



4-1-1873

A Geologist's Winter Walk.

John Muir

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmb>

Recommended Citation

Muir, John, "A Geologist's Winter Walk." (1873). *John Muir: A Reading Bibliography by Kimes, 1986 (Muir articles 1866-1986)*. 78.

<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmb/78>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the John Muir Papers at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in John Muir: A Reading Bibliography by Kimes, 1986 (Muir articles 1866-1986) by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact mgibney@pacific.edu.

Overland, Apr. 1873
p. 10.

DC
ge

1873.] April A GEOLOGIST'S WINTER WALK.

355

A GEOLOGIST'S WINTER WALK.*

AFTER reaching Turlock, I sped
afoot over the stubble-fields, and
through miles of brown *Hemizonia* and
purple *Erigeron*, to Hopeton, conscious
of little more than that the town was
behind and beneath me, and the mount-
ains above and before me; on through
the oaks and *chaparral* of the foothills
to Coulterville, and then ascended the
first great mountain step upon which
grows the sugar-pine. Here I slackened
pace, for I drank the spicy, resiny
wind, and was at home—never did pine-
trees seem so dear. How sweet their
breath and their song, and how grandly
they winnowed the sky. I tingled my
fingers among their tassels, and rustled
my feet among their brown needles and
burrs.

When I reached the valley, all the
rocks seemed talkative, and more lov-
able than ever. They are dear friends,
and have warm blood gushing through
their granite flesh; and I love them with
a love intensified by long and close com-
panionship. After I had bathed in the
bright river, sauntered over the mead-
ows, conversed with the domes, and
played with the pines, I still felt muddy,
and weary, and tainted with the sticky
sky of your streets; I determined, there-
fore, to run out to the higher temples.
"The days are sunful," I said, "and
though now winter, no great danger need
be encountered, and a sudden storm will
not block my return, if I am watchful."

*NOTE.—The friend with whom Mr. Muir shares
his mountain studies, one of many who know the un-
tiring patience with which they are pursued, is well
persuaded that the readers of "Living Glaciers,"
"Yosemite in Flood," and other papers which have
appeared in the OVERLAND, will enjoy these unpre-
pared letter-pages, warm from the pen of the writer,
and takes the responsibility of their publication.

The morning after this decision, I
started up the Cañon of Tenaya, caring
little about the quantity of bread I car-
ried; for, I thought, a fast and a storm
and a difficult cañon are just the medi-
cine I require. When I passed Mirror
Lake, I scarcely noticed it, for I was
absorbed in the great Tissack—her
crown a mile away in the hushed azure;
her purple drapery flowing in soft and
graceful folds low as my feet, embroid-
ered gloriously around with deep, shad-
owy forest. I have gazed on Tissack
a thousand times—in days of solemn
storms, and when her form shone di-
vine with jewels of winter, or was veiled
in living clouds; I have heard her voice
of winds, or snowy, tuneful waters; yet
never did her soul reveal itself more im-
pressively than now. I hung about her
skirts, lingering timidly, till the glaciers
compelled me to push up the cañon.
This cañon is accessible only to deter-
mined mountaineers, and I was anxious
to carry my barometer and chronometer
through it, to obtain sections and al-
titudes. After I had passed the tall
groves that stretch a mile above Mirror
Lake, and scrambled around the Tena-
ya Fall, which is just at the head of the
lake groves, and crept through the dense
and spiny *chaparral* that plushes the
roots of all the mountains here for miles,
in warm, unbroken green, and was as-
cending a precipitous rock-front, where
the foot-holds were good, when I sud-
denly stumbled, for the first time since
I touched foot to Sierra rocks. After
several involuntary somersaults, I be-
came insensible, and when conscious-
ness returned, I found myself wedged
among short, stiff bushes, not injured in
the slightest. Judging by the sun, I

up high
down to

shown
she herself

beds
climometer

forms a
dense boxy
plush about
the bases of
the cañon
walls

slipped
all atremble but

down from
of the earth
streets

for surviving
influenza & exercise

could not have been insensible very long; probably not a minute, possibly an hour; and I could not remember what made me fall, or where I had fallen from; but I saw that if I had rolled a little further, my mountain-climbing would have been finished. "There," said I, addressing my feet, to whose separate skill I had learned to trust night and day on any mountain, "that is what you get by intercourse with stupid town stairs, and dead pavements." I felt angry and worthless. I had not reached yet the difficult portion of the cañon, but I determined to guide my humbled body over the highest practicable precipices, in the most intricate and nerve-trying places I could find; for I was now fairly awake, and felt confident that the last town-fog had been shaken from both head and feet.

I camped at the mouth of a narrow gorge, which is cut into the bottom of the main cañon, determined to take earnest exercise next day. No plush boughs did my ill-behaved bones receive that night, nor did my bumped head get any spicy cedar-plumes for pillow. I slept on a naked boulder, and when I awoke all my nervous trembling was gone.

The gorged portion of the cañon, in which I spent all the next day, is about a mile and a half in length; and I passed the time very profitably in tracing the action of the forces that determined this peculiar bottom gorge, which is an abrupt, ragged-walled, narrow-throated cañon, formed in the bottom of a wide-mouthed, smooth, and beveled cañon. I will not stop now to tell you more; some day you may see it, like a shadowy line, from Cloud's Rest. In high water, the stream occupies all the bottom of the gorge, surging and chafing in glorious power from wall to wall, but the sound of the grinding was low as I entered the gorge, scarcely hoping to be able to pass through its entire length.

By cool efforts, along glassy, ice-worn slopes, I reached the upper end in a little over a day, but was compelled to pass the second night in the gorge, and in the moonlight I wrote you this short pencil-letter in my note-book:

"The moon is looking down into the cañon, and how marvelously the great rocks kindle to her light—every dome, and brow, and swelling boss touched by her white rays, glows, as if lighted with snow. I am now only a mile from last night's camp; and have been climbing and sketching all day in this difficult but instructive gorge. It is formed in the bottom of the main cañon, among the roots of Cloud's Rest. It begins at the dead-lake where I camped last night, and ends a few hundred yards above, in another dead lake. The walls everywhere are craggy and vertical, and in some places they overlean. It is only from twenty to sixty feet wide, and not, though black and broken enough, the thin, crooked mouth of some mysterious abyss; for in many places I saw the solid, seamless floor. I am sitting on a big stone, against which the stream divides, and goes brawling by in rapids on both sides; half my rock is white in the light, half in shadow. Looking from the opening jaws of this shadowy gorge, South Dome is immediately in front—high in the stars, her face turned from the moon, with the rest of her body gloriously muffled in waved folds of granite. On the left, cut from Cloud's Rest, by the lip of the gorge, are three magnificent rocks, sisters of the great South Dome. On the right is the massive, moonlit front of Mount Watkins, and between, low down in the furthest distance, is Sentinel Dome, girdled and darkened with forest. In the near foreground is the joyous creek, Tenaya, singing against boulders that are white with the snow. Now, look back twenty yards, and you will see a water-fall, fair as a spirit; the moonlight just touches it, bringing it in

relief against the deepest, dark back-ground. A little to the left, and a dozen steps this side of the fall, a flickering light marks my camp—and a precious camp it is. A huge, glacier-polished slab, in falling from the glassy flank of Cloud's Rest, happened to settle on edge against the wall of the gorge. I did not know that this slab was glacier-polished, until I lighted my fire. Judge of my delight. I think it was sent here by an earthquake. I wish I could take it down to the valley. It is about twelve feet square. Beneath this slab is the only place in this torrent-swept gorge where I have seen sand sufficient for a bed. I expected to sleep on the boulders, for I spent most of the afternoon on the slippery wall of the cañon, endeavoring to get around this difficult part of the gorge, and was compelled to hasten down here for water before dark. I will sleep soundly on this sand; half of it is mica. Here, wonderful to behold, are a few green stems of prickly *Rubus*, and a tiny grass. They are here to meet us. Ay, even here, in this darksome gorge, 'frightful and tormented' with raging torrents and choking avalanches of snow. Can it be? As if the *Rubus* and the grass-leaf were not enough of God's tender prattle-words of love, which we so much need in these mighty temples of power, yonder in the "benmost bore" are two blessed *Adiantums*. Listen to them. How wholly infused with God is this one big word of love that we call the world! Good-night. Do you see the fire-glow on my ice-smoothed slab, and on my two ferns? And do you hear how sweet a sleep-song the fall and cascades are singing?"

The water-ground chips and knots that I found fastened between rocks, kept my fire alive all through the night, and I rose nerved and ready for another day of sketching and noting, and any form of climbing. I escaped from the gorge about noon, after accomplishing some of the most delicate feats of

mountaineering I ever attempted; and here the cañon is all broadly open again—a dead lake, luxuriantly forested with pine, and spruce, and silver fir, and brown-trunked *Librocedrus*. The walls rise in Yosemite forms, and the stream comes down 700 feet, in a smooth brush of foam. This is a genuine Yosemite valley. It is about 2,000 feet above the level of Yosemite, and about 2,400 below Lake Tenaya. Lake Tenaya was frozen, and the ice was so clear and unruffled, that the mountains and the groves that looked upon it were reflected almost as perfectly as I ever beheld them in the calm evening mirrors of summer. At a little distance, it was difficult to believe the lake frozen at all; and when I walked out on it, cautiously stamping at short intervals to test the strength of the ice, I seemed to walk mysteriously, without any adequate faith, on the surface of the water. The ice was so transparent, that I could see the beautifully wave-rippled, sandy bottom, and the scales of mica glinting back the down-pouring light. When I knelt down with my face close to the ice, through which clear sunshine was pouring, I was delighted to discover myriads of Tyn-dall's six-sided ice-flowers, magnificently colored. A grand old mountain mansion is this Tenaya region. In the glacier period, it was a *mer de glace*, far grander than the *mer de glace* of Switzerland, which is only about half a mile broad. The Tenaya *mer de glace* was not less than two miles broad, late in the glacier epoch, when all the principal dividing crests were bare; and its depth was not less than fifteen hundred feet. Ice-streams from Mounts Lyell and Dana, and all the mountains between, and from the nearer Cathedral Peak, flowed hither, welded into one, and worked together. After accomplishing this Tenaya Lake basin, and all the splendidly-sculptured rocks and mountains that surround and adorn it, and the great Tenaya Cañon

white

I found

was

he walking on water

even

ending the

4-winter
mt.
I has been
ground
into a bent
warming out
I seems to be
coming near
farming

on, with its wealth of all that makes mountains sublime, they were welded with the vast South Lyell and Illilouette glaciers on one side, and with those of Hoffman on the other—thus forming a portion of a yet grander *mer de glace*.

Now your finger is raised admonishingly, and you say, "This letter-writing will not do." Therefore, I will not try to register my homeward ramblings; but since this letter is already so long, you must allow me to tell you of Cloud's Rest and Tissiack; then will I cast away my letter pen, and begin "Articles," rigid as granite and slow as glaciers.

I reached the Tenaya Cañon, on my way home, by coming in from the northeast, rambling down over the shoulders of Mount Watkins, touching bottom a mile above Mirror Lake. From thence home was but a saunter in the moonlight. After resting one day, and the weather continuing calm, I ran up over the east shoulder of the South Dome, and down in front of its grand split face, to make some measurements; completed my work, climbed to the shoulder again, and struck off along the ridge for Cloud's Rest, and reached the topmost sprays of her sunny wave in ample time for sunset. Cloud's Rest is a thousand feet higher than Tissiack. It is a wave-

The head of Yosemite Valley
extends

like crest upon a ridge, which begins at Yosemite with Tissiack, and runs continuously eastward to the thicket of peaks and crests around Tenaya. This lofty granite wall is bent this way and that by the restless and weariless action of glaciers, just as if it had been made of dough—semi-plastic, as Prof. Whitney would say. But the grand circumference of mountains and forests are coming from far and near, densing into one close assemblage; for the sun, their god and father, with love ineffable, is glowing a sunset farewell. Not one of all the assembled rocks or trees seemed remote. How impressively their faces shone with responsive love!

I ran home in the moonlight, with long, firm strides; for the sun-love made me strong. Down through the junipers—down through the firs; now in jet-shadows, now in white light; over sandy moraines and bare, clanking rock; past the huge ghost of South Dome, rising weird through the firs—past glorious Nevada—past the groves of Illilouette—through the pines of the valley; frost-crystals flashing all the sky beneath, as star-crystals on all the sky above. All of this big mountain-bread for one day! One of the rich, ripe days that enlarge one's life—so much of sun upon one side of it, so much of moon on the other.

good
to enjoy a grand beauty
wood
shone
shone

NAPOLÉON III.

SECOND PERIOD.—1865 TO 1872.

THE sagacity of Napoléon III. did not betray him, when, following the maxims he had published to the world while a prisoner, he chose and fostered the alliance of Great Britain, although that alliance failed him at the last. England had renounced the idolatrous notions of legitimacy which drove her into the coalition against Napoléon

I. Her political advance had gone forward with enormous strides. The democratic element was largely recognized, and being educated for further development. Like France, she had adopted the maxim of free trade in food and industry. Napoléon III. remembered the dying saying of his uncle, Napoléon I., "In fifty years, Europe will be republi-