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REMINISCENCES OF JOSEPH LE CONTE.

BY JOHN MUIR.

"BETYOND all wealth, honor, or even health, is the attachment we form to noble souls."

I have been one of Joseph Le Conte's innumerable friends and admirers for more than thirty years. It was in Yosemite Valley that I first met him, not far from the famous rock beneath the shadow of which he died. With a party of his students he was making his first excursion into the high Sierra, and it was delightful to see with what eager, joyful, youthful enthusiasm he reveled in the sublime beauty of the great Valley, and tried to learn how it was made. His fame had already reached me, though he had then been only a year or two in California, and, like everybody else, I was at once drawn to him by the charm of his manners, as to a fine lake or a mountain; and when he kindly invited me to join his party, of course I gladly left all my other work and followed him. This first Le Conte excursion, with its grand landscapes and weather and delightful campfire talks, though now far back in the days of auld lang syne, still remains in mind bright and indestructible, like glacial inscriptions on granite.
We left the Valley by the Coulterville trail, then, turning to the eastward, climbed in long, wavering curves and zigzags through the glorious forests of silver fir north of Yosemite, across the dome-paved basin of Yosemite Creek, along the southern slopes of Mt. Hoffmann, down into the bright, icy basin of Lake Tenaya, over the Merced and Tuolumne divide past a multitude of sublime glacial monuments, along many a mile of smooth, flowery meadows, up Mt. Dana, and down Bloody Canyon to the lake and gray plains and volcanoes of Mono. How the beloved Professor enjoyed all this his own story best tells. Sinewy, slender, erect, he studied the grand show, forgetting all else, riding with loose, dangling rein, allowing his horse to go as it liked. He had a fine poetic appreciation of nature, and never tired of gazing at the noble forests and gardens, lakes and meadows, mountains and streams, displayed along the windings of the trail, calling attention to this and that with buoyant, sparkling delight like that of a child, keeping up running all-day lectures, as if trying to be the tongue of every object in sight. On calm nights by the campfire he talked on the lessons of the day, blending art, science, and philosophy with whatever we had seen. Any one of us, by asking a question on no matter what subject, made his thoughts pour forth and shine like rain, quickening, exciting mental action, appealing to all that is noblest in life.

Our camp at Lake Tenaya was especially memorable. After supper and some talk by the fire, Le Conte and I sauntered through the pine groves to the shore and sat down on a big rock that stands out a little way in the water. The full moon and the stars filled the lake with light, and brought out the rich sculpture of the walls of the basin and surrounding mountains with marvelous clearness and beauty amid the shadows. Subsiding waves made gentle heaving swells, and a slight breeze ruffled the surface, giving rise to ever-changing pictures of wondrous brightness. At first we talked freely, admiring the silvery masses and ripples of light, and the mystic, wavering dance of the stars and rocks and shadows reflected in the unstable mirror. But soon came perfect stillness, earth and sky were inseparably blended and spiritualized, and we could only gaze on the celestial vision in devout, silent, wondering admiration. That lake with its mountains and stars, pure, serene, transparent, its boundaries lost in fullness of light, is to me an emblem of the soul of our friend.

Two years later we again camped together, when I was leading him to some small residual glaciers I had found. But his time was short; he had to get back to his class-room. I suggested running away for a season or two in time-obliterating wilderness, and pictured the blessings that would flow from truancy so pious and glorious. He smiled in sympathy with an introverted look, as if recalling his own free days when first he reveled in nature's wild wealth. I think it was at this time he told me the grand story of his early exploring trip to Lake Superior and the then wild region about the headwaters of the Mississippi. And notwithstanding he accomplished so much in the short excursions which at every opportunity he made, I have always thought it was to be regretted that he allowed himself to be caught and put in professional harness so early.

As a teacher he stood alone on this side of the continent, and his influence no man can measure. He carried his students in his heart, and was the idol of the University. He had the genius of hard work which not even the lassitude of sickness could stop. Few of his scholars knew with what inexorable determination he toiled to keep close up with the most advanced thought of the times and get it into teachable form; how he listened to the speech which day uttereth unto day, and gathered knowledge from every source—libraries, laboratories, explorers in every field, assimilating the results of other men's discoveries and making them his own, to be given out again free as air. He had the rare gift of making dim, nebulous things clear and attractive to other minds, and he never lacked listeners. Always ready for
every sort of audience, he lifted his charmed hearers up and away into intellectual regions they had never hoped to see or dared to encounter, making the ways seem easy, paths of pleasantness and peace, like a mountaineer who, anxious to get others onto commanding peaks, builds a trail for them, winding hither and thither through the midst of toil-beguiling beauty to summits whence the infinitely varied features of the landscape are seen in one harmony, and all boundaries are transparent and become outlets into celestial space.

Joseph Le Conte was not a leader, and he was as far as possible from being what is called "a good fighter, or hater." Anything like a quarrel or hot controversy he instinctively avoided, went serenely on his way, steeping everything in philosophy, overcoming evil with good. His friends were all who knew him, and he had besides the respect of the whole community, hopefully showing that however bad the world may be, it is good enough to recognize a good man.

In the winter of 1874 or '5 I made the acquaintance of his beloved brother, John. The two with their families were then living together in a queer old house in Oakland, and I spent many pleasant evenings with them. The brothers and John's son Julian were invariably found reading or writing. Joseph, turning down his book, would draw me out on my studies in the Sierra, and we were occasionally joined by John when some interesting question of physics caught his attention,—the carrying force of water at different velocities, how boulders were shoved or rolled on sea beaches or in river channels, glacial denudation, etc. I noticed that when difficulties on these and kindred subjects came up Joseph turned to his brother, and always, I think, regarded him intellectually as greater than himself. Once he said to me: "The public don't know my brother for half what he is; only in purely scientific circles is he known. There he is well known and appreciated as one of the greatest physicists in America. He seems to have less vitality than I have, seldom lectures outside of his classroom, cares nothing for popularity; but he is one of the most amiable of men as well as one of the most profound and original of thinkers." In face and manners he was like his brother, and had the same genial disposition and intellectual power. But he was less influential as a teacher than Joseph, held straighter forward on his own way, doing original and purely scientific work, and loved to dwell on the heights out of sight of common minds. Few of his students could follow him in his lectures, for his aims were high and the trails he made were steep, but all were his devoted admirers. Until John's death, some ten years ago, the brothers were always spoken of as "the two Le Contes." In my mind they still stand together, a blessed pair, twin stars of purest light. Their writings brought them world-wide renown, and their names will live, but far more important is the inspiring, uplifting, enlightening influence they exerted on their students and the community, which, spreading from mind to mind, heart to heart, age to age, in ever widening circles, will go on forever.

JOSEPH LE CONTE.

BY INA COOLBRITH.

What words can add unto his fame,
Or greener make his well-won bays?
Himself has deathless writ his name.
His life-work is his noblest praise.

No man was cast in gentler mould,
Yet stronger none in firm command.
His thought our lesser thought controlled,
Our hearts he held within his hand.

And Heaven so close about him lay
While still earth's lowly plane he trod,
He might not miss its shining way:
Who walks with nature walks with God.