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Reminiscence of John Muir by Young, S. Hall

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ALASKA DAYS WITH JOHN MUIR

by

S. Hall Young

February 23, 1916.

Your fellow Californian, and one of the greatest of you, John Muir, was one of the most intensely religious men that I have ever met. His religion was not of the usual type in its outward display. I think that it would have scared him almost to death if anybody had asked him to lead in prayer or to make a religious speech, and yet I have heard him in the presence of the heathen of Alaska make some of the most intensely religious sermons that I have ever listened to, and some of the most effective. I cannot better condense what I know about him and my appreciation of the man than in the verdict that I made after long thought and cogitation.

He lived aloft, exultant, unafraid,
All things were good to him. The mountain old
Stretched gnarled hands to help him climb. The peak
Waved blithe snow-banner greeting; and for him
The rav'ning storm, aprowl for human life,
Purred like the lion at his trainer's feet.
The grizzly met him on the narrow ledge,
Gave gruff "good morning"--and the right of way.
The blue-veined glacier, cold of heart and pale,
Warmed, at his gaze, to amethystine blush,
And murmured deep, fond undertones of love.

He walked apart from men, yet loved his kind,
And brought them treasures from his larger store.
For them he delved in mines of richer gold.
Earth's messenger he was to human hearts.
The starry moss flower from its dizzy shelf,
The ouzel, shaking forth its spray of song,
The glacial runlet, tinkling its clear bell,
The rose-of-morn, abloom on snowy heights -
Each sent by him a jewel-word of cheer.
Blind eyes he opened and deaf ears unstopped.

He lived aloft, apart. He talked with God
In all the myriad tongues of God's sweet world;
But still he came anear and talked with us,
Interpreting for God to listn'ing men.

To this man of God, for so I call him and so I have known him, I think I owe more than to any other human creature. For he interpreted God to me,--the lesson of the deep fiord and more than all of those terrible, relentless, cold glaciers that he made warm with the love of God, the crystal with which he fashioned the world for the blessing and help of human kind.

I am to tell you this afternoon of a few incidents of a voyage or two that I took with him in that great northern land that he loved and that I loved,--whether it is the opening up of that great Glacier Bay with its sixty miles of

unknown beauty and wonder (unknown to that time when we first introduced it in 1879,) and when the greatest of all the glaciers was given the name of my companion, when we saw the wonderful splash of gold, the richest of all golds, as if a pigment, perfect, were dashed on that highest peak of all; or when coming up to the farthest northern tribe of that great archipelago, we preached to the Chilcat tribe of heathen Indians, insolent, proud, war-like, cruel heathen, and opened up to them for the first time something of the love of God,-- an all-day sermon, when from morning to night they kept me talking.

We had been greeted by a shower of bullets as we came up near the village. But presently we heard the cracking of wood outside as they were prying off the planks in order that those outside might hear, and soon we saw a row of black heads looking down through the smoke-hole. When I would stop exhausted they would cry, "Tell us more. Tell us more of the man from Heaven who died for you and for us." So all day they kept us talking of the love of God shown in Christ Jesus. As the result of that first visit with John Muir to-day three-fourth of that tribe are humble followers of Christ,-- a transformed people. So in every tribe and village which we then first entered, Christ is now known. The children learn of Him in Sunday School. Now they are Christians and redeemed people.

One other incident that I want to relate brings to you something of the lessons of this great convention from all parts of the earth, and I want to tell you what John Muir did for me,--the most wonderful thing that I have ever known a human being to do for another. We were climbing -- only I was trying to keep up with that man. I had been with mountain climbers before, but never one like him. How he scaled Shasta and all your mountains to create his new theory of glacial action! How he interpreted God and His way of making the world and shaping the world and fitting it for human abode, as no other man had ever done. I was a student sitting at his feet, trying to follow him,-- I a mere young man, new to that work, but always striving to catch his hand-hold and to step in his foot-hold. We were 8,000 feet high, scaling a sheer cliff of basaltic rock. The glacier had cut into it until in places it leaned out above the glacier. But there were fissures and ledges so that the hand always found a hold, and we could still ascend, Muir making all haste. We were afraid that the sun would sink before we could get to the top. Man is always dissatisfied

Greater love
has no
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with his view-point, and wants to see a wider vision. We had come up that terrible cliff, making all haste, to within about forty feet of the top. We came along a little shelf, and then John Muir left me, running like a goat along that shelf, trying to get clear to the top, shouting, "We must see the sunset from the top."

I came to a gash in the cliff. It was about five feet across, and had I not been so weary I could have leaped it. It sloped very steeply for some fifteen feet below, opening on the face of the precipice above the glacier, and was filled to within about four feet of the surface with slaty gravel. I saw a rock the size of my head projected from the slippery stream of gravel. In my haste to overtake Muir I did not stop to make sure this stone was part of the cliff, but stepped with springing force upon it to cross the fissure. Instantly the stone melted away beneath my feet, and shot downward, and was carrying me with it. As I fell I turned on my face and struck out with both hands to grasp the rock on either side. Falling forward hard, both arms were twisted behind me, and I slid down towards that fearful precipice some fifteen feet below. I know what it is to have the thoughts of a lifetime crowded before one's mind in a moment of deadly peril. I had no foundation except that treacherous gravel. I had no hope so far as anything that I could do was concerned. But I was wrong -- I had a wonderful friend. He heard my cry as I fell. He looked upon me, and I heard his ejaculation -- that "My God!" was not profanity, *breathed forth as* it was a prayer. And then, seeing my helplessness, no more ejaculations of dismay, but cheery words, "Hold fast; I'm going to get you out of this. I can't get to you on this side; the rock is sheer. I'll have to leave you now and come down on the other side." Then he went away, whistling "Bonnie Dundee" and "Highland Mary." And at last, when it seemed as if every moment was my last and every heart-beat seemed to shift me a little farther, and when finally I hung over the face of the cliff I heard his voice, cheery again, "I'm here, I'm going to get you out of this." I could not even turn my head to see the hand that was stretched out to me. Grasping me by one hand he reached far over and presently I felt his grasp as he caught me by my weight. And then, such was my knowledge of my friend, I knew that rather than loose that grip of me he would share my fate and be dashed to the glacier below.

And then I saw the glacier a thousand feet below, till he drew me close to him by crooking his arm. As my head came up past his level he caught

me by the collar with his teeth. My weight on his jaws dragged his outwards. It was utterly impossible, yet he did it! Holding me by his teeth as a panther her cub, he dragged me, a helpless weight, clinging like a spider to a wall, up some fifteen feet by main strength till he came to a little ledge.

And all that night, imprisoned between cliffs, that night of darkness and wildness -- how that man with hands and feet and eyes and heart took care of me, doing for me the things that I could not do myself, until the morning came and found us among friends. Can I ever forget that friend? Could he ask me for anything during all his life and I not give it? Could he make any demand upon me, and I say no? He risked his life a thousand times for me.

Dear friends, let me apply what he did to what Christ did for all humanity. He more than risked his life to save us. With the hand that bears the print of the nail, all through the night he has suffered and has been our care-taker, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves, and he has promised to care for us till the morning dawns and finds us with friends and home and safety. Can we forget that friend? Can he make any demands on us and we say no, for did he not give his life for us? And he asks you and me to give the service of our lives to show our love -- "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."