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Twenty Hill Hollow

John Muir

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Mademoiselle Deligny remained but a week in Brittany. She never recovered from her surprise at finding the Marquis de Bridial so changed; and life in one of these old castles was a very tiresome affair, she said to Louis; adding, by way of comfort:

"Don't fret, Louison; we will return to Paris at once. Ah! poor women are always disappointed, when we—follow the dictates of our hearts!"

During the week of her stay, the Marquis never once raised his eyes. A month after her departure, Marion and Gilbert were married in the little chapel where the Marquise lay buried; and Monsieur le Marquis has not resumed his "historical researches" to this day.

On his table now stood a little, pale-blue slipper; and on the steps of the vault in the chapel he placed a fresh bouquet of flowers every morning. In after-years, he devoted his talents and energies to painting; but his little grandchildren were the only ones who sincerely admired his artistic productions.

TWENTY HILL HOLLOW.

I WISH to say a word for the great central plain of California in general, and for Twenty Hill Hollow, in Merced County, in particular; because, in reading descriptions of California scenery, by the literary racers who annually make a trial of their speed here, one is led to fancy, that, outside the touristical seesaw of Yosemite, Geyser, and Big Trees, our State contains little else worthy of note, excepting, perhaps, certain wine-cellar and vineyards, and that our few travelers who are in earnest—true romantics—are always disappointed, when they are led to fancy, that, outside the touristical stops, one is made a trial of their speed here, one is led to fancy, that, outside the touristical seesaw of Yosemite, Geyser, and Big Trees, our State contains little else worthy of note, excepting, perhaps, certain wine-cellar and vineyards, and that our few travelers who are in earnest—true romantics—are always disappointed, when they are led to fancy, that, outside the touristical stops.

The whole State of California, from the Siesta to San Diego, is one block of beauty, one matchless valley; and our great plain, with its mountain-walls, is the true California Yosemite—exactly corresponding in its physical character and proportions to that of the Merced. Moreover, as Yosemite the less is outlined in the lesser Yosemite of Indian Cañon, Glacier Cañon, Illilouette, and Pohono, so is Yosemite the great by the Yosemite of the King's River, Fresno, Merced, and Tuolumne. The only important difference between the great central Yosemite—bottomed by the plain of the Sacramento and San Joaquin, and walled by the Sierras and mountains of the coast—and the Merced Yosemite—bottomed by a glacier meadow, and walled by glacier rocks—is, that the former is double—two Yosemite in one, each proceeding from a tangle of glacier cañons, meeting opposite Suisun Bay, and sending their united waters to the sea by the Golden Gate.

We were to cross-cut the Sierras into blocks a dozen miles or so in thickness, each section would contain a Yosemite Valley and a river, together with a bright array of lakes and meadows, rocks and forests. The grandeur and inexhaustible beauty of each block would be so vast and over-satisfying that to choose among them would be like selecting slices of bread cut from the same loaf. One bread-slice might have burnt spots, answering to craters; another would be more browned; another, more crusted or raggedly cut; but all essentially the same. In no greater degree would the Sierra slices differ in general character. Nevertheless, we all would choose the Merced slice, because, being easier of access, it has been nibbled and tasted, and pronounced very good; and because of the concentrated form of its Yosemite, caused by certain conditions of baking, yeasting, and glacier-frosting of this portion of the great Sierra loaf. In like manner, we readily perceive that the great central plain is one batch of bread—-one golden cake—and we are loath to leave these magnificent loaves for crumbs, however good.

After our smoky sky has been washed in the rains of winter, the whole complex row of Sierras appear from the plain as a simple wall slightly beveled, and colored in horizontal bands laid one above another, as if entirely composed of partially straightened rainbows. So, also, the plain seen from the mountains has the same simplicity of smooth surface, colored purple and yellow, like a patchwork of irised clouds. But when we descend to this smooth-furred sheet, we discover complexity in its physical conditions equal to that of the mountains, though less strongly marked. In particular, that portion of the plain lying between the Merced and Tuolumne, with a few clear, open sections occur, exposing an eloquent history of seas, and glaciers, and volcanic floods—chapters of cinders and ashes that picture dark days, when these bright, snowy mountains were clouded in smoke, and riveted and laked with living fire. A fearful, black, when these Sierras flowed lava to the sea. What horizons of flame; what atmospheres of ashes and smoke!
TWENTY HILL HOLLOW.

Music is one of the attributes of matter, into whatever forms it may be lawful or lawful. Drops and sprays of air are specialized, and made to splash and churn in the bosom of a lark, as infinitesimal portions of air plash and sing about the angles and hollows of sand-grains, as perfectly composed and predestined as the rejoicing anthems of worlds; but our senses are not fine enough to catch the tones. Fancy the waving, pulsing melody of the vast flower congregations of the Hollow flowing from myriad voices of tuned petal and pistil, and heaps of sculptured pollen. Scarce one note is for us; nevertheless, God be thanked for this blessed instrument hid beneath the feathers of a lark.

The eagle does not dwell in the Hollow; he only floats there to hunt the long-eared hare. One day I saw a fine specimen alight upon a hill-side. I was at first puzzled to know what power could fetch the sky-king down into the grass with the larks. Watching him attentively, I soon discovered the cause of his carthiness. The hare of his choice stood erect at the door of his burrow, staring his winged brother full in the face. They were about ten feet apart. Should the eagle attempt to snatch his bread, it would instantly disappear. Should long-eared, tired of inaction, seek, seek, seek! His body was eighteen inches, from nose-tip to tail. His great ears measured six and a half inches in length and two in width. His ears—which, notwithstanding their great size, he wears gracefully and becomingly—have procured the homely nickname by which he is commonly known, of "Jackass hare." Hares are very abundant over all the plain and up in the sunny, lightly wooded foot-hills, but their range does not extend into the close pine-forests.

Coyotes, or California wolves, are occasionally seen gliding about the Hollow; but they are not numerous, vast numbers having been slain by the traps and poisons of sheep-raisers. The coyote is about the size of a small shepherd-dog; beautiful, and graceful in motion, with erect ears, and a bushy tail, like a fox. Inasmuch as he is fond of mutton, he is cordially detested by "sheepmen" and nearly all cultured people.

The ground-squirrel is the most common animal of the Hollow. In several hills there is a soft stratum, in which they have tunneled their homes. It is interesting to observe these rodent towns in time of alarm. Their one circular street resounds with sharp, lancin outcries of, "Seekit, seek, seek, seekit!" Near neighbors, peeping cautiously half out-of-doors, engage in low, purring chat. Others, bolt upright on the door-sill or on the rock above, shout excitedly, as if giving orders or intelligence of the motions and aspects of the enemy. Like the wolf, this little animal is accursed, because of his relish for grain. Vity that Nature should have made so many small mouths palated like our own! All the seasons of the Hollow are warm and bright, and flowers bloom throughout the whole year. But the grand commencement of the annual genesis of plant and insect-life is governed by the setting in of the rains, in December or January. The air, hot and opaque, is washed and cooled. Plant-seeds, which for six months have lain on the ground...
The weather grows in beauty, like a flower. Its roots are in the ground, and the rains quickly develop day-clusters a week or two in size, divided and shaded in foliage of clouds; or round hours of ripe sunshine wave and spray in sky-shadow, like racemes of berries half hidden in leaves.

These months of so-called rainy season are not filled with rain. Nowhere else in North America, perhaps in the world, are Januarys so balmed and edged with vital sunlight. Referring to my notes of 1868 and 1869, I find that the first heavy general rain of the season fell on the 18th of December. January yielded to the Hollow, during the day, only twenty hours of rain, which was divided among six rainy days. February had only three days on which rain fell, amounting to eighteen and one-half hours in all. March had five rainy days. April had three, yielding seven hours of rain. May also had three wet days, yielding nine hours of rain; and completed the so-called rainy season for that year, which is probably about an average one. It must be remembered that this rain record has nothing to do with what fell in the night.

The ordinary rain-storm of this region has little of that outward pomp and sublimity of structure so characteristic of the storms of the Mississippi Valley. Nevertheless, we have experienced rainstorms out on these treeless plains, in nights of solid darkness, as impressively sublime as the noblest storms of the mountains. The wind, which in settled weather blows from the north-west, veers to the south-east; the sky curdles gradually and evenly to a graceless, seamless cloud, and then comes the rain, steadily and moderately, but often driven slant by a strong wind. In 1869, more than three-fourths of the winter rains came from the south-east. One magnificent storm from the north-west occurred on the 21st of March. An immense, round-browed cloud came sailing over the flowery hills in most imposing majesty, bowling water as from a sea. The rain-gush lasted about one minute; but was the most magnificent catacatact of the sky-mountains that I ever beheld. A portion of calm sky toward the Sierras was brushed with thin, white cloud-tissue, upon which the rain-torrent showed to a great height: a cloud water-fall, which, like those of Yosemite, was neither spray, nor solid water. In the same year the cloudiness of January, omitting rainy days, averaged 0.32; February, 0.13; March, 0.20; April, 0.10; May, 0.08.

The greater portion of this cloudiness was gathered into a few days, leaving the others blocks of solid, universal sunshine in every chink and pore.

At the end of January, four plants were in flower: a small white cress, growing in large patches; a low-set, umbel-planted, yellow flowers; an Erigenum, with flowers in leafless spangles, and a small borage. Five or six flowers had adjusted their hoods, and were in the prime of life. In February, squires, hares, and flowers were in springtime joy. Bright plant-constellations and carnations shone everywhere about the Hollow. Ants were getting ready for work by rubbing and sunning their limbs upon the husk-piles around their doors. Fat and pollen-dusted "burly, dozing bumblebees" were rumbling among the flowers; and spiders were busy mending up old webs or weaving new ones. Flowers were born every day, and came gushing from the ground like gayly dressed children from a church. The bright air became daily more songful with fly-whispers, and sweeter with breath of plants. In walking the Hollow at this season, one sees, or thinks he sees, many doubtful motions at the tops of holes—uncertain twinklings—which proceed from field-crickets, as they leap to their chambers, and a small, bright-polished lizard, nicknamed "the go-quick."

In March, plant-life is more than doubled. The little, pioneer cress, by this time, goes to seed, wearing daintily embroidered silences. Several Claytonias appear; also, a large, white Lepidopetron, and two Nemophilas. A small Plantago becomes tall enough to wave and show silky ripples of shade. Toward the end of this month or the beginning of April, plant-life is at its greatest height. Few have any just conception of its amazing richness. Count the flowers of any portion of these twenty hills, or of the bottom of the Hollow, among the streams: you will find that there are from one to ten thousand upon every square yard, counting the heads of Composites as single flowers. Yellow Composite form, by far, the greater portion of this goldy-way. Well may the sun feed them with his richest light, for these shining sunlets are his very children—rays of his ray, beams of his beam! One would fancy that these California days receive more gold from the ground than they give to it. The earth has indeed become a sky; and the two cloudless skies, roving toward each other flower-beams and sunbeams, are fused and conglomiated into one glowing heaven. By the end of April most of the Hollow plants have ripened their seeds and died; but, undecayed, still assist the landscape with color from persistent involucres and corolla-like heads of chaffy scales.

In May, only a few deep-set lilies and Erigenums are left alive. June, July, August, and September are the season of plant-rest; followed, in October, by a most extraordinary outgush of plant-life, at the very driest time of the whole year. A small, unobtrusive plant, from six inches to three feet in height, with pale, glandular leaves, suddenly bursts into bloom, in patches miles in extent, like a resurrection of the gold of April. I have counted upward of 3,000 heads upon one plant. Both leaves and pedicles are so small as to be nearly invisible among so vast a number of daisy golden-heads, that seem to keep their places unsuppressed, like stars in the sky. The heads are about five-eighths of an inch in diameter; rays and disk-flowers, yellow; stamens; purple. The rays have a rich, furred appearance, like the petals of garden pansies. The prevailing summer wind makes all the heads turn to the south-east. The waxy secretion of its leaves and involucres has suggested its grim name of tarweed, by which it is generally known. In our estimation, it is the most delightful member of the whole composite family of the plain. It remains in flower until November, uniting with an Erigenum that continues the floral chain across December to the spring plants of January. Thus, although nearly all of the year's plant-life is crowded into February, March, and April, the flower circle around the Twenty Hill Hollow is never broken.

The Hollow may easily be visited by tourists en route for Yosemite, as it is distant only about six miles from Snelling's. It is at all seasons interesting to the naturalist; but it has little that would interest the majority of tourists earlier than January or later than April. If you wish to see how much of light, life, and joy can be got into a January, go to this blessed Hollow. If you wish to see a plant-resurrection—myriads of bright flowers crowding from the ground, like souls to a judgment—go to Twenty Hills in February. If you are travelling for health, play truant to doctors and
friends, fill your pocket with biscuits, and hide in the hills of the Hollow, lave in its waters, tan in its golds, bask in its flower-shine, and your baptisms will make you a new creature indeed. Or, choked in the sediments of society, so tired of the world, here will your hard doubts disappear, your carnal incrustations melt off, and your soul breathe deep and free in God's shoreless atmosphere of beauty and love.

Never shall I forget my baptism in this font. It happened in January: a resurrection-day for many a plant and for me. I suddenly found myself on one of its hills; the Hollow overflowed with light, as a fountain, and only small, sunless nooks were kept for mosseries and ferneries. Hollow Creek spangled and mazed like a river. The ground steamed with fragrance. Light, of unspeakable richness, was brooding the flowers. Truly, said I, is California the Golden State—in metallic gold, in sun gold, and in plant gold. The sunshine for a whole summer seemed condensed into the chambers of that one glowing day.

Every trace of dimness had been washed from the sky; the mountains were dusted and wiped clean with clouds—Pacheco Peak and Monte Diablo, and the waved blue wall between; the grand Sierras stood along the plain, colored in four horizontal bands—the lowest, rose purple; the next higher, dark purple; the next, blue—and, above all, the white row of summits pointing to the heavens.

It may be asked, What have mountains fifty or a hundred miles away to do with Twenty Hill Hollow? To wild people, these mountains are not a hundred miles away. Their spiritual power and the goodness of the sky make them near, as a circle of friends. They rise as a portion of the hilled walls of the Hollow. You can not feel yourself out-of-doors; plain, sky, and mountains ray beauty which you feel. You bathe in these spirit-beams, turning round and round, as if warming at a camp-fire. Presently you lose consciousness of your own separate existence: you blend with the landscape, and become part and parcel of Nature.

TIMMS' STRATEGY.

MAPES was chivalrous by nature; he believed in "seeking the bubble reputation, even in the cannon's mouth." His enthusiasm was aroused by the recital of stories of deeds of desperate daring; while he had nothing but contempt for even success won by crooked and indirect means. Timms, on the contrary, believed there was policy in war, and that the end justified the means, particularly if the end was attained. Companions from infancy, their lives had been spent in competition for scholastic and such other honors as the locality afforded, without even a momentary break in their friendship. But now, in early manhood, they struggled for a prize of incalculable value, with an ardor that threatened a complete rupture of friendly relations. The heart and hand of Eliza Reed, the neighborhood belle, were to be won; and to these none others might aspire, in the face of such formidable competition as that of Mapes and Timms. They alone—each by virtue of his own personality and position—had a right to lay siege to the heart of that variable, irritable, imperious beauty, and for months the strife between them had gone on. Each one had called into play all his personal and social resources; for the local society had taken such an interest that it was divided into two factions, known as the