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John Muir

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YOSEMITE VALLEY.

Beauties of the Landscape in Early Summer.

Late Changes in the Valley—Lack of Plan—a Serious Impediment to Improvement—John Muir’s Views.

YOSEMITE VALLEY, June 21, 1889.

A stream of fine, hearty, enthusiastic people is now pouring into Yosemite Valley, coming from far and near, over land and sea, to see the new and reviving beauty, rising up the bright slopes of the mountains from ridge to ridge in glad exclamation through the noblest forests in the world, and descending through clouds of dust, poplars, and cottonwoods into the noblest assemblage of mountain rocks and waterfalls.

This current of travel, taking its rise in all the higher nations of the world, loses nothing of its first eager love and enthusiasm as the years go by, and this great throbbing heart of the Sierra becomes more accessible and better known. Like other streams, it has its floods and droughts, now low and straggling like the Sierra rivers in autumn, now hurrying and crowding like an avalanche, overflowing the hotels and trails and roads, stirring the wilderness with its noisy rush, in striking contrast with the majestic calm and deliberation of nature.

It is now some thirty years or more since the regular Yosemite pleasure travel began, consisting at first of a few adventurous parties that traced the obscure trails across rocky ridges and roaring, bridgeless streams, picketing their animals and camping where night overtook them, the arm of pure wildness making the rough places smooth, and covering up every inconvenience and danger encountered by the way. This year more than a thousand visitors have already registered at the Man House, and campers, mostly from the hot plains of the San Joaquin and Sacramento, are beginning to come in, whole families together, bringing tents, bedding, provisions, etc., in stout spring wagons, well prepared for long, good times.

Probably from 4,000 to 5,000 people will enter the valley this season, about one-fourth or more of them campers.

THE COMING THOUSANDS.

But this is still the day of small things, bill all as compared with the numbers that will come in future years, and as compared with the store of mountain wealth that Nature offers here to every honest seeker. The first accounts of the wonders of Yosemite Valley and the big sequoias, repeated over and over again in the newspapers, soon grew stale and wearisome to mere readers, causing many to guess that interest in them must at length fail and die like some mere fashion of restless sight-seers. But the wonders of this valley have never been told. They are unspeakable. Each must come and see for himself; and countless thousands yet unborn will come and see. For love of the beauty of pure wildness is ever welling up in the human heart, like unfailing mountain fountains, to endure and become more profound so long as man continues to aspire and grow.

The snowfall on the fountains of the streams was light last winter, and, therefore, the grand flood-time of the falls is already past; but there are still other fountains to be visited, holding the admiring attention of the throng of eager visitors. Floods of sunshine pour down over the gray and purple domes, while magnificent mountains of cumulus, with smooth, pearly bosses, are built above them during the mid-day hours, mountain over mountain, dome over dome, showing Nature ever at work, adding beauty to beauty, putting on new robes of leaf and cloud and sunshine every day.
Most of the vegetation on the floor of the valley, now in its prime, is new life and joy. The water-ozen sings along the river, and a lithe and nimble fish play among its reeds and bulrushes. The meadows, all putting forth their new leaves and blossoms, are colored bright and yellow, as if the leaves were bursting into bloom. The grasses, trees, and flowers are woven into lace-work of marvelously beautiful designs. Glorious basins of water, however they may vary in volume, singing loud or low, in sheets of lace or diamond showers, are a never-ending source of delight to the eye and mind. The forests, rock and snow and glad, rejoicing water, each in their own way and season, are a never-ending beauty in the lives, seeing God's wild beauty displayed in characters they will not forget, but will carry to the grave.

At no time of the year can a visit to the valley be in any fair sense a failure. The ever-changing, ever-changing, and mellow-colored autumn, while the gales of winter and snow are melting from the banks of the river in its borders of meadows and fields and trails to Glacier Point, many a linnet in the groves.

As far as the eye can see, the snow is melting, and the birds are then building their nests. The sound of the streams descends in the form of beautiful cascades and falls, however they may vary in volume, singing loud or low, in sheets of lace or diamond showers, as well as in thundering avalanches of snow. Add to this, they never cease to be beautiful.

The meadows flooded. The spring rains, the meadows flooded more or less, and covered with mirrors that give marvellous reflections of the mighty walls. Then, too, the streams are melting snow covering all their basins. The birds are then building their nests and singing songs, and flowers are coming to the sunshine. In summer the trees affect a labor of love in the form of blossoms and leaves, and flowers are coming to the sunshine. In summer the streams descend in the form of beautiful cascades and falls. The river is foaming shining lace or diamond showers, as well as in thundering avalanches of snow. Add to this, they never cease to be beautiful.

Changes in the valley.

In general views from Inspiration Point, or from any other commanding outlook on the river, there is almost no appreciable change since my first visit twenty years ago, excepting a scar on the south wall, made at the time of the Yurok avalanche. The Responsible Commissioner has been instructed to take charge of the river valley. Many handsome and substantial bridges have been built in telling evidence of the enormous amount of the river pouring its crystal floods through the valley. Many hands have been opened here and there through the trees and underbrush, greatly to the benefit of those who may be too weak or too old to enjoy the beauty of nature. And, in general, all the many changes that have been made in the valley have been for the better. Good roads and trails have been made by the Commission, and the keeping of the valley, or have been purposed, affording easy ways to Glacier Veil and Cathedral Rocks and El Capitan, to the grand outlooks and the sendings of willow and oak, every color showed in the thick, lazy sunshine of Indian summer.

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Changes in the valley.
TOO MUCH IMPROVEMENT.

Miles of fences have been built around hay-fields and patches of kitchen vegetable that have taken the places of the wild lily and rose gardens; and hundreds of horses have been allowed to run loose over the unfenced portion of the valley year after year until in many places it looks like a dusty, exhausted wayside pasture. The trouble seems to be not so much a lack of interest in the welfare of the valley as a want of a general, definite plan of action, with reference to so-called improvements and conveniences. The Commissioners ever being changed, and without any general plan of the grounds before them, work on each in his own way until gradually all the more delicate and destructible of the charms of the valley are being marred or destroyed.

If one master landscape gardener were employed to lay out the grounds, not with reference to the production of hay and provisions, which surely may better be brought in from farms outside the valley, nor to the making of an artificial park, but to bring to light and make available the natural beauties of the place, as they already exist in such marvelous and inimitable perfection, then with such a plan before them succeeding Commissions might work toward a common harmonious end, without danger of one marring or abolishing the work of another.

THE VALLEY AT PRESENT.

At present the valley is like a grand hall, its walls covered with fine paintings and perfect in every way, and the floor covered with a beautiful carpet, but torn and dusty in some spots, and strewn with unsightly litter. The stench of a certain pig sty rises to the top of the domes at least, and a train of cars might be loaded with tin cans and other kitchen-midden rubbish, lying exposed in this pleasure ground of the world where everyone may see it, as if like precious silverware it were exposed for sale. But all this sooner or later will no doubt be removed. The Commissioners, I am told, have determined at their last meeting held here the other day to abolish most of the fences in the valley, and prohibit the turning loose of horses and cattle.

Another good thing they have done in
choosing Galen Clark, the old, pioneer as guardian. Mr. Clark knows the valley well, and loves it well, and will do all in his power to preserve what remains of the natural flora of the valley. Fortunately most of it still remains, though in a badly trampled and mutilated condition. The most serious and irreparable portion of the damage done so far has been the cutting down of grand old oaks and pines that required centuries of growth and cannot be replaced.

Millions of sheep have already swept most of the herbaceous vegetation of the Sierra out of existence. Not one of all the accessible wild gardens in the southern and middle sections of the range has been spared. And where now shall we look for illustrations of our mountain flora if not in Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees, under the special protection of the State.

JOHN MUIR.