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JOHN MUIR

By Katharine Merrill Graydon

While the goldseekers of '49 were making their perilous way by land and by sea to California, there came to our Middle West a Scotchman with his little son of eleven years. This lad, too, was bound for the great Golden State, though years and toil and travel were to intervene.

Knowing nothing of the Old World but his own birthplace in the land of brown heather, the little stranger wandered with unspeakable delight over his father's acres in unploughed, untrodden, undesecrated Wisconsin. Such vastness, such color, such glory, he had never dreamed of. Here were tall, widespreading, awful trees; flowers that had been growing through hundreds - through thousands - of springs and summers, unseen by any but the wild eyes of savages and the heavenly eyes of angels, and unmolested by herds or flocks or men. To the amazed, enraptured boy it was Paradise.

The top and the bottom of society are alike self-indulgent, if not alike luxurious. It is not from these unfortunate classes that great men usually come, nor did the parents of John Muir belong to either of these classes. Like the parents of Burns and of Carlyle, they were intelligent, upright, pious, duly observant of the laws of earth and heaven, with will and strength for steady toil.

John Muir's mother, Anne Gilrye, was a representative Scotch woman, quiet, conservative, affectionate, fond of poetry and painting. His father, Daniel Muir, was a man of marked character, impetuous, enthusiastic, full of fiery energy, fond of adventure and new enterprise, while his whole life was controlled and kept in a steady glow with the religion of the Old Covenanters.

In the Wisconsin wilderness the adventurous father and mother, with their eight children, applied themselves with relentless vigor to the work of creating a farm, - chopping, grubbing, fencing, burning brush, plowing, sowing, even the

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boy of eleven doing a man's work. While following the plow, John's eager eyes, like those of another plowman, caught glimpses of mouse and daisy, and loved them both; they watched the coming and going and nesting of robins and thrushes and bluejays; they saw the life of insects, frogs and snakes; they rested with every new delight on the flowers as they arose from the dead at the call of spring, - and the boy learned the habits of all. Unawares he found and unconsciously he accepted his vocation in life.

For him there was no school but the prairie and the forest, no discipline but toil and strict obedience to parental authority. After the day's work, the evening meal and worship, the family promptly retired. But one of Farmer Muir's boys had a way of lingering behind by the firelight to catch, perchance, five minutes - or, at most, ten - for a book or for some self-imposed task of invention before the father's not-to-be-disobeyed voice called out, "John, go to bed. Must you get every night a new commandment to go to bed?" One night he chanced to add, "If you will read, read in the morning. You may rise as early as you like," - of course with no idea of advantage being taken of the permission. But it gave a new thought to the boy; never before had the possibility of waking without the father's call occurred to him, and he mounted to his room so charged with the brave purpose of early rising that he found himself down again at one o'clock. Five houss of time all his own! What a treasure! But it was winter. The thermometer was below zero. A fire would rouse the father and would waste the wood. With shivering body and numb fingers he could not sit down to a book, but to go back to bed and to lose these precious hours was not to be thought of. He could warm himself with the kind of work he loved.

At stolen intervals or in the hour of rest at noon, he had been trying to construct a self-acting mill. By the feeble light of a tallow candle, he now set to work in the cellar at this mill. The whole winter, from one or as early an

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hour as he could waken, until six, he worked at either his books or his mechanical inventions, making for the latter even his own tools.

His book hunger was insatiable. Again and again he read the meager home library. To buy a book he saved his pennies for a year. Wealth seemed to come with Wood's Natural History, or Plutarch's Lives, or Josephus, Or Rollin. At the age of fifteen, amid the dreary work of the farm, the realm of poetry began to open to him like the dawn of a glorious day, and he found new joy in Burns, in Aikenside, in Cowper, in Milton, in Shakespeare, and in the language, the imagery, the nobler thoughts of Job, Isaiah, David. In addition to history and poetry, he eagerly studied mathematics without the slightest incitement or assistance from teacher or friend, carrying knotty problems to the field in his mind and solving them as he swung his axe or scythe, or as he followed the plow.

Thus, while the boy was giving time and strength toward reducing the farm to cultivation, his mind pondered the thought of his books, and his soul grew upon the beauty which Nature had scattered about him.

The scene has changed. John Muir is again in a strange land. The flowery wilderness of Wisconsin has given way to the mountains of California, to Alaska, and to the dark forests where rolls the Oregon. In these marvelous regions he wanders and wonders and wishes to live forever. The boy has grown to be a man, tall, fair, not very Scotch in appearance. The farm gave health and strength and manly beauty. The University of Wisconsin added to his store of knowledge, gave him mental discipline and discretion, and bestowed on him what perhaps was better still, the abiding friendship of Professor James Davie Butler.

While in college, his strongest bent seemed toward mechanical contrivances. To this day, traditions of his inventions linger about the university. He seemed possessed with the desire to make a machine with voluntary powers, not a monster

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like Mrs. Shelley's, but a thing to be of use; and he very nearly succeeded. Had John Muir lived in the Middle Ages, he might have paid dearly for his ingenuity. In connection with one of his wooden clocks, he contrived a bed that at a certain hour would place its occupant upon his feet, a lamp that would light itself, and a desk that at proper intervals would present a chemistry for study, a volume of mathematics, a Latin work, or whatever else formed the day's routine, allowing time for meals and recreation.

After working his way through college, young Muir set out on long botanical and geological rambles in Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan, Canada, and around the Great Lakes, roving free as a bird over prairies and bogs, and through wild, majestic forests, supporting himself by any farm work or mill work that came in his way.

A year or two in Indianapolis, where he worked in factory or foundry, offered opportunity for acquaintance with the trees and flowers of this vicinity. This was the very time that Dr. Schliemann found a transient home in our city. Widely different were the two men and their destinies; one learned in the language of men, severely trained in ancient and modern literature; the other unsurpassed in knowledge of the various language and form and dress of Nature; one with pride and circumstance, unearthing cities and investigating enchanting ruins of the childhood of the world, the other wandering alone and unknown in primeval forests, discovering with unutterable joy some frail flower or curious fern or mighty river of ice.

It was in a workshop in our town that in one unhappy dusk the skilled hand of John Muir slipped and that his keen, clear eye was pierced by a sharp instrument, which, in the same moment, pierced his heart, for all the glory of the world he might never see again flashed swifter than lightning before him. For weeks the stranger suffered in a dark room, where he was visited by Miss Cathatine Merrill, introduced to him by Professor James D. Butler, who wrote, "Walk into the fields with this young man and you will find him wiser than

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Solomon."

With Miss Merrill were oftentimes children whom he charmed with accounts of the things he had seen and had heard. Through the years which have brought manhood and womanhood to his childish hearers, they have cherished the memory of that dark room and of those beautiful stories, and they have never ceased to listen to the tales still as wonderful - to the voice still as beloved.

The accident, agonizing though it was, gave light for darkness, and he now made the decision that his work should no longer lie along the line of mechanics and invention, but he spent in the study of Nature. So, from Indianapolis Mr. Muir set out afoot on a thousand-mile ramble to the Gulf of Mexico, studying the flora of Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Yet the plants and the animals and the rocks were not his only companions; very small copies of Burns, of Milton, of the New Testament, he carried, and made them a part of the very fiber and essence of his being.

With appetite whetted by the exuberant vegetation of the Southern States, he pushed his way further south, sailing for Cuba, where he enjoyed the glorious plant life and scenery of the tropics. All the while quite unaware whither his path was leading, he was pushing on toward the Lord's garden of California.

His own words best tell the story of his arrival: "After leaving the Florida swamps I came here. All the world was before me, and every day was a holiday. I stopped one day in San Francisco, and then asked the nearest way out to the untrampled part of the country. 'But where do you want to go?' asked the man to whom I had applied for this important information. 'To any place that is wild,' I said. This reply startled him, and he seemed to fear that I might be crazy, and that, therefore, the sooner I got out of town the better; so he directed me to the Oakland ferry. From East Oakland I started up the Santa Clara Valley on the first of April, after a wet winter. The warm, sunny air was fairly throbbing with lark

song, and the hills back of the cultivated fields were covered with bloom, making bright masses of color side by side and interblending blue and purple and yellow from many species of giliae, lupines, compositae, etc., now mostly lost. Of course with such an advertisement of plant wealth, I was soon on those hills, and the glowing days went by uncounted.

"Inquiring the way to Yosemite, I was directed through the Pacheco Pass, and from the summit of this pass I gained my first view of the Sierra with its belt of forests, and of the great San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys. It was one of those perfectly pure, rich, ripe days of California sun-gold, where distant views seemed as close as near ones, and I have always thanked the Lord that I came here before the dust and smoke of civilization had dimmed the sky, and before the wild bloom had vanished from the plain. Descending the pass, I waded out into the marvelous bloom of the San Joaquin when it was in its prime. It was all one sea of golden and purple bloom, so deep and dense that in walking through it you would press more than a hundred blooms at every step. In this flower-bed, five hundred miles long, I used to camp by just lying down wherever night overtook me, as if I had sunk beneath the waters of a lake; the radiant heads of compositae touching each other, ray to ray, shone above me like the thickest star-clusters of the sky; and, in the morning, I sometimes found plants that were new looking me in the face, so that my botanical studies would begin before I was up.

"At Crane Flat I reached the main forest belt, and there for the first time I saw the giants of the Sierra woods in all their glory: sugar pines more than two hundred feet high, with their long arms outstretched over the spiry silver firs, and yellow pine, libocedrus and Douglas spruce. This was in 1868. I was perfectly free, and I soon saw it would be long ere I could get out of those woods, and, as you know, I am not out of them yet. Then the sugar pine seemed to me the priest of the woods, ever addressing the surrounding trees, - and calling upon

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everybody with ears to hear,- and blessing them."

For five winters and ten summers Mr. Muir made the Yosemite Valley his central camp while studying the adjacent region - reading the mystic leaves of that wondrous book of mountains and interpreting the mighty things written there. Keen observation, tireless study, and familiar acquaintance gave ho him a knowledge of the ice rivers that have sculptured those mountains, grinding out canyons, sharpening peaks, digging out domes from inclosing rocks, carving their plain sides into their present glorious forms. "No man living understands glacial action in the formation of scenery as that young Muir in California," wrote Professor Louis Agassiz.

Here he met many noted scientists and travelers, among the latter being Emerson. Mr. Emerson never forgot John Muir and his letters vainly tried to bring the young man eastward.

For awhile at first he worked in the little mill he built for Mr. Hutchings to make the fallen pines into lumber. In this way the man of few wants earned money enough in a year or two to last through ten years of seclusion and solitude while he studied the sculpture of the earth, the action of glaciers, the growth and distribution of forests.

For months, even years, he was separated from human life, living absolutely alone, with trees, flowers and rocks as companions. Nothing, in fact, seems to have set him apart from his time more than this liking for solitude, yet it was mingled with perfect sanity, kindliness and love of his kind. It was said of him that he cared less for a man than for a tree, but the countless friends he made all over the world from Presidents of the United States and railway magnates, literary and scientific men in many countries, to sheep-herders and ranchers, disprove the assertion. He was known and loved everywhere in the Sierras by men who would scarcely have been able to read his books, even if they

had ever heard of their existence. As there gathered that December of 1914 about his open grave a noted group of men and women, and remembrance was evident from the universities which had honored him, from the leading magazines of the country and from various societies of science, there stood, the picture of loss and sorrow, a little old Chinaman who for years had served the family with Oriental loyalty, and not a dry eye saw him turn, when all was over, to his cabin across the vineyard. Mr. Muir was the truest of friends, constant and loving even to children's children of those who had ever helped him or for whom he had ever cared.

In 1881 Mr. Muir was appointed botanist on the government expedition sent out for the relief of the Jeannette, and was thus enabled to extend his studies into the frozen regions of Siberia and Alaska, around the shores of Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean adjacent to Bering Strait.

In 1893 he returned for the first time to his birthplace. The East Lothian fields on which his eyes had first looked are among the most fertile and beautiful of all Scotland, and few portions of the East Coast are rockier or more wildly beaten by the sea. The farms, the gardens, the heathy Lamermuir Hills, the grand sea storms thundering and foaming on the black cavernous rocks, made impressions that had never grown dim. Here in historic Dunbar, among the shore cliffs and the picturesque ruins of the old castle which had afforded shelter to Edward II on his flight from Bannockburn, had become the residence of the widow of James I in the Fifteenth century, and had served several times as a refuge for Queen Mary during her troubles, Mr. Muir's adventurous rock climbing had commenced. At the old home he had had a little garden of his own in which he had diligently scratched and planted, declaring that when he was a man he would have a big garden full of tulips and lilies and daisies. Here, on

Saturdays, with or without leave, he had made truant raids along the shore and into the country, robbing orchards and turnip fields, seeking birds' nests, catching butterflies, watching skylarks mounting and singing over the field of Cromwell's famous battle and over the green meadows that belonged to the Gray Friars' Monastery. He found still the old stone schoolhouse where at three years of age the baby had been started with his one little book; here Latin and French grammars from cover to cover had been committed to memory; the Shorter Catechism likewise, upon the slightest stumbling over the recital of which came the master's flogging, as if some connection existed between the skin and the memory; and here he had learned by heart the most of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament, which knowledge he regarded as his most valuable school acquisition. John Ruskin esteemed as highly his knowledge of the Bible, and surely no men are larger debtors to the matchless Book for style, thought, and feeling.

In this visit he was happy to become acquainted with the publisher, David Douglas of Edinburgh - that man of choice memories of choice men - and with Sir Joseph Hooker of London.

The latter years of Mr. Muir's life were spent upon a beautiful ranch in the Sierra foot hills. His chief activities were with his pen and in connection with the Forestry Commission. Strongly influential was he in arousing the powers at Washington to the fatality of tree destruction - to its criminality, and to the desirability of preserving the most beautiful regions of the West through establishment of National Parks.

His winters were spent largely in writing, for though he successfully declined importunities for lectures, he could not so well escape the pressure of magazine and book men. He did not like to write. So painstaking was he that he looked upon the completion of an article as if he had arisen from a bed of illness. No money tempted him -- the lure was not there, even though the Atlantic Monthly has paid no contributor hìgher per page, and though he was offered ten thousand dollars for

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a series of letters on his last trip. No friend ever sat in that large study of his without fear lest the dado of unused notebooks, - the accumulated record of years of wandering and seeing and loving, - never be converted into a form and read and known of men. It did seem as if, with all that large Homeric leisure, more might have been written. But he stoutly maintained that people did not keenly care for the tales he had to tell, that he had no particular mission, and that it did not matter whether he wrote or not. "Books and talks," he used to say, "and articles about Nature are at least little more than advertisements, hurrah invitations, dinner bells. Nothing can take the place of absolute contact, of seeing and feeding at God's table for oneself. The cold and perishing cannot be warmed by descriptions of fire and sunshine, nor the hungry fed with books about bread. The Lord Himself must anoint eyes to see, my pen can not. One can only see by loving; love makes things visible and all labor light. Nobody can be ambitious to do anything wonderful, when God's wonders are in sight. Every day we should all pray, 'O Lord, open Thou mine eyes.'"

Mr. Muir's personal appearance was attractive; the slender, slightly stooped figure, the shapely head covered with curls, the face on which was written the result of solitary and scant living, the beard streaked with gray, the clear blue eyes and refined brow. Many a traveler in the Golden State found himself attracted to this inimitable man. It was a conquest to entice him into your home, and no guest was held in higher esteem by those who knew the privilege of entertaining him. Listeners were held for hours by his rare conversation, -- there was never anything like it, - made up of spirited narrative and descriptions so vivid that "Our foreheads felt the wind and rain," spiced with irresistible humor and gentle irony. But though enjoying men and enjoyed by men, he cared not to spend time in a city while he "might see God making a world." "And then there

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are your stupid streets," he used to say. ""I never can find my way. Why, in my mountains I am never lost. I drop my pack and at midnight come back on my trailless path to find it without trouble. You ought not to live here. Go up a canyon. How is it possible to teach young people until you have absorbed the magnetism and mountaninism of the glacial regions, until you have been baptized in God's shoreless atmosphere of beauty and love?"

A letter written by the light of his campfire closes with: "Here are a few green stems of prickly rubus and a tiny grass, God's tender prattle words of love which we so much need in these mighty temples of power. How wholly infused with God is this one big word of love we call the world!"

Mr. Muir has been called "The Thoreau of California." With love of nature and renunciation of worldy glory in common, one has but to glance at the writings of each to see the difference between their lives and their aims. R. L. Stevenson says: "Thoreau did not wish virtue to go of him to his fellowmen, but shrunk in a corner to hoard it for himself." Not so with John Muir. No man gave of his store more lavishly. Ignorant ears were favored with what would delight the hearing of a Sir Joseph Hooker, an Asa Gray, a Joseph Le Conte. The language in which to one or two or three listeners he told of the sights he had seen in untrodden parts of the earth was simple enough for the humblest understanding, eloquent enough to charm the most scholarly. In that upper study, many and many a traveler along life's rugged way had had his path illumined, his heart set at ease, his hope renewed, his idea of the greatness of living reformed. He had an indescribable way of showing men the things that are real, of stripping from feverish self-seeking those things that blind the vision and deter the soul, of declaring the eternal verities.

Mr. Muir was exceedingly tender. If there were one thing hateful to him, it was cruelty -- the cruelty of the sportsman who finds pleasure in making a hole

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through a beautiful animal, of tearing the fills out of a fish. In his early experience in the wilds, he showed his inherited idea of the necessity of killing a rattlesnake when met by crushing the first to cross his path, -- the only animal he ever took the life of, and he hoped ever after that he would be forgiven for killing that creature "loved only by its Maker."

Another impressive characteristic was his self-sacrifice. Not often was reference made to this aspect of his work, but once he said, "I have made a tramp of myself; I have gone hungry and cold; I have left bloody trails on sharp, icy peaks, to see the wonders of earth." How truly self in his noble pursuit was lost sight of may be seen in most of his writings, not least in the little dog story, "Stickeen."

In Mr. Muir keenness of observation, vivid imagination, and poetic feeling found well balanced expression. It is this that gives charm to his scientific papers, body and substance to his literary articles. More than any one man did he influence the Government to set apart our great National Parks. More than any man's has his voice crying in the wilderness urged tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people to turn to the mountains - their home - and shown that wildness is a necessity and that the sole motive of his writings was to interest men in and to educate them up to some sort of appreciation of the garden our Lord has here placed us in, and our personal responsibility in maintaining this high estate. Few things were ever so hard for Mr. Muir to accept as, years ago, the ruling of the Federal court to grant to San Francisco the right to use the Hetch-Hetchy Valley, twin of and greater than the Yosemite, as a reservoir for the city supply of water.

Far more than anything he did, was what Mr. Muir was. That there are favored men to whom Nature especially discloses herself, - men who preach

the gospel Wordsworth came to announce, - the world accepts. Their eyes are not holden that they cannot see, nor are their hearts dulled that they cannot feel, nor their ears so grossly closed in that they cannot hear. The great mass of men may never know the secrets of Nature, for the great mass of men must toil through life bearing the burden of the mystery of this unintelligible world, and to such come gratefully the words of a seer. Mr. Muir knew, as the prophet of old knew, that where there is no vision the people perish, and he lifted his voice against the fatal pursuit of the present for non-essentials, for the things not really worth while and not eternal. A ray from the Transfiguration Mount seemed to have been caught by him, also, - he had seen the Truth, and the truth had made him free of narrow conventions and false ideals, of pretense and shallowness of all kinds, and of self-seeking; the truth had led him out not only to see God making a world, but also to interpret the wondrous sight for you and for me.

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