet who condescended to tell me that “you can’t be too careful who you talk to in these parts.” He stalked on fearing, I suppose, every minute for his social chastity. Now that man was a barbarian (I took occasion to tell him so), for he comported himself after the manner of the head-hunters and hunted of Assam, who are at perpetual feud one with another.

You will understand that these foolish stories are introduced in order to cover the fact that this pen cannot describe the glories of the Upper Geyser basin. The evening I spent under the lee of the Castle Geyser sitting on a log with some troopers and watching a baronial keep forty feet high spouting hot water. If the Castle went off first they said the Giantess would be quiet and vice versa; and then they told tales till the moon got up and a party of campers in the woods gave us all something to eat.

Next morn Tom drove us on, promising new wonders. He pulled up after a few miles at a clump of brushwood where an army was drowning. I could hear the sick gasps and thumps of the men going under, but when I broke through the brushwood the hosts had fled and there were only pools of pink, black, and white lime thick as turbid honey. They shot up a pat of mud every minute or two, choking in the effort. It was an uncanny sight. Do you wonder that in the old days the Indians were careful to avoid the Yellowstone? Geysers are permissible, but Dore-like mud is terrifying. The old lady from Chicago took a piece of it, and in half an hour it died into lime dust and blew away between her fingers. All maya—illusion—you see. Then we clinked over
sulphur in cubes and crystals, but it broke if you touched it, and there was a waterfall of boiling water; and a road across a level park hotly contested by the beavers. Every winter they build their dam and flood the low-lying land; every summer that dam is torn up by the Government, and for half a mile you must plough axle-deep in water, the willows brushing into the buggy, and little waterways branching off right and left. The road is the main stream—just like the Bolan line in flood. If you turn up a byway there is no more of you, and the beavers work your buggy into next year’s dam.

Then came soft, turfy forest that deadened the wheels, and two troopers—on detachment duty—came noiselessly behind us. One was the Wrap-up-his-Tail man, and we talked merrily while the half broken horses bucked about among the trees; and so a cavalry escort was with us for a mile, till we came to a mighty hill all strewn with moss agates and everybody had to get out and pant in that thin air. But how intoxicating it was! The old lady from Chicago clucked like an emancipated hen as she scuttled about the road cramming pieces of rock into her reticule. She sent me fifty yards down the khud to pick up a piece of broken bottle which she insisted was moss agate. “I’ve some o’ that at home an’ they shine. Yes, go [get it] young man.”

As we climbed the long path the road grew viler and viler till it became without disguise the bed of a torrent; and just when things were at their rockiest we emerged into a little sapphire lake—but never sapphire was so blue—called Mary’s Lake: and that between eight and nine thousand feet above the sea. Then came grass downs, all on a vehement slope, so that the buggy following the new-made road ran on the two off-wheels mostly, till we dipped head first into a ford, climbed up a cliff, raced along a down, dipped again and pulled up dishveled at “Larry’s” for lunch and an hour’s rest. Only “Larry” could have managed that school-feast tent on the lonely hillside. Need I say that he was an Irishman? His supplies were at their lowest ebb. The seven-foot giant from Arkansaw in the back hovel announced that the beer was following the beef, but Larry enveloped us all in the golden glamour of his voluble speech ere we had descended, and the tent with the rude trestle table became a palace, the rough fare, delicacies of Delmonico, and we the abashed recipients of Larry’s imperial bounty. It was only later that I discovered I had paid eight shillings
for tinned beef, biscuits and beer, but on the other hand Larry had said: “Will I go out an’ kill a buffalo?” And I felt that for me and for me alone would he have done it. Everybody else felt that way. Good luck go with Larry!

“An’ now you’ll all go an’ wash your pocket-handkerchiefs in that beautiful hot spring round the corner,” said he. “There’s soap an’ a washboard ready, an’ ‘tis not every day that ye can get hot water for nothing.” And he waved us large-handedly to the open downs while he put the tent to rights. There was no sense of fatigue in the body or distance in the air. Hill and dale rode on the eyeball. I could have clutched the far-off snowy peaks by putting out my hand. Never was such maddening air. Why we should have washed pocket-handkerchiefs Larry alone knows. It appeared to be a sort of religious rite. In a little valley overhung with gay painted rocks ran a stream of velvet brown and pink. It was hot—hotter than the hand could bear—and it coloured the boulders in its course.

There was the maiden from New Hampshire, the old lady from Chicago, papa, mamma, the woman who chewed gum, and all the rest of them gravely bending over a washboard and soap. Mysterious virtues lay in that queer stream. It turned the linen white as driven snow in five minutes, and then we lay on the grass and laughed with sheer bliss of being alive. This have I known once in Japan, once on the banks of the Columbia, what time the salmon came in and “California” howled, and once again in the Yellowstone by the light of the eyes of the maiden from New Hampshire. Four little pools lay at my elbow, one was of black water (tepid), one clear water (cold), one clear water (hot), one red water (boiling): my newly washed handkerchief covered them all. We marveled as children marvel.

“This evening we shall do the grand canyon of the Yellowstone?” said the maiden.

“Together?” said I, and she said yes.

The sun was sinking when we heard the roar of falling waters and came to a broad river along whose banks we ran. And then—oh, then! I might at a pinch describe the infernal regions but not the other place. Be it known to you that the Yellowstone River has occasion to run through a gorge about eight miles long. To get to the bottom of the gorge it makes two leaps, one of about one hundred and twenty and
the other of three hundred feet. I investigated the upper or lesser fall, which is close to the hotel. Up to that time nothing particular happens to the Yellowstone, its banks being only rocky, rather steep and plentifully adorned with pines. At the falls it comes round a corner, green, solid, ribbed with a little foam and not more than thirty yards wide. Then it goes over still green and rather more solid than before. After a minute or two you, sitting upon a rock directly above the drop behind, begin to understand that something has occurred; that the river has jumped between solid cliff walls and that the gentle froth of water lapping the sides of the gorge below is really the outcome of great waves. And the river yells aloud: but the cliffs do not allow the yells to escape.

That inspection began with curiosity and finished in terror, for it seemed that the whole world was sliding in chrysolite from under my feet. I followed with the others round the corner to arrive at the brink of the canyon: we had to climb up a nearly perpendicular ascent to begin with, for the ground rises more than the river drops. Stately pine woods fringe either lip of the gorge, which is—the Gorge of the Yellowstone. You’ll find all about it in the guide books.

All I can say is that without warning or preparation I looked into a gulf seventeen hundred feet deep with eagles and fish hawks circling far below. And the sides of that gulf were one wild welter of colour—crimson, emerald, cobalt, ochre, amber, honey splashed with port-wine, snow white, vermilion, lemon and silver-grey, in wide washes. The sides did not fall sheer, but were graven by time and water and air into monstrous heads of kings, dead chiefs, men and women of the old time. So far below that no sound of its strife could reach us, the Yellowstone River ran—a finger-wide strip of jade-green. The sunlight took those wondrous walls and gave fresh hues to those that nature had already laid there. Once I saw the dawn break over a lake in Rajputana and the sun set over the Oodey Sagar amid a circle of Holman Hunt hills. This time I was watching both performances going on below me—upside down you understand—and the colours were real. The canyon was burning like Troy town; but it would burn forever, and thank goodness neither pen nor brush could ever portray its splendours adequately. The Academy would reject the picture for a chromolithograph. The public would scoff at the
letter-press for *Daily Telegraphese*. “I will leave this thing alone,” said I. “Tis my peculiar property. Nobody else shall share it with me.”

Evening crept through the pines that shadowed us but the full glory of the day flamed in that canyon as we went out very cautiously to a jutting piece of rock—blood red or pink it was—that overhung the deepest deeps of all. Now I know what it is to sit enthroned amid the clouds of sunset. Giddiness took away all sensation of touch or form: but the sense of blinding colour remained. When I reached the mainland again I had sworn that I had been floating. The maid from New Hampshire said no word for a very long time. She then quoted poetry, which was perhaps the best thing she could have done.

“And to think that this show-place has been going on all these days an’ none of we ever saw it,” said the old lady from Chicago, with an acid glance at her husband.

“No, only the Injins,” said he, unmoved; and the maiden and I laughed long. Inspiration is fleeting, beauty is vain and the power of the mind for wonder limited. Tho’ the shining hosts themselves had risen choiring from the bottom of the gorge they would not have prevented her papa and one baser than himself from rolling stones down those stupendous rainbow-washed slides. Seventeen hundred feet of steepest pitch and rather more than seventeen hundred colours for log or boulder to whirl through. So we heaved things and saw them gather way and bound from white rock to red or yellow, dragging behind them torrents of colour, till the noise of their descent ceased and they bounded a hundred yards clear at the last into the Yellowstone.

“I’ve been down there,” said Tom that evening. “It’s easy to get down if you’re careful—just sit and slide; but getting up is worse. An’ I found down below there two stones just marked with a picture of the canyon. I wouldn’t sell those rocks not for fifteen dollars.”

And papa and I crawled down to the Yellowstone—just above the first little fall—to wet a line for good luck. The round moon came up and turned the cliffs and pines into silver; and a two-pound trout came up also, and we slew him among the rocks nearly tumbling into that wild river.
Then out and away to Livingston once more. The maiden from New Hampshire disappeared; papa and mamma with her disappeared. Disappeared, too, the old lady from Chicago and all the rest, while I thought of all that I had not seen—the forest of petrified trees with amethyst crystals in their black hearts; the great Yellowstone Lake where you catch your trout alive in one spring and drop him into another to boil him; and most of all of that mysterious Hoodoo region where all the devils not employed in the geysers live and kill the wandering bear and elk, so that the scared hunter finds in Death Gulch piled carcasses of the dead whom no man has smitten. Hoodoo-land with the overhead noises, the bird and beast and devil-rocks, the mazes and the bottomless pits—all these things I missed. On the return road Yankee Jim and Diana of the Crossways gave me kindly greeting as the train paused an instant before their door, and at Livingston whom should I see but Tom the driver?

“I've done with the Yellowstone and decided to clear out East somewhere,” said he. “Your talkin' about movin' round so gay an' careless made me kinder restless; I'm movin' out.”

Lord forgive us for our responsibility one to another!

“And your partner?” said I.

“Here's him,” said Tom, introducing a gawky youth with a bundle; and I saw those two young men turn their faces to the East.