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The LAST

CANYON

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A NOVEL

John Vernon

The Last Canyon

John Vernon



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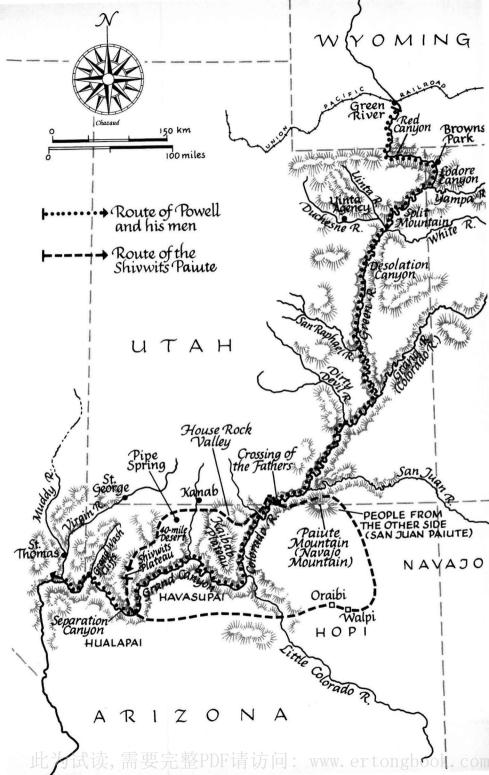
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Author's Note

The name "Grand Canyon" had been used before Powell's 1869 expedition, but wasn't yet common; Powell in fact helped fix that name in the imagination of Americans with his 1874 account of the expedition. When the trip took place, however, "Big Canyon" and "Great Canyon" were also frequently employed. I've chosen "Great Canyon" as the operable name in this novel to emphasize the lack of familiarity in 1869 with what has since become an American icon.



Characters

John Wesley Powell's men and boats at time of launch

The Emma Dean: Major Powell, Bill Dunn, Jack Sumner

The Kitty Clyde's Sister: Walter Powell, George Bradley

The No Name: Oramel Howland, Seneca Howland, Frank Goodman

The Maid of the Canyon: William Hawkins (a.k.a. Missouri Rhodes), Andy Hall

SHIVWITS PAIUTE CHARACTERS - TOAB'S FAMILY

RELATION

		DITODIOII MIDIIITIO	
Onchok		Wink	
Pooeechuts	Onchok's wife	Mouse	
Mara	Pooeechuts's sister	Metate (grinding stone)	
Toab	Onchok's cousin	Rabbit Tick	
Kwits)	Left-handed	
Soxor	Children of Onchok	Moist	
	and Pooeechuts		
Chookwadum	J	Skinny One	

ENGLISH MEANING

Note: For the historical Paiute, cousins were equivalent to siblings and were often referred to as "brother" or "sister."

OTHER CHARACTERS

NAME

Teskimalauwa Havasupai seer

Pangwits San Juan Paiute shaman, brother of Mara

and Pooeechuts

Hoskininni Leader of a Navajo band

Nankapeea Kaibab Paiute Jacob Hamblin Mormon leader

Paantung Shivwits Paiute

Part One

Part Une May 23—June 15, 1869

1

Green River City, Wyoming Territory 23 May, 1869

Dearest Emma,

Rec'd yours of the 13th inst. and trust no more will follow, as we launch tomorrow, consequently further letters to me will lie unopened in their dusty pigeonholes. I will, as we discussed, write to you from the Uinta Agency, tho' knowing precisely when is impossible. We could take as much as a month to arrive there, depending upon the hazards on the river. After that our course is all unknown territory, for a thousand miles, and we shan't be again among civilized people until we reach the southern settlements in Utah Territory.

"Civilized"? "Again"? I say these with a wink. Green River City is a wicked place; and the Mormon towns too in the southern wilds of Utah are said to be full of wastrels and laggards who engage in shameful orgies. That is slander and calumny, one Latter Day Saint passing through here informed me last week. I assured him I would judge for myself. And you may too, Emma my love. If Detroit becomes weary, jump on a train and join us regardless of where we wash up—on whatever lurid shore—once our Odyssey is finished.

No, I'll join you. I'll come to you in Detroit. You'll be easier to find.

Don't tell your father that I've called this place wicked—he'll send an angel to destroy it. And wicked's a mild sketch. It's changed in three months. Now the line is completed, the pashas of the Union Pacific have chosen Bryan, not Green River City, as the base for their

terminal buildings, much to the chagrin of the locals, who promptly fled, leaving only the riffraff. The line completed! You must have seen it in the papers, Em—the final spike hammered at Promontory Summit, the Atlantic and Pacific coasts at last linked—they played it up to beat the band. The consequence is, half this town is boarded up. Of the several thousand who lived here in March, perhaps a hundred remain. Remember what I said before leaving?—these Hell on Wheels towns are as transitory as soap bubbles. And they hold human life as cheaply as at Gettysburg. One nymph du pave among our soiled doves inhaled charcoal fumes in her crib a week ago and was found dead the following morning.

There's not a tree, shrub, flower, or patch of grass anywhere about except along the river. The hills are scorched daily by the unrelenting sun. Little wonder the people have bolted!

Our camp is by the river, and most of us keep as much as possible away from the town, except, as you might imagine, your friend Bill Dunn, who struts along the main street every inch the oleaginous desperado. He may look ferocious, with that raven-black hair falling to his shoulders, and the fat and blood of countless slaughtered beasts adding luster to his buckskin, but looks are deceiving. Those who sputter and grouse and behave with surly bluster are often mild as kittens, I've learned. His principal fault is his speech—blunt, frank, and harsh—but men such as that often prove the most loyal. When I gently reprimanded his surliness last week he turned away and said, "I don't wish to be happy."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Afraid it won't last."

I trust him more than some softer-spoken men, for instance Oramel Howland. Dearest, don't exult—I should have listened to you. The knowledge he claimed of elementary surveying and mapmaking and the like when we met him last year made a happy impression. But when I unpacked the instruments this week—the sextant, the barometers, the precious chronometer—he showed no interest whatsoever. I begin to suspect he is less than meets the eye. He fusses and scolds and every now and then gives me that prophet-of-the-Bible stare, which I counter with my own, though my beard is shorter. (His, now long and white, curls back in the wind.) I bloat my eyes enough to burn a hole through him, but he seldom wilts. Since

we're both of the Wesleyan body—and because he is my senior, tho' only by a year—he may think he has as much right as I to preach to the men, but so far (in my presence, at least) he suppresses the urge. I've learned he's already sent a dispatch to his paper, the Rocky Mountain News, which violates my agreement with the Tribune in Chicago, but I've decided there's no sense in kicking up a row. Each man on this voyage has his interests and inducements—or his own madness, to use your word—and I have mine. Ora did relinquish his position on the News to join our corps, so I'm loath to begrudge him the occasional dispatch, and besides, once beyond the Uinta Agency all is unexplored territory, and dispatches won't be possible then, as we'll be incommunicado.

We've all given up something. Jack Sumner gave up his trading post, and William Hawkins, like Dunn, gave up his trapping, tho' that's little sacrifice, since beaver are scarcer than hen's teeth these days. Sumner, Dunn, and Oramel Howland are bringing their gold pans, and I'm not blind to that especial madness, indeed I encouraged it. I told them I knew quite a bit about rocks, having lectured on the subject, and that's what I gave up, the comforts of the classroom, for the duration of this voyage. But didn't their eyes light up when I described the rivers we'll descend, and the gorges they've carved deep into the earth, and who knew what sort of veins would be exposed or what a man might find if he brought along his gold pan?

As for my madness, as you know—and I made this clear to them—it is geological knowledge. I informed the gold hunters that our voyage will be no ordinary junket but a scientific exploring expedition, the first to venture through all the canyons on the Green and Colorado Rivers, culminating in the greatest canyon of all, rumored to be 300 miles long—and they ought not to mind if their one-armed commander measures and weighs and takes samples and describes all we come across in the rock and mineral department, not just gold. I said I needed their help not only with physical work but with a profusion of scientific observations, and to their credit they give the instruments a fling, but sometimes I must rescue them (the instruments, that is). Each man is charged with making independent estimates of the distances between compass bearings, and Ora shall take said compass bearings at every river bend. Bill Dunn seems adept with the barometers, and Ora pretends to have mastered the sex-

tant, but I shan't let him handle it. His task will be to write down my observations for latitude and longitude and use them for his maps. Dunn wished to know why we needed maps, since the river would take us where it would regardless, and I told him that was not the proper attitude. What sort of nation, I asked—turning my head to include all the others—can build a transcontinental railroad yet be ignorant so long of what its borders contain? Maps are more precious than gold, I said, and Dunn wrinkled his nose. Between you and me, Emma, I'm afraid we'll be a little raw at first in the business of surveying and mapping the country, but I've educated roughnecks before, and most of these men were in the war—they've the habit of obedience. All are bronzed, hardy bucks in the vigor of life, and I've no real regrets in the choices I made, not even dear Ora, whose labors will be under my watchful eye, not yours, I ought to add—he resented your orders this winter past.

You should have seen our corps hail the new men as one by one they arrived. A dunking was the usual salutation, but George Bradley glowered and backed off his greeting party, including Bill Dunn, and George is even shorter than I (tho' only by a finger). Until a few weeks ago, he was orderly sergeant at Fort Bridger, but General Grant—excuse me, President—obtained his release at my request, that he might go on this expedition. George will be useful; he comes from a family of Massachusetts boatmen and is skilled in the repair and the management of vessels. Little misfortunes work him into a passion, but he is made of good gum and has a ready hand and a powerful arm and appears brave and generous, if something of a lone wolf.

Andy Hall, another newcomer, I spotted rowing in circles in a homemade boat not far from our camp, and I enlisted him at once. He is a Scotch boy and only eighteen years old, even younger than Ora's brother Seneca, but a good deal stronger. When we stand side by side he is the tallest of our crew. Young as he is, he has had considerable experience with adversity, having worked as a bullwhacker for the railroad. A merchant in town described him as a skilled Indian fighter. If I know my wife as well as the back of my hand—and you must admit I do—I am satisfied that, confronted with Andy, your first reaction would be to sketch his massive head, surmounted by a

beaked nose, surrounded by ears, and beset with blue eyes as deep as forest pools. He will serve as cook's assistant—Hawkins as cook.

Finally, not counting myself, there is a ninth, added yesterday, an Englishman named Frank Goodman. I confess he is a stranger. His face is florid, so is his speech, and at the last moment he showed up in our camp and asked if I was the famous Major John Wesley Powell, having read about our expedition in the papers. I said I was indeed the person he sought, minus that part about the fame. You'll be famous enough after this voyage, he vowed, and then he begged to come along, even offered me money—and I capitulated, but refused the money. I thought we could use another stout, willing hand, but now I have my doubts. He seems somewhat namby-pamby.

All have been practicing handling the boats and learning the signals I'll make with my flags. Their antics extend to roughhousing on the water, and I've been pleased to observe that my oversized bulkheads are splendidly watertight and prevent the boats from sinking when capsized. The men are quite amazed.

Of course they've heard all the stories. They've listened to preposterous descriptions of thousand-foot waterfalls, of suckholes that can swallow an iron-plated *Monitor*, of stretches of river that run so fast they go uphill for several miles at a time. A man in this town described our goal, the "Great Canyon," as the most stupendous gorge known on the globe. He hasn't seen it, of course; no one has, except in fleeting glimpses from the rim. That doesn't prevent authoritative declarations of the sort this dabster made: that the height of the walls causes birds to exhaust themselves before they can fly out, with the result that they drop back senseless into the canyon; or that powerful waves of the Colorado River can knock a large hawk out of the sky. I told the men such stories are ant paste, and they agreed to come along with my solemn assurances—but who really knows?

You asked in your last about hostile Indians. Bill Dunn assures me that once beyond the Uinta Agency we will meet none, and the agency Utes, as you know from the winter, are warm and openhearted, if somewhat unsavory. Those Indians in the country south toward which we go—Paiute and Navajo and Apache, principally—never venture into the canyons, Bill has learned. They are too deep, and the river too swift.

Yes, I wish you could have stayed and come with us. Not just for my comfort; you have all the requirements—hardiness, vigor, and practical wisdom—but I could not do this to your father, subject his precious daughter for who knows how many more months to the crudity of mountain men. Note that I say your father, not you. I know your strengths, and they are steadfast yet patient, strengths of heart above all.

We have rations for ten months, and our boats are as soundly constructed as I could wish: three built of oak, staunch and firm, double-ribbed, with double stem- and sternposts, and further strengthened by the bulkheads. As we discussed, I made the fourth boat smaller, and of pine, though cut to the same pattern. And, surprise—I've named her for you. She is called the *Emma Dean* and has a sharp cutwater. She is in every way built for speed and flexibility, and shall be our lead boat, with me in command.

We feel quite proud of our little fleet as it lies in the river waiting for us to embark: the Stars and Stripes, spread by a stiff breeze, over the *Emma Dean*; the waves rocking the little vessels; and the current of the Green, swollen, mad, and seeming eager to bear us down through its mysterious canyons.

The good people of Green River City, such as they are—all one hundred of the merchants, miners, gamblers, Mexicans, Indians, mulewhackers, saloonkeepers, soiled doves, and infernal wretches left in the town—plan to see us off in the morning, but I suspect the only ones who actually appear will be those who manage to drink until dawn. We leave as early as possible; at midday the heat becomes intolerable, enough to boil the fish in the water.

My brother sends his regards. He grows more melancholy the longer we delay, and today when I told him we launch tomorrow he launched himself—into song, of course—and you've heard his booming voice. Walter is strong and can row like the devil and will go mad again if he stands around idle, as I mentioned in my last. Lord, send him peace of mind.

And now, my dear, I have one more thing to say. After eight years of marriage, declarations of affection between husband and wife are like a coin effaced from use, or I should say overuse. You already know my feelings on this matter—my shameful discomfort. I can

think of you and a fountain of tears starts from my eyes, but in speaking of love, or putting pen to paper, my too great measure of irksome discomfort often robs me of words. Actions speak louder than words, dearest Emma. My love will be expressed in the caution with which I face dangers on this voyage, in my management of hazard and want, in my continual vigilance, and in my safe return. What perils there are, what breakers and torrents lie in wait on the river, what precipices will suddenly appear beneath our boats, who can truly say? My grim determination to see you again and embrace you will bring me back whole. It need not be said that anyone in my position would be hard pressed to peer into the future, to anticipate dangers unsuspected and unbegotten, whether of the river or of hostile Indians. No one knows what waits ahead, tho' on the score of Indians I suspect Dunn is right—that either from fear or superstition our dusky brethren stay away from the river and its steep and gloomy canyons. The land is too harsh and the hazards too great even for feathered men. And as for the waters, they may be high now, but that is just the spring flood. For the first 200 miles the Green is free of rapids save the occasional meager ripple. It will carry me safely, and I'll end where I began - in your arms again.

> Your Loving Husband, Wes

2

Wes looked around him: all hell was breaking loose. His boat had nosed down, got gripped by the river, and wind had turned to water. The *Emma Dean* shot forward in a blink and Wes was shouting and Jack Sumner rowing air and Bill Dunn pulling so hard on his oars that a tholepin popped out and clattered to his feet. He dropped down to pick it up. Between Bill in the bow and Jack in the stern, Wes waved his stump and bellowed out orders lost to the roar and

hiss. "Left, boys, left! Man your oars, Bill!" Shouts reduced to bird squeal. Bill leaned over the gunnel now and was fumbling with the tholepin. Wes bent down and shouted in his ear, "What the devil are you doing?"

"Major Powell, sir, I can't make the fucker fit!"

Just moments ago they'd been drifting in a dream on a placid tilt of river, a bubble's downward sag. Below and beyond it, peaks of waves and gouts of foam had leapt like little demons trying to find the doomed men. Prominent in the rapids ahead was a monstrous boulder stacking up the river—neck folds on a bull.

Now they raced toward it. "Left," Wes screamed, then looked back to spot, a hundred feet behind them, the Kitty Clyde's Sister sliding into the rapids, with George Bradley and Wes's brother attempting to row, the latter's mouth wide open in song. Even George couldn't hear Walter's voice, Wes thought. The roar of the rapids, more like fire than water, drowned all other sounds. But Wes knew what his brother was singing: "John Anderson, My Jo." He could tell by the satisfied warp of Walter's mouth.

He turned back to face upriver, clinging to his rope tied around a strut, which he used for busting rapids. His inflated life preserver wrapped snug around his neck felt like a horse collar and took away some dignity, since no one else wore one. The *Emma Dean* climbed waves then dropped then climbed again, and above her the canyon walls rose in red bluffs and the noontime sun flamed off the sandstone and the river caught its light and spread it like a rash.

The No Name entered the rapids now, and twisting around Wes saw it jumping like a deer jumping logs, and the grown men inside bouncing up and down—the two Howland brothers and the helpless Frank Goodman, clinging to his seat. Wes shouted again—he wasn't sure why or at whom or even what—then a wave cuffed his boat, nearly knocking him over, and something in his spine broke into blossom and he righted himself in the act of turning back, and all this happened in a moment. The unceasing roar filled the air and the river rose before him. "Left, boys!" he screamed, stressing that direction with his head and upper torso. The right stump helped too, straining left across his chest, with nerve ends sprouting a frantic phantom arm. He watched Bill in front of him rowing with one oar

and felt like clubbing the oaf. They weren't going left, they were broadsiding toward the huge rock ahead and he screamed, "Both oars, Bill!" Furrows of water rocked the boat left and right, sending columns and streamers ten or more feet high toward Wes, half standing, and bucked him like a mustang. From his height above the men he could see the fatal boulder, obscured by a left-moving sheer wall of water. "We're lost, boys, we're lost!" He stood to full height—five foot four—and shaking his head, laughed like a madman.

A shard of his attention sensed the *Maid* back there shooting into the rapids, and detected as though from an inner distance the howls and execrations of Andy Hall and William Hawkins.

The Emma Dean reached its crisis. Wes had to sit when his boat rose and hung suspended in time, remitted from gravity, but shaking like a peak about to blow. She seemed to keep rising while water crashed through her, her forward momentum still jerking her up. At last she paused. Out of nowhere he pictured the real Emma Dean, safe in Detroit. And the water carved open, or so it seemed—it positively parted to receive them.

They shot straight ahead through two walls of water, and now it was just a never-ending breathless race. Wes stood again. Below him, Bill Dunn with the tholepin in his hand looked startled as a baby laid on his back. Wes turned to signal the others left, as far left as possible, but he had to hang on and couldn't use his flag. It was all body language—head butts, stump flaps. The *Emma Dean* didn't race, she flew through the air, then slammed down so hard he was airborne for an instant. She spun around madly, pinning Wes to his seat, but the boys worked the oars—this was water they could bite—and the boat swung downriver, slowing to full steam. Amazingly, Bill still rowed with one oar. It mattered less now. A perfectly flat slide of water had found them and they rode it down the wind toward the next hanging avalanche of river, then rode that around a bend—these rapids were endless—past shawls of foam pouring over boulders left and right of their boat. The river slowed as it curved.

"Ain't you done with that yet?" Jack Sumner barked. Bill Dunn fumbling with the tholepin again.

"Can't get it back in."

"We rode all that way with it out?"