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ALASKA COAST SCENERY.

Sailing Among the Islands---Delightful Views.

Wonderful Variety of Lovely Pictures.

Effects of Glaciation—An Archipelago of Evergreen Isles.

[SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE BULLETIN.]

FORT WRANGEL, Alaska, Sept. 25, 1879.

The trip from Victoria to Alaska among the islands, in the summer time, is perfectly delightful. Leaving scientific interests entirely out of the count, no excursion that I can think of may be made into any other portion of our vast country where so marvelous an abundance of fine scenery is so freely unfolded. Gazing from the deck of the steamer one is pushed smoothly and silently over the calm blue waters, on and on through the midst of islands clad with evergreens, that seem the freshest and finest on the face of the globe. The ordinary discomforts of a seavoyage are not felt at all, because nearly the whole long way to Sitka is on inland waters that are usually about as waveless as a mountain lake. It is as if a hundred Lake Tahoes were joined end to end and sown broadcast with islands, the shore-lines refined and bent in and out into curves still more beautiful; the forests planted thicker; long tapering vistas opened in every direction, and the bright sky softened and shaded with smooth pearly clouds. Day after day we seem to float in the very heart of true fairyland, each succeeding view seeming more and more beautiful, the one we chance to have before us the most surprisingly beautiful of all. I never before found myself embosomed in scenery that is so hopelessly beyond description. To sketch picturesque bits definitely bounded, is comparatively an easy matter. A lake in the woods, a glacier meadow, or cascade in its dell; or even one grand masterview of mountains beheld from some clear outlook, after climbing from height to height, up through the veiling woods. These may be attempted, and some picture more or less telling made of them. For in them one finds definite aim—a beginning-ground, on which to commence making efforts with hope of getting done. But in these coast landscapes there is such indefinite expansiveness, such a multitude of features, without any redundancy that may be slighted or left out; and these features are so varied, and at the same time similar, their lines graduating delicately into one another in endless succession, while the whole is so fine, so tender, so ethereal, any pen work upon it seems coarse and unavailing. Tracing its shining ways through fiord and sound, past forest and waterfall, island and mountain and far azure headland, it seems as if surely we must at length reach the very paradise of the poets—the abode of the blessed. Yet what more divine may there be to be wished for.

Some guess of its riches may be made from the fact that the coast line of Alaska is 26,000 miles long, while that of all the rest of the United States is only about 10,000 miles. And that in the grand Alexander Archipelago, stretching between Dixon Entrance and Cross Sound, there are 1,100 islands.

Hinting what we can about it all in a general way, we may regard it as an intricate web of embroidery, sixty or seventy miles wide—fine spun coast lace trimming the rugged mountain-laden Continent from Puget Sound to the ice about the pole. Some would say that it is all one grand monotone of beauty, but it is not. The general type—the pattern—is the same throughout, but no two views are alike. Here you glide into a narrow channel, hemmed in with mountains, forested down to the water's edge. There is no distant view, and your attention is pushed back to the object close about you—the crowded spires of the spruces rising higher and higher on the steep green slopes; gaps of paler green where winter avalanches have cleared away the trees; retreating hollows, the fountains of ancient glaciers, with lingering snowbanks in the shadows, and zigzags of cascades disappearing in the forest; short steep glens, with brawling streams hidden beneath alder and dogwood, seen only where they emerge on the brown algae of the shore, or from sheer mossy cliffs. Perchance a few ducks shoot past overhead, or a bald eagle may be seen leisurely pluming on the top of a dead spar, or a coon heard uttering his intensely lonely cry. All this is pure wildness, as closely shut in, and withdrawn as a glacier lake on the summit of the Sierra.

In the meanwhile the steamer is often so near the shore you may distinctly see the purple cones clustered on the tops of the trees, and the ferns and mosses at their feet. But new scenes are brought to view with magical rapidity. Rounding some bossy cape, the eye is called away into far-reaching vistas, bounded by finely curved headlands in charming array, one dipping gracefully beyond the other, and growing fainter and more ethereal in the distance. The bright, tranquil channel stretches river-like between, stirred here and there by the flash of leaping salmon that rise a foot or two above the water like vivid jets of silver, and by flocks of white gulls floating like lilies among the sun-spangles, while the mellow-tempered sunshine, pouring over all, blends sky, land and water in pale misty blue. Then, while you are gazing with strange, dreamy longings into the depths of this lovely ocean lane, the steamer, turning into some passage not visible until the moment of entering it, glides through into a wide expanse—a sound filled with islands, sprinkled or clustered in forms and compositions such as only God could invent. Some sheer-faced, plunging deep into the blue prairie, others rounding off in fine convex brows, or with hollow curves terminating in long level points tipped with sedge. Some are so small the trees growing on them seem like single handfuls culled from the neighboring woods and set in the water to keep them fresh, while here and there at wide intervals you may notice a bare rock just above the water—a black dot, punctuating the end of a full outswelling sentence of islands, every word of which is reflected in the mirror water, form and meaning doubled.

EFFECTS OF GLACIATION.

The variety we find, both as to the contours and the collocation of the land masses, is due chiefly to differences in the structure and composition of the rocks out of which they are made, and the unequal amount of glaciation different portions of the landscape have received; some sections having been profoundly influenced by the influx of large steeply-inclined glaciers from the mountains of the mainland. Especially heavy was this influence towards the end of the Glacial Period, when the main ice-sheet, flowing parallel with the coast, was beginning to fail, allowing the local land-ice from the mountains to push its way farther out to sea. And again, the higher of the mountains of the islands nourished local glaciers, some of them of considerable size, which sculptured their summits and sides quite deeply, in some cases making wide shell-shaped amphitheatres at the top, with canyons or valleys leading down from them into the sea. These causes produced much of the obscuring variety of which nature is so fond, but none the less will the studious observer see the underlying harmony—the general trend of the islands in the direction of the flow of the ice, parallel to the coast line where the main flow was but little influenced by local glaciers from the mainland, and in a direction oblique or at high angles to the shore line where the influence of those local glaciers was greatest. Furthermore, all the islands, great and small, as well as the headlands and promontories of the mainland, are seen to have a rounded, over-rubbed, sand-papered appearance, an exquisite finish free of angles, produced by the over-sweeping ice-flood during the appearance of glacial abundance. In these generalizations delicate, complying harmony is everywhere apparent.

The canals, channels, straits, passages, sounds, etc., are, of course, subordinate to the same forces as the land masses, and differ from them only in being portions of the one pre-glacial margin of the continent more deeply eroded, and therefore covered with the ocean waters, which flowed into them as the ice was melted out of them. Had the general glacial degradation been greatly less, then these ocean ways would have been valleys, and the islands rounded hills and ridges, forming landscapes with smooth, undulating features like those found above the sea-level wherever the rocks and glacial conditions were similar. In a general way these island-bound channels are like rivers, not only in separate reaches as seen from the deck of a vessel, but continuously so for hundreds of miles in the case of the longest of them; the tide-currents, the fresh drift-wood, the inflowing land-streams and luxuriant overleaning foliage of the banks making this resemblance all the more complete. But their courses are more direct than those of rivers, on account of the steadiness of the flow of the ice-sheet that eroded them. The impressions produced by the archipelagos are similar to those derived from wide lakes, however much diversified by the islands, and the water seems everywhere deep, never fretted away in shallow, dabbled pools. Some of the islands are continents in effect from any view to be had of them, save only on the map; but by far the greater number are small and appreciable as islands, hundreds of them less than a mile long, dotting the shining levels in everlasting beauty. These the eye easily takes in, and dwells upon them with ever fresh delight. In their relations to each other, the individual members of a group have evidently been derived from the same source—hewn from one rock mass; yet they never seem broken or abridged in any way as to their lines of contour, however abruptly they may dip their fronts. Viewed one by one, they seem detached beauties, like extracts from a fine poem, while from the completeness of their lines and the way that their trees are put on, each seems a finished stanza in itself. Contemplating the arrangement of the trees, a distinct impression is produced of their having been sorted and harmonized as to size and correlation like a well-balanced bouquet. In some of the smaller tufted islets, a group of tapering spruces are planted in the middle, and two smaller groups that evidently correspond with each other are planted on the ends at about equal distances from the central group. Or the whole appears as one group, with marked fringing trees that match each other spreading around the outside, like flowers leaning out against the rim of a vase. These relations to harmony are so constant in the island woods, they evidently are the result of design, as much so as the arrangement of the feathers of a bird.

Thus perfectly beautiful are these blessed evergreen islands, and their beauty is all the beauty of youth. For though the freshness of their verdure must be attributed to the copious moisture with which they are bathed from the warm ocean river that comes to them from the sunny fountains of Japan, this portion of the Japan current is itself young; while the very existence of the islands, their features, finish and peculiar distribution are all immediately referable to the creative action of the ice during the great winter just now come to a close.

JOHN MUIR.