10-11-1897

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PATHLESS TREASURE FIELDS
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John Muir Writes of the Vast Country, Rich in
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There Is No Occasion for Seekers After Fortune to Rush Pell-Mell Into the Region of Snow and Ice, for Alaska, for
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By John Muir.

All the world is sprinkled with gold, but precious sparsely in most places. Nature, it seems, put just enough of the exciting stuff into the starry mass to keep people on the move. Most of that portion of it lying within reach of the miner in the two Americas is on the Pacific side, in the main mountain ranges. All the mountains from the Straits of Magellan to Alaska are gold-bearing and many mines in them have been worked for centuries and are still being worked. But the best of the discovered placers to the southward—the poor man’s mines—are apparently exhausted, therefore attention has been turned to the north. Most of the Yukon basin is covered with auriferous gravel, glacial drift, as it is called. But only where the gold it holds has been concentrated by the melting of streams still in existence or by those that have vanished with the glaciers is it rich enough to pay for working, whether on the plains at the base of the fountain mountains or in the hollows and valleys in their midst. El Dorados and bonanzas are becoming rather common nowadays for in the general mining revival in progress new ones, big or little, are being discovered every year. But they never lose their charm or lack a crowd. From King Solomon’s time to our own every fresh discovery has been followed by a wave of excitement, and the counting of the yellow ounces has been eagerly listened to by the industrious and lazy alike. Strange to say, the more remote and inaccessible the new mines, the richer they are thought to be and the more anxiously are they sought for.

Big, pathless, frozen Alaska is an ideal country for El Dorados. Unexplored countries are growing more scarce, but therefore the world has been listening with eager expectancy for gold news from the wild Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. For the last sixteen years or more hundreds of adventurous prospectors have been braving spring Alaska, making holes here and there along the more accessible streams; and when at length news of rich Klondyke came over the mountains many were ready to run to it. But would-be miners in this big Northland may better take their time in running, for as far as this exciting Klondyke spot is concerned, it is all open up, every auriferous inch of it. The news of its richness reached the Yukon miners long before it got across the mountains to newspaper readers, and they promptly forsook their claims on the other streams and rushed headlong day and night, with or without sufficient provisions, over hill and dale, brush and bog, to the new diggings. Therefore, except as showing what may possibly be found in other portions of the vast unprospected wilderness, the Klondyke should be regarded as ancient history, and no more to be depended on than the old washed out placers of California.

In courting fortune in Alaska one should go slow, count the cost, go into training and study mining like any other business. That there is no reason for killing, pell-mell haste is at once seen in the light of the experience of the three or four hundred of the bravest and most skillful prospectors that ever dared a wilderness. It took them more than fifteen years to discover this one very rich spot. Henceforth, of course, prospecting will be immensely encouraged and accelerated, but the vast extent of the territory and the difficulties to be encountered and the transportation of supplies, frozen, brushy, moss-covered ground, shortness of the prospecting season, etc., will keep the country wild—a poor man’s country—for many years to come. Under rare conditions fortunes have been made in new countries in almost every other business as well as mining; but these are the wide, wide exceptions, not the rule. Mining is mostly slow, dull, hard work. Strong, sober, wide-awake men, thousands of them, have been courting gold in the best wildernesses for over twenty years without making more of it than a grim, bare living. Nobody has a right to expect to get rich in Alaska on any other gold field on the globe without giving the best part of his life to the business. As far as these new Alaska mines are concerned it is stating the case moderately to say that no one unable or unwilling to stay and work faithfully and patiently in the frosty wilderness for at least ten years should venture there at all.
Less than one in a hundred now crowding into the territories from which the frozen placerers in a year or two will be successful. From the exciting glare of exceptionally yellow gravel and yellow quartz veins every right-minded man will turn his eyes away, for no matter how barren or lean that on which so many Alone the placer or quartz supply, it is said, will last another. That same year I heard of a party who said they had gone into the Yukon basin and flowed over it like a broad ocean current, gro wn a tremendous silt. But much of this work was done by streams that vanished with the glaciers in which their sources lay. And because of the superior richness of the deposits, but because they are far more extensive.

This placer was shirking and heedling from the sea which forms the eastern extension, is known as Cassiar, or rather the Cassiar, near the Yukon divide. The placerers on these streams were considered rich even by Californians, yielding at first from fifteen to twenty dollars per quarter; but they have said to have yielded at their best, millions. The whole region, like the Yukon basin, is under the glacial drift, and so deeply that there are but few spots even in the channels of the swiftest streams where the bedrock is exposed. When I visited this region in 1879 most of the miners were laboriously grinding the beds of streams, and their goods were wasted and almost entirely broken, as in fact they are, by the mechanical down-grinding of the ice sheet. And so it will be found in Alaska than in any other territory in the United States. Nature takes Nature will accept or reject what she finds.