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John Muir

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Our Towering Peaks and Deep Abysses.

BY JOHN MUIR.

California is rich in mountains. They rise in glorious array all around her borders, forming a long, nest-like oval, and offer grand and picturesque scenery in endless variety.

At first sight, such is the massive simplicity of the topography, the State seems to have only one valley—the grand central plain hemmed in by the coast mountains and the Sierra. But with this apparent simplicity there is great complexity of hidden detail. The Coast Range, like a forest-crowned barrier rising against the ocean, has innumerable spurs, ridges and valleys, some looking out through long vistas to the sea, others in the great central plain, and yet a thousand others enshrouded in small hills, each with its own climate, soil and productions. But all this is only the border land. When the traveler, making his way inland through the maze of coast landscape, at length, now on the summit of one of the passes or inner peaks opposite San Francisco, the grand and vast view before him is outspread before him. At his feet, extending to right and left, far as the eye can reach, lies the grand central plain, one smooth, continuous bed of fertile, foodful soil, forty miles wide, 400 long, bounded by the white Sierra on the east, the coast mountains on the west, while these two ranges curve around and enclose it on the north and south, making a basin, whose only outlet to the sea is through the bay of San Francisco and the Golden Gate.

The Sierra is nearly 500 miles long, 150 wide, and from 2,000 to nearly 10,000 feet high. Mount Shasta, a colossal volcanic cone 14,440 feet high, stands guard at the north end of the range, Mount Whitney, several hundred feet higher, at the other, while innumerable peaks of intermediate height are scattered all along the coast. In the clear springtime from your commanding standpoint on the Coast Range you see a pearly belt of snow along the summit and extending a good way down. Then a belt of high and dark purple marking the existence of the forests where hostel the silver, fir, giant sequoia, sugar, pine, etc., the noblest conifers in the world, and along the base of the range a belt of rose purple where lie the miners' gold. But you see nothing to suggest the wonderful depth and grandeur of the scenery. None of the dimpled peaks mentioned in glowing array so high in the sky seem comparatively smooth and featureless. Nevertheless some statuesque glaciers lie hidden there and many Yosemite valleys with their lofty domes and waterfalls and wealth of architecture, and the whole range of both peaks is formed by erasures of tremendous rocks in which once stood majestic glaciers and in which now flow and sing the bright Sierra Fivers.

Dread pines, stunted and covered, lie buried at the top of the range, sunny palms and orange groves laden with fruit flourish at the foot of it.

Martinez, January 29th.

1. Photograph Dept., First Church. 2. Photographed by H. X. Sall. 3. San Francisco Chronicle. 4. Photographed by Mr. H. X. Sall. 5. Photographed by Mr. P. 6. Photographed by Mr. P. 7. Photographed by Mr. P.