

Draw Landscapes P6

English sketch books 127

(5)

Salt Lake Valley Oct.

1849.

See facing p 102
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7/4

Tent sketch on
last page of original

My dear Mother,

It seemed an endless time since I last wrote you, though perhaps not much longer than an ordinary interval in my correspondence. I feel as if I might have crossed oceans and continents - you probably feel as if I had. But I have lived fast since then. Every day has been full of matter for thought - the vicissitudes of climate and scenery through which I have passed have not been more rapid than those of my own mind, nor the change more entire than that of my situation and feelings - although I am still a member of the same party and engaged in the same pursuits. I think I wrote you from Ft. Laramie and if I recollect right my spirits were none of the best at the time. At present none of the causes which then made my situation so disagreeable remain. The party has separated; all my evil geniuses have taken themselves off to Fort Hall, and my best friend, and one of the best friends I ever made is in command, - Mr. Gunnison. He told me long ago that if he ever had it in his power, he would atone for the injustice if I suffered; and he has done it fully. My leisure hours in camp are now as pleasant as kindness and congeniality can make them and my only fear is of becoming and useless through an abuse of his excessive indulgence. There is some reason too why we should feel for each other, our mutual sympathy has been much in demand. Subjected to the same unmanly persecution, we made common cause, and I could feel that among SUCH a crowd I had a friend and defender. Many a pleasant hour we passed in consoling each other; he weak and sick and I not so miserable as not to feel indignant at the meanness that could take sneaking advantage of his weakness. Such as you would hardly believe if I should tell it to you. Still matters never were so managed as to afford me an opportunity of taking an insult and acting on it. Often I wished to do so, but that is all passed and seems more like the recollection of a nightmare.

Perhaps I am egotistical to talk so much about it, but YOU will excuse me for telling you what so severely tried my inexperience and I can better afford to trouble you with such disgusting matter, now that I ~~am~~ no longer suffer the infliction. The Captain even for some time past has seemed to feel ashamed of his conduct and has seemed even apologetic in his manner toward me. I am sick of the subject and ready to begin again on more agreeable topics - and all this is for your private ear.

You would open your eyes wider than usual with lady-like wonder, my dear Ma, if you could look in on me where I am - our domestic fire-side, and you would really smile in your quiet way to see its comfort and contentment. Just life the door of our office tent with Indian privilege and I might take you for one of the mop headed squaws who pay us such pop visits, peering in with their tawny faces and bright black eyes glancing with curiosity - yours with the compliment I have paid you - and if your curiosity ran away with your wits you would most likely run into our little stove pipe - ambitiously thrusting itself out of the front door as an indication and an invitation to the warmth and comfort within. Next you would see the fulfilment of such anticipations - the stove itself - not much bigger than a footstone, but which, small as it is, like everything else on the prairies, ran off its legs if it ever had any, and now rests securely on the inside of the lid of an old bake-oven. Behind that and along the side of the tent you would run your eyes along a shelf, and the first object that would strike your squaw appetite would be a huge coffee pot and array of small tin cups, plates and knives to match, and an instrument box which would again excite your savage curiosity - then a pair of spurs and a set of spoons and the nautical almanac and an assortment of books ranging from the "Poems of the Pleasures?" to the "Surveyor's Assdistant". Underneath is slung a tripod for an instrument in the field which you'd take for "baby lodge poles". The barometer hanging from the tent pole would fairly nonplus you - the

pistol-holsters hanging below it also. By this time your ceaseless chatter has at last wearied out our patience and we are compelled to interrupt our absorbing occupation to give you something to eat and send you off, and we turn again intent on our pleasant labor - writing home, Mr. Gunnison and myself. He to Madame in Detroit - I to the one in all the world who loves me best - my Mother. Both of us have heard reports of the dreadful ravages of disease among you and have fretted and chafed for our long delayed letters which have not come yet - not a word since leaving home; and both of us think of the long and weary march over which the thoughts of our friends have followed us. He has just ticked himself for the last time over a sketch I made of himself "a le mountaineer". Tampico hat and bald-faced mule - and enclosed it for Mrs. G.'s edification - and thus we spend our evenings in our little camp, hidden gypsy-like among the willows on the bank of the "Jordan" or "Utah Outlet", 17 miles from the city and just on the edge of the wide plains of salt which form the beach of the Salt Lake. I am much taken up now of evenings with bringing up my astronomy, and Mr. G. kindly assists me and allows me to assist at his observations - wants to make an astronomer of me.

This is a strange country - so strange that no one who has not seen it can form any conception of it. I doubt whether there be a scene like it in the wide world. It comes nearest to what I have read of the steppes of Siberia and the Arabian deserts. I am at a loss how to describe it to you. It can all be embraced at one view, and the first sensation with which that view struck me was utter and overwhelming astonishment - of boundless and infinite space. Mr. G. and myself rode on in advance of the command down a deep and narrow canon of defile in the mountains nearly at sunset. The pass gradually grew narrower and the mountains less elevated. We would among broken rocks and abrupt hills along the bed of a creek - emerged from them and

rose a gentle rounded bluff and the whole mighty scene burst upon us! The valley swept away from our feet till it grew dark and dim with distance, a smooth expanse utterly unbroken by tree, rock or undulation even - falling away and away beneath us - then rising with the same gentle slope into a range of mountains which mingled with the sky before us. On the left and from our banks a range of snow capped peaks seemed absolutely to overhang the valley, their bare and furrowed faces ~~rising~~ rising abruptly from the plain for thousands of feet almost perpendicular. These swept to the south the whole length of the valley, came then down to a narrow pass and through this the view was bounded by loftier mountains still beyond the Utah Valley 40 miles from the pass and 70 miles from us. To the west the sun was setting over the great Lake which lay like a line of gold along the horizon shut in and alternately dividing range after range of bleak and jagged mountains, till they were lost in distance. Far to the north on our right lay chains of mountains beyond Fort Hall which is 160 miles from here, distinctly visible. Thus at one view the whole valley lay before us and from any the lowest point in it the same scene is around us. The most peculiar feature of the country is the absence of trees. For 900 miles on the other side of the South Pass we travelled over a boundless prairie. The South Pass itself is a prairie so level that you can not perceive the inclination of a continent and this side the plains are a succession of great level tables untill we reach Fr. Bridger 113 miles off where our road lies through mountain gorges and canons as they are called here. The valley itself is a great basin prairie with one ~~or two~~ or two lines of stunted cottonwoods running down the creeks - otherwise not a bush in sight.

For four or 5 weeks past we have been busy measuring a base line for triangulation along the shores of the lake - on the plains of salt and sand which edge it for miles in breadth so level that a levelling

instrument can not make them more so and so smoothe that we are always surrounded by a MIRAGE. We seem to be surrounded by water which reflects perfectly every object when there is not a drop for miles - men half a mile off appear to walk on water. I have been so much deceived that I really begin to think the Salt Lake all a great MIRAGE itself. In a few days we shall break up and move up towards Utah where we shall probably winter.

You are by this time tired of descriptions which you cannot realize. I must give up the attempt to tell you all the novelties with which I am charged, but the people, - I must say something of them, and the city - a mud city but not such as you would picture to yourself, built of adobies - subburnt brick of the same pale blue color which is fashionable in the States, and which really looks tastful here though natural to the clay. The city occupies an area of 4 miles square and waves with cornfields - a collection of small farms and houses. The people are kind and hospitable, but there are some curious features about their customs and government which for good reasons I must defer to another time.

I have been grandually ^{Indianizing} ? myself, but you will hardly believe me when I tell you that I actually live in a Lodge - "a race that lives in Lodges made of skins". Such is my present abode - a Snake Lodge that the Capt. bought for the requisite number of blankets and knives at Ft, Bridgers, and a very comfortable house it is. If you could see me squatted "a la turque" on my divan of buffalo robe and blankets mending my mocassins or drawing or eating buffalo steak, you'd take me for an Indian or a nondescript - not for your hopeful certainly. By the way eating most buffalo meat is a luxury you ~~xxxx~~ know nothing about. It is after this fashion. A stick is sharpened at both ends. The small end is stuck unceremoniously through a square foot of hump or rib as you would stick a pin, and the other end into the ground before

~~156~~

the fire. When roasted it is taken up bodily and stuck down again in the middle of the lodge or tent. It is the most delicious morsel in the world and the cheapest. The diagram below will give some idea of how the rest of the operation is conducted. I should like to send you a lot of sketches but the only mail goes out tomorrow. It is now late at night and I must get through. Perhaps I shall have another visitor tonight. Last night I woke up, looked out and there was a wolf standing in the door of the lodge very coolly surveying the interior, probably one of the band that has been giving us such delightful serenades since we have been here and that eat off the handle of ~~of Cousin Lucia's~~ ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ of an india rubber bucket and carried off a boot the other night, as bad as Cousin Lucia's rats - you remember.

For the first time in my life I now find myself actually busy. I MUST do something to save my own reputation and I find myself sadly deficient - incompetent. Confess that it was rather a rash undertaking to engage to draw landscape for a government survey when I had never drawn but ONE of any kind and never attempted to draw from nature. It is sadly discouraging to find my earnest efforts rendered comparatively useless by ignorance and want of practice, but it is too late to shrink from the task now. I have the alternative either of leaving the party which is acknowledging my incompetence or of having drawings which I cannot look on without disgust published or rejected - equally preferable for me. I am much like a New Foundland puppy plunged neck and heels in the pond who MUST SWIM - or SINK. All this keeps me in anything but a sanguine temper, but I can't give up and whine. I remember well Pa's partial encouragement when I suggested my incompetence. I am afraid his kindness spoke instead of his judgment then. Tell him I will do my best not to belie his opinion, but I dread the result. Give the boys my love, and remind Joe of me when you write. Give my regards to any of my old acquaintances you meet. When Cousin Samuel returns

and finds his portrait unfinished, tell him the circumstances ^{7.} - and
beg his indulgence. I will finish it some day or other. And Now,
Mother, another long farewell. I am waiting most anxiously to receive
your letters to know whether you are all alive or not - they are
coming down from Fort Hall. Your son,

F. R. GRIST.

I find myself much in need of cash and send down by the bearer of this
Mr. Kinkade,
a merchant here from St. Louis, a draft on Pa which he cashes here
\$200.00.

Could Pa contrive to procure and send through to me by the first
opportunity next spring (trains or mail) two or three best English
SKETCH BLOCKS (a peculiar kind of sketch book.) They may be had
of Dechaux, N. Y. I think per Skillman. I am in need of something
of the sort.