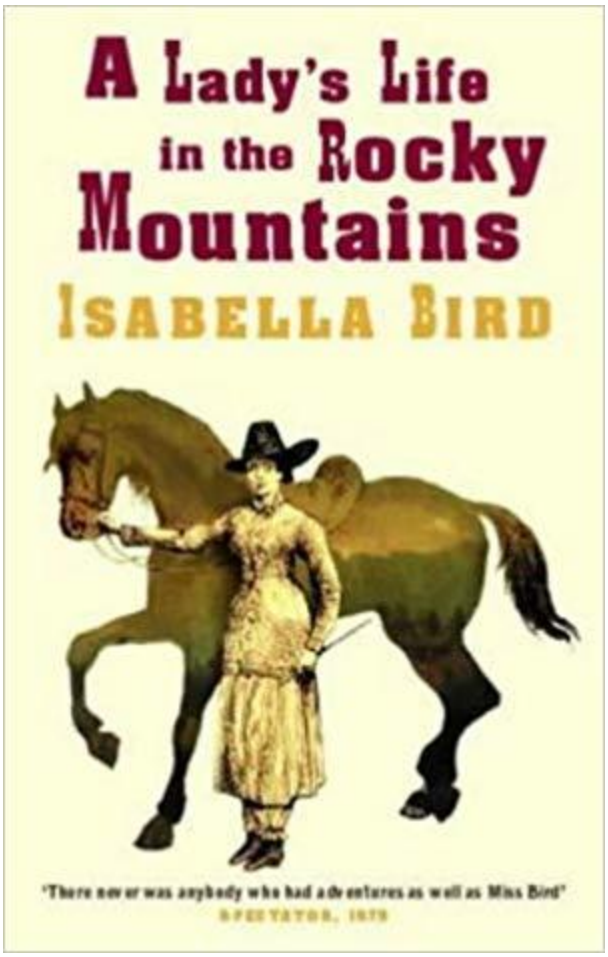
A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains [excerpt]

Isabella Bird



[*in this excerpt, Bird was staying with Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers in Longmount (today's Longmont). Of Mr. Chalmers she writes, "On an English road one would think him a starving or a dangerous beggar. He is slightly intelligent, very opinionated, and wishes to be thought well informed, which he is not." And Mrs. Chalmers? "She looks like one of the English poor women of our childhood—lean, clean, toothless, and speaks, like some of them, in a piping, discontented voice, which seems to convey a personal reproach. All her waking hours are spent in a large sun-bonnet. She is never idle for one minute, is severe and hard, and despises everything but work. I think she suffers from her husband's shiftlessness."*

Bird desires to go to Estes Park, and Mr. Chalmers claims to know the way. Here's their journey]

There is a most romantic place called Estes Park, at a height of 7,500 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 fifty-five miles, and as Chalmers was confident that he could take me over the mountains, a distance, as he supposed, of about twenty 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 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 a 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 had all been shaven off, except a turf 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, I 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-colored 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 weltering, 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, even though I had to walk during these meanderings to save my tired horse. When at last, at dark, we reached the open, there was a snow flurry, with violent gusts of wind, and the shelter of the camp, dark and cold as it was, was desirable. We had no food, but made a fire. I lay down on some dry grass, with my inverted saddle for a pillow, and slept soundly, till I was awoke by the cold of an intense frost and the pain of my many cuts and bruises. Chalmers promised that we should make a fresh start at six, so I woke him up at five, and here I am alone at half-past eight! I said to him many times that unless he hobbled or picketed the horses, we should lose them. "Oh," he said "they'll be all right." In truth he had no picketing pins. Now, the animals are merrily trotting homewards. I saw them two miles off an hour ago with him after them. His wife, who is also after them, goaded to desperation, said, "He's the most ignorant, careless, good-for-nothing man I ever saw," upon which I dwelt upon his being well meaning. There is a sort of well here, but our "afternoon tea" and watering the horses drained it, so we have had nothing to drink since yesterday, for the canteen, which started without a cork, lost all its contents when the mule fell. I have made a monstrous fire, but thirst and impatience are hard to bear, and preventible misfortunes are always irksome. I have found the stomach of a bear with fully a pint of cherrystones in it, and have spent an hour in getting the kernels; and lo! now, at half-past nine, I see the culprit and his wife coming back with the animals.

LOWER CANYON, September 21.

We never reached Estes Park. There is no trail, and horses have never been across. We started from camp at ten, and spent four hours in searching for the trail. Chalmers tried gulch after gulch again, his self-assertion giving way a little after each failure; sometimes going east when we should have gone west, always being brought up by a precipice or other impossibility. At last he went off by himself, and returned rejoicing, saying he had found the trail; and soon, sure enough, we were on a well-defined old trail, evidently made by carcasses which have been dragged along it by hunters. Vainly I pointed out to him that we were going north-east when we should have gone south-west, and that we were ascending instead of descending. "Oh, it's all right, and we shall soon come to water," he always replied. For two hours we ascended slowly through a thicket of aspen, the cold continually intensifying; but the trail, which had been growing fainter, died out, and an opening showed the top of Storm Peak not far off and not much above us, though it is 11,000 feet high. I could not help laughing. He had deliberately turned his back on Estes Park. He then confessed that he was lost, and that he could not find the way back. His wife sat down on the ground and cried bitterly. We ate some dry bread, and then I said I had had much experience in traveling, and would take the control of the party, which was agreed to, and we began

the long descent. Soon after his wife was thrown from her horse, and cried bitterly again from fright and mortification. Soon after that the girth of the mule's saddle broke, and having no crupper, saddle and addenda went over his head, and the flour was dispersed. Next the girth of the woman's saddle broke, and she went over her horse's head. Then he began to fumble helplessly at it, railing against England the whole time, while I secured the saddle, and guided the route back to an outlet of the park. There a fire was built, and we had some bread and bacon; and then a search for water occupied nearly two hours, and resulted in the finding of a mudhole, trodden and defiled by hundreds of feet of elk, bears, cats, deer, and other beasts, and containing only a few gallons of water as thick as pea soup, with which we watered our animals and made some strong tea.

The sun was setting in glory as we started for the four hours' ride home, and the frost was intense, and made our bruised, grazed limbs ache painfully. I was sorry for Mrs. Chalmers, who had had several falls, and bore her aches patiently, and had said several times to her husband, with a kind meaning, "I am real sorry for this woman." I was so tired with the perpetual stumbling of my horse, as well as stiffened with the bitter cold, that I walked for the last hour or two; and Chalmers, as if to cover his failure, indulged in loud, incessant talk, abusing all other religionists, and railing against England in the coarsest American fashion. Yet, after all, they were not bad souls; and though he failed so grotesquely, he did his incompetent best. The log fire in the ruinous cabin was cheery, and I kept it up all night, and watched the stars through the holes in the roof, and thought of Long's Peak in its glorious solitude, and resolved that, come what might, I would reach Estes Park.

I. L. B.