A Wind-storm in the Forests.

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Editor

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JOHN MUIR

(1836–)

JOHN MUIR, an explorer and naturalist, whose field of work has been particularly the western and northwestern mountain regions of America,—where at least one great glacier now bears his name,—was born at Dunbar, Scotland, in 1836. With his parents and a large flock of brothers and sisters, he came to the United States in 1850, after some good common-schooling in Dunbar. He began his study of nature in the region near Fort Winnebago, Wisconsin, with an ever increasing interest and delight in whatever belongs to the world of creatures, plants, and stones, particularly in the waving solitudes of forests and rock-and-snow tracts of the northwestern Sierras.

Muir’s freedom to devote himself to a life of observation and record was delayed: and in the story of his years of manual work as a farmer, mechanic, lumberman, sheep-herder, and what not besides, there comes surprise at his power to find time and energy for other pursuits in the nature of an avocation; and with the surprise we have a sense of pleasure that a man of untiring muscles and mind could win free of all that checked his natural preferences. He studied grammar and mathematics while a farm hand, and read through a library of books when in the fields. He earned enough as a young man to give himself four years of special scientific study in the University of Wisconsin. Then began an independent life, in which he alternated seasons of hard work, wholly or much alone; partly through the circumstances of his wanderings, partly by his own choice. It is said that during ten years of mountaineering in the remoter Sierras, he met no men except one band of Mono tribesmen.

For some ten summers and winters prior to 1876, Mr. Muir was settled near the Yosemite district. In the year named he became a member of the Geodetic Survey of the Great Basin, and attempted much botanical work. During 1879, and subsequently, after he reached Alaska, he explored and charted its vast mountain ranges, discovered
Glacier Bay and the Muir Glacier system; and with that expedition and
the two succeeding tours he became the foremost authority on Alas-
ka’s geologic and other natural aspects. He also visited the Yukon
and Mackenzie Rivers, and traversed the cañon country of California.
He was of the party on board the Corwin in 1881, sent out to trace
the lost Jeannette, which enterprise added largely to his sketches
and notes for scientific use. Since 1879, the year of his marriage,
Mr. Muir has had his home in California; but to find him in it at
other than a given time, is somewhat an accident, so indefatigable
is his industry as a naturalist. He is as ready to-day for an alpine
excursion of weeks or months as in the early period of a naturalistic
career exceptionally arduous and fruitful.

Mr. Muir has written much less than his explorations would
suggest; but as a contributor to the highest class of American and
foreign periodicals, and the author of volumes dealing with his ex-
periences, impressions, and discoveries, he is a writer of distinct and
unusual individuality. He is less a man of letters in his manner than
he is the direct, graphic, and sincere observer, whose aim is to write
down simply what he sees or feels, to put the reader in the quickest
and closest touch with a topic or a scene. But the simplicity and
personal effect of his style give it a peculiar vigor and eloquence.
He has been spoken of as a naturalist whose observations “have the
force of mathematical demonstration.” In the study of glacial con-
ditions, botanic life, the fauna of the Northwest, and kindred subjects,
he is reckoned a specialist by the first scientists of the day; and his
personal traits have won him the esteem of the army of scientists
who have visited the Western country where he lives and works.
His most popular volume, “The Mountains of California,” promises
to become a classic; his editorial contributions in Picturesque Cal-
ifornia are thoroughly effective; and he has won wide favor through
descriptive pages, splendid for spontaneous and vivid prose pictures
of great scenery,—studies of the wind’s movement of a pine forest,
or a delicate flower of California, or a wild-bird’s lonely nest.

A WIND-STORM IN THE FORESTS

From “The Mountains of California.” Copyright 1894, by The Century
Company

The mountain winds, like the dew and rain, sunshine and snow,
are measured and bestowed with love on the forests, to
develop their strength and beauty. However restricted the
scope of other forest influences, that of the winds is universal.
The snow bends and trims the upper forests every winter, the
lightning strikes a single tree here and there, while avalanches
now down thousands at a swoop as a gardener trims out a bed
of flowers. But the winds go to every tree, fingerling every leaf
and branch and furrowed bole; not one is forgotten: the Moun-
tain Pine towering with outsretched arms on the rugged butt-
tresses of the icy peaks, the lowliest and most retiring tenant of
the dells,—they seek and find them all, caressing them tenderly,
bending them in lusty exercise, stimulating their growth, pluck-
ing off a leaf or limb as required, or removing an entire tree or
grove, now whispering and cooing through the branches like a
sleepy child, now roaring like the ocean; the winds blessing the
forests, the forests the winds, with ineffable beauty and harmony
as the sure result.

After one has seen pines six feet in diameter bending like
grasses before a mountain gale, and ever and anon some giant
falling with a crash that shakes the hills, it seems astonishing
that any, save the lowest thick-set trees, could ever have found
a period sufficiently stormless to establish themselves; or once
established, that they should not sooner or later have been blown
down. But when the storm is over, and we behold the same
forests tranquil again, towering fresh and unscathed in erect
majesty, and consider what centuries of storms have fallen upon
them since they were first planted: hail, to break the tender
seedlings; lightning, to shatter; snow, winds, and
avalanches, to crush and overwhelm,—while the manifest result
of all this wild storm-culture is the glorious perfection we behold:
then faith in Nature’s forestry is established, and we cease to
deplore the violence of her most destructive gales, or of any
other storm implement whatsoever.

There are two trees in the Sierra forests that are never blown
down, so long as they continue in sound health. These are the
Juniper and the Dwarf Pine of the summit peaks. Their stiff,
crooked roots grip the storm-beaten ledges like eagles’ claws;
while their lithé, cord-like branches bend round compliantly,
offering but slight holds for winds, however violent. The other
alpine conifers—the Needle Pine, Mountain Pine, Two-leaved
Pine, and Hemlock Spruce—are never thinned out by this
agent to any destructive extent, on account of their admirable
toughness and the closeness of their growth. In general the
same is true of the giants of the lower zones. The kinglty Sugar
Pine, towering aloft to a height of more than two hundred feet,
offers a fine mark to storm-winds; but it is not densely foliaged, and its long horizontal arms swing round complacently in the blast, like tresses of green, fluent algae in a brook: while the Silver Firs in most places keep their ranks well together in united strength.

The Yellow or Silver Pine is more frequently overturned than any other tree on the Sierra, because its leaves and branches form a larger mass in proportion to its height; while in many places it is planted sparsely, leaving open lanes through which storms may enter with full force. Furthermore, because it is distributed along the lower portion of the range, which was the first to be left bare on the breaking up of the ice-sheet at the close of the glacial winter, the soil it is growing upon has been longer exposed to post-glacial weathering, and consequently is in a more crumbling, decayed condition than the fresher soils farther up the range, and therefore offers a less secure anchorage for the roots. While exploring the forest zones of Mount Shasta, I discovered the path of a hurricane strewn with thousands of pines of this species. Great and small had been uprooted or wrecked off by sheer force, making a clean gap, like that made by a snow avalanche. But hurricanes capable of doing this class of work are rare in the Sierra; and when we have explored the forests from one extremity of the range to the other, we are compelled to believe that they are the most beautiful on the face of the earth, however we may regard the agents that have made them so.

There is always something deeply exciting, not only in the sounds of winds in the woods, which exert more or less influence over every mind, but in their varied water-like flow as manifested by the movements of the trees, especially those of the conifers. By no other trees are they rendered so extensively and impressively visible; not even by the lordly tropic palms or tree-ferns responsive to the gentlest breeze. The waving of a forest of the giant Sequoias is indescribably impressive and sublime; but the pines seem to me the best interpreters of winds. They are mighty waving golden-rods, ever in tune, singing and writing wind-music all their long century lives. Little, however, of this noble tree-waving and tree-music will you see or hear in the strictly alpine portion of the forests. The burly Juniper, whose girth sometimes more than equals its height, is about as rigid as the rocks on which it grows. The slender lash-like sprays of the

Dwarf Pine stream out in wavering ripples, but the tallest and slenderest are far too unyielding to wave even in the heaviest gales. They only shake in quick, short vibrations. The Hemlock Spruce, however, and the Mountain Pine, and some of the tallest thickets of the Two-leaved species, bow in storms with considerable scope and gracefulness. But it is only in the lower and middle zones that the meeting of winds and woods is to be seen in all its grandeur.

One of the most beautiful and exhilarating storms I ever enjoyed in the Sierra occurred in December 1874, when I happened to be exploring one of the tributary valleys of the Yuba River. The sky and the ground and the trees had been thoroughly rain-washed and were dry again. The day was intensely pure: one of those incomparable bits of California winter, warm and balmy and full of white sparkling sunshine, redolent of all the purest influences of the spring, and at the same time enlivened with one of the most bracing wind-storms conceivable. Instead of camping out, as I usually do, I then chanced to be stopping at the house of a friend. But when the storm began to sound, I lost no time in pushing out into the woods to enjoy it. For on such occasions Nature has always something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof.

It was still early morning when I found myself fairly adrift. Delicious sunshine came pouring over the hills, lighting the tops of the pines, and setting free a stream of summery fragrance that contrasted strangely with the wild tones of the storm. The air was mottled with pine-tassels and bright green plumes, that went flashing past in the sunlight like birds pursued. But there was not the slightest dustiness; nothing less pure than leaves, and ripe pollen, and flecks of withered bracken and moss. I heard trees falling for hours at the rate of one every two or three minutes: some uprooted, partly on account of the loose, water-soaked condition of the ground; others broken straight across, where some weakness caused by fire had determined the spot. The gestures of the various trees made a delightful study. Young Sugar Pines, light and feathery as squirrel-tails, were bowing almost to the ground; while the grand old patriarchs, whose massive boles had been tried in a hundred storms, waved solemnly above them, their long, arching branches streaming fluently on the gale, and every needle thrilling and ringing and
shedding off keen lances of light like a diamond. The Douglas Spruces, with long sprays drawn out in level tresses, and needles massed in a gray, shimmering glow, presented a most striking appearance as they stood in bold relief along the hilltops. The madroños in the dells, with their red bark and large glossy leaves tilted every way, reflected the sunshine in throbbing spangles like those one so often sees on the rippled surface of a glacier lake. But the Silver Pines were now the most impressively beautiful of all. Colossal spires two hundred feet in height waved like supple golden-rods chanting and bowing low as if in worship; while the whole mass of their long, tremulous foliage was kindled into one continuous blaze of white sun-fire. The force of the gale was such that the most steadfast monarch of them all rocked down to its roots, with a motion plainly perceptible when one leaned against it. Nature was holding high festival, and every fibre of the most rigid giants thrilled with glad excitement.

I drifted on through the midst of this passionate music and motion, across many a glen, from ridge to ridge; often halting in the lee of a rock for shelter, or to gaze and listen. Even when the grand anthem had swelled to its highest pitch, I could distinctly hear the varying tones of individual trees.—Spruce, and Fir, and Pine, and leafless Oak,—and even the infinitely gentle rustle of the withered grasses at my feet. Each was expressing itself in its own way,—singing its own song, and making its own peculiar gestures,—manifesting a richness of variety to be found in no other forest I have yet seen. The coniferous woods of Canada and the Carolinas and Florida are made up of trees that resemble one another about as nearly as blades of grass, and grow close together in much the same way. Coniferous trees, in general, seldom possess individual character, such as is manifest among Oaks and Elms. But the California forests are made up of a greater number of distinct species than any other in the world. And in them we find, not only a marked differentiation into special groups, but also a marked individuality in almost every tree, giving rise to storm effects indescribably glorious.

Toward midday, after a long, tingling scramble through copse of hazel and ceanothus, I gained the summit of the highest ridge in the neighborhood; and then it occurred to me that it would be a fine thing to climb one of the trees, to obtain a wider outlook and get my ear close to the Æolian music of its topmost needles. But under the circumstances the choice of a tree was a serious matter. One whose instep was not very strong seemed in danger of being blown down, or of being struck by others in case they should fall; another was branchless to a considerable height above the ground, and at the same time too large to be grasped with arms and legs in climbing; while others were not favorably situated for clear views. After cautiously casting about, I made choice of the tallest of a group of Douglas Spruces that were growing close together like a tuft of grass, no one of which seemed likely to fall unless all the rest fell with it. Though comparatively young, they were about a hundred feet high, and their lithe, brushy tops were rocking and swirling in wild ecstasy. Being accustomed to climb trees in making botanical studies, I experienced no difficulty in reaching the top of this one; and never before did I enjoy so noble an exhilaration of motion. The slender tops fairly flapped and swished in the passionate torrent, bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round, tracing indescribable combinations of vertical and horizontal curves, while I clung with muscles firm braced, like a bobolink on a reed.

In its widest sweeps my tree-top described an arc of from twenty to thirty degrees; but I felt sure of its elastic temper, having seen others of the same species still more severely tried —bent almost to the ground indeed, in heavy snows—without breaking a fibre. I was therefore safe, and free to take the wind into my pulses and enjoy the excited forest from my superb outlook. The view from here must be extremely beautiful in any weather. Now my eye roved over the piny hills and dales as over fields of waving grain, and felt the light running in ripples and broad swelling undulations across the valleys from ridge to ridge, as the shining foliage was stirred by corresponding waves of air. Oftentimes these waves of reflected light would break up suddenly into a kind of beaten foam, and again, after chasing one another in regular order, they would seem to bend forward in concentric curves, and disappear on some hillside, like sea waves on a shelving shore. The quantity of light reflected from the bent needles was so great as to make whole groves appear as if covered with snow, while the black shadows beneath the trees greatly enhanced the effect of the silvery splendor.

Excepting only the shadows, there was nothing sombre in all this wild sea of pines. On the contrary, notwithstanding this
was the winter season, the colors were remarkably beautiful. The shafts of the pine and libocedrus were brown and purple, and most of the foliage was well tinged with yellow; the laurel groves, with the pale under sides of their leaves turned upward, made masses of gray; and then there was many a dash of chocolate color from clumps of manzanita, and jet of vivid crimson from the bark of the madroños; while the ground on the hillsides, appearing here and there through openings between the groves, displayed masses of pale purple and brown.

The sounds of the storm corresponded gloriously with this wild exuberance of light and motion. The profound bass of the naked branches and boles booming like waterfalls; the quick, tense vibrations of the pine-needles, now rising to a shrill, whistling hiss, now falling to a silky murmur; the rustling of laurel groves in the dells, and the keen metallic click of leaf on leaf,—all this was heard in easy analysis when the attention was calmly bent.

The varied gestures of the multitude were seen to fine advantage, so that one could recognize the different species at a distance of several miles by this means alone, as well as by their forms and colors and the way they reflected the light. All seemed strong and comfortable, as if really enjoying the storm, while responding to its most enthusiastic greetings. We hear much nowadays concerning the universal struggle for existence, but no struggle in the common meaning of the word was manifest here; no recognition of danger by any tree; no depreciation: but rather an invincible gladness, as remote from exultation as from fear.

I kept my lofty perch for hours, frequently closing my eyes to enjoy the music by itself, or to feast quietly on the delicious fragrance that was streaming past. The fragrance of the woods was less marked than that produced during warm rain, when so many balsamic buds and leaves are steeped like tea; but from the chafing of resinous branches against each other, and the incessant attrition of myriads of needles, the gale was spiced to a very tonic degree. And besides the fragrance from these local sources, there were traces of scents brought from afar. For this wind came first from the sea, rubbing against its fresh, briny waves, then distilled through the redwoods, threading rich ferny gulches, and spreading itself, in broad undulating currents over many a flower-enamed ridge of the coast mountains, then across the

Winds are advertisements of all they touch, however much or little we may be able to read them; telling their wanderings even by their scents alone. Mariners detect the flowery perfume of land-winds far at sea, and sea-winds carry the fragrance of dulse and tangle far inland, where it is quickly recognized, though mingled with the scents of a thousand land-flowers. As an illustration of this, I may tell here that I breathed sea-air on the Firth of Forth, in Scotland, while a boy; then was taken to Wisconsin, where I remained nineteen years: then, without in all this time having breathed one breath of the sea, I walked quietly, alone, from the middle of the Mississippi Valley to the Gulf of Mexico, on a botanical excursion; and while in Florida, far from the coast, my attention wholly bent on the splendid tropical vegetation about me, I suddenly recognized a sea-breeze, as it came sifting through the palmettos and blooming vine-tangles, which at once awakened and set free a thousand dormant associations, and made me a boy again in Scotland, as if all the intervening years had been annihilated.

Most people like to look at mountain rivers, and bear them in mind; but few care to look at the winds, though far more beautiful and sublime, and though they become at times about as visible as flowing water. When the north winds in winter are making upward sweeps over the curving summits of the High Sierra, the fact is sometimes published with flying snow-banners a mile long. Those portions of the winds thus embodied can scarce be wholly invisible, even to the darkest imagination. And when we look around over an agitated forest, we may see something of the wind that stirs it, by its effects upon the trees. Yonder it descends in a rush of water-like ripples, and sweeps over the bending pines from hill to hill. Nearer, we see detached plumes and leaves, now speedling by on level currents, now whirling in eddies, or escaping over the edges of the whirls, soaring aloft on grand, upsweeling domes of air, or tossing on flame-like crests. Smooth, deep currents, cascades, falls, and swirling eddies, sing around every tree and leaf, and over all the varied topography of the region with telling changes of form, like mountain rivers conforming to the features of their channels.

After tracing the Sierra streams from their fountains to the plains, marking where they bloom white in falls, glide in crystal
plumes, surge gray and foam-filled in bowlder-choked gorges,
and slip through the woods in long, tranquil reaches—after thus
learning their language and forms in detail, we may at length
hear them chanting all together in one grand anthem, and com-
prehend them all in clear inner vision, covering the range like
lace. But even this spectacle is far less sublime and not a whit
more substantial than what we may behold of these storm-streams
of air in the mountain woods.

We all travel the Milky Way together, trees and men; but
it never occurred to me until this storm day, while swinging in
the wind, that trees are travelers, in the ordinary sense. They
make many journeys; not extensive ones, it is true; but our own
little journeys, away and back again, are only little more than
tree-wavings—many of them not so much.

When the storm began to abate, I dismounted and sauntered
down through the calming woods. The storm-tones died away,
and turning toward the east, I beheld the countless hosts of the
forests hushed and tranquil, towering above one another on the
slopes of the hills like a devout audience. The setting sun filled
them with amber light, and seemed to say, while they listened,
“My peace I give unto you.”

As I gazed on the impressive scene, all the so-called ruin of
the storm was forgotten; and never before did these noble woods
appear so fresh, so joyous, so immortal.