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A Sierra Flood Storm.

John Muir

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A SIERRA FLOOD-STORM.

How interesting would be the history of a single rain-drop followed back from the ground to its farthest fountains. It is hard to obtain clear, general views of storms so extensive and seemingly so shapeless as the one under consideration, notwithstanding the aid derived from a thousand observers furnished with the best instruments. The smallest and most comprehensible species of Sierra storm is found growing in the middle region of the range, some specimens being so local and small that we can go round their bases and see them from all sides like a mountain. Like the rains of the greater portion of the equatorial regions, they seem to obey a kind of rhythm, appearing day after day a little before noon, sometimes for weeks in succession and forming one of the most imposing and characteristic features of the midday scenery. Their periods are well known and taken into account by Indians and mountaineers. It is not long, geologically speaking, since the first rain-drop fell upon the present landscape of the Sierra; for, however old the range may be, regarded as a whole, its features are young. They date back only to the glacial period. Yet in the few tens of thousands of years that have elapsed since these foot-hill landscapes were left bare by the melting ice-sheet, great superficial changes have taken place. The first post glacial rains fell upon bare rocks and plantless moraines, but under nature's stormy cultivation these cold fields became fruitful. The ridged soils were spread out and mellowed, the seasons became warmer, and vegetation came gradually on—sedge and rush and waving grass, pine and fir, flower after flower—to make the lavish beauty that fills them to-day.

In the present storm, as in every other, there were tones and gestures inexpressibly gentle manifested in the midst of what is called violence and fury, and easily recognized by all who look and listen for them. The rain brought out all the colors of the woods with the most delightful freshness—the rich browns of bark, and burs, and fallen leaves, and dead ferns; the grays of rocks and lichens; the light purple of swelling buds, and the fine warm yellow greens of mosses and libocedrus. The air was steaming with fragrance, not rising and wafting past in separate masses, but equally diffused throughout all the wind. Pine woods are at all times fragrant, but most in spring when putting out their tassels, and in warm weather when their gums and balsams are softened by the sun. The wind was now chafing their needles, and the warm rain was steeping them. *Monardella* grows here in large beds, in sunny openings among the pines; and there is plenty of bog in the dells, and manzanita on the hill-sides; and the rosy fragrant-leaved *shamoebatia* carpets the ground almost everywhere. These with the gums and balsams of the evergreen formed the chief local fragrance fountains within reach of the wind. Sailors tell that the flowery woods of Colombia scent the breeze a hundred miles to sea. Our Sierra wind seemed so perfectly filled, it could hardly lose its wealth go where it would; for the ascending clouds of aroma when first set free were winnowed and washed and parted from all their heaviness, and they became pure, like light, and were diffused and fairly lodged in the body of the air, and worked with it in close accord as an essential part of it.

Toward the middle of the afternoon the main flood-cloud lifted along its western border, revealing a beautiful section of the Sacramento lying some twenty or thirty miles away brilliantly sunlighted and glistening with rain-pools as if it were paved with burnished silver. Soon afterward a remarkably jagged blast-like cloud with a sheer face appeared over the valley of the Yuba, dark colored and roughened with numerous furrows like some huge lava table. The blue Coast Range was seen stretching along the sky like a beveled wall, and the sombre and crazy Marysville Buttes rose imposingly out of the flooded plain like an island out of the sea. The rain began to abate, and the whole body of the storm was evidently withering and going to pieces.

I sauntered down through the dripping bushes, reveling in the universal vigor and freshness with which all the life about me was inspired. The woods were born again. How clean and unworn, and immortal the world seemed to be!—the lofty cedars in full bloom laden with golden pollen and their washed plumes tipped with glowing rainbeads; the pines rocking gently and settling back into rest; light spangling on the broad mirror-leaves of the magnolia, and its tracery of yellow boughs relieved against dusky thickets of chestnut oak, liverworts, lycopodiums, ferns, all exulting in their glorious revival, and every moss that had ever lived seemed to have come crowding back from the dead to clothe each trunk and stone in living green. Young violets, smilax, fritillaria, saxifrage, were pushing up through the steaming ground as if conscious of all their coming glory; and innumerable green and yellow buds, scarce visible before the storm, were smiling everywhere, making the whole ground throb and tingle with glad life. As for the birds and squirrels, not a wing or tail was to be seen. Squirrels are dainty fellows, and dislike wetness more than cats. They were, therefore, snug at home, rocking in their dry nests. The birds were down in the sheltered dells, out of the wind, some of the strongest pecking at acorns or madrone berries, but most sitting in low copses with breast-feathers puffed out and keeping each other company.—*John Muir, in June Overland Monthly.*