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John Muir

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By John Muir

All the upper branches of the Sierra rivers are buried every winter beneath a heavy mantle of snow, and set free in the spring in magnificent floods. Then, the thousand thousand fountains full and overflowing, every living thing breaks forth into singing, and the glad streams, outspread over all the mountains, shine and fall in glorious light, shaking everything into music, making all the world a song.

The great annual thaw begins in May in the forest region, and is in full overflowing prime over the high Sierra in June, varying somewhat both in time and fullness with the weather and depth of the snow. Toward the end of summer the streams are at their lowest ebb, few even of the strongest singing much above a whisper as they slip and ripple through gravel and boulder beds from pool to pool in the hollows of their channels, and fall in sheets of embroidery, fold over fold, down their stairways of precipices and polished inclines. But, however low their singing, it is always ineffably fine in tone, in harmony with the restful time of the year, when all the heavy work is finished.

The first snow of the season that comes to the help of the streams usually falls in September or October, sometimes in August, in the midst of yellow Indian summer, when the goldenrods and gentians of the glacier meadows are in their glory. This Indian summer snow, however, soon melts, the chilled flowers spread their petals to the sun, and the gardens as well as the streams are refreshed as if only a warm shower had fallen. The storms that load the mountains with snow that is to form the main fountain supply for the year seldom set in before the middle or end of November. The first fall is usually from two to four feet in depth. Then, with intervals of fine, sunny weather, storm follows storm, heaping snow on snow, until from thirty to sixty feet has fallen; but on account of heavy settling and compacting and the loss from melting and evaporation, the depth over the middle forest region rarely exceeds ten feet.

When the first heavy storms stopped work on the mountains, I made haste down to Yosemite Valley, my glorious winter den, not to “hole up” and sleep the white months away like the marmots and bears. I was out every day, and often all night, sleeping but little, wading, climbing, sauntering among the blessed storms and calms, the so-called wonders and common things ever on show, rejoicing in almost everything alike that I could see or hear—the
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Of the downy wafts and curls of spray-dust, which in mild nights fall about as silently as dew, are held back until sunrise to make a store of heavy ice to reinforce the waterfall's thunder-tones, and announce the arrival of the calmest, brightest days.

The Upper Yosemite Fall, on account of its greater height and exposure, is more influenced by the wind than any of the others. The summer winds that come up the river cañon from the sea and the plains are seldom stormy; but the winter gales do some very wild work, bending and twisting and at times fairly worrying the falls and forests, and hanging snow banners a mile long on the summit peaks.

One morning I was awakened by a pelting shower of pine-cones, and soon learned that a grand Norther was storming about the Valley, playing with the falls as if they were mere wisps of mist, and making the great pines bow and sing with glorious, exhilarating enthusiasm. Soon after sunrise, when I was seeking a place safe from flying branches, I saw the Lower Yosemite Fall thrashed and pulverized from top to bottom into one glorious mass of rainbow dust; while a thousand feet above it the main Upper Fall was suspended on the face of the cliff in the form of an inverted bow, all silvery white and fringed with short wavering strips. Then, suddenly assailed by a tremendous blast, the whole mass of the fall was blown into threads and ribbons, and driven back over the brow of the cliff whence it came, as if denied admission to the Valley. This kind of show-work was continued about ten or fifteen minutes; then another change in the play of the huge exulting swirls and billows and upheaving domes of the gale allowed the baffled fall to gather and arrange its tattered waters, and sing down again in its place. As the day advanced, the wild, triumphant gale gave no sign of dying, excepting brief lulls; the Valley was filled with its weariless roar, and the bright, cloudless sky grew garish white from myriads of minute sparkling snow-spicules. In the afternoon, when I was watching the storm from the shelter of a big pine-tree, the Upper Fall was suddenly arrested about half-way...
down the cliff without being blown either upward or sidewise. The whole ponderous flood, weighing hundreds of tons, was simply held stationary in mid-air about one and a half minutes, resting on the invisible arm of the wind as if gravitation at that point in its path had been abolished. The ordinary amount of water, in the meantime, was pouring over the cliff, wedging and widening, forming a cone about seven hundred feet high. At length, as if ordered to go on, scores of arrowy comets shot down from the base of the majestic cone of white water as if escaping through separate outlets.

But glorious as are these Yosemite waterfalls rejoicing in all their bright array of icy jewelry and light, and in their sublime fullness of beauty and power in the spring, they sometimes enjoy a glad storm glory that excels all this, to be seen only once in a long rare while, when the snow lying deep on the mountains is suddenly melted into music and floods in the depth of winter. In all the years I have lived in Yosemite, only once have I seen the Valley in full universal flood-bloom. In the afternoon of December 16, 1871, a magnificent crimson cloud towered aloft in solitary grandeur above the Cathedral Rocks. It had a noble buttressed base, and smooth shaft like an old Sequoia, and a broad bossy down-curling crown, with all its parts colored alike in glowing crimson. Wondering what the meaning of this lonely red cloud might be, I was up betimes next morning watching the sky. Nothing like a storm sign came in sight until near noon, when thin curly gray clouds began to blur the sunshine, and after dark rain fell, which soon changed to snow. By daylight next morning nearly a foot had fallen, and it was still snowing thick and fast, and the avalanches began to sound.

In the night of the 18th there was another change to heavy rain, but as the temperature was only two degrees above the freezing point, the snow-line was only a few hundred feet above the Valley floor. The streams, therefore, instead of being increased in volume by this rain, were diminished, because the fresh snow sponged up part of their waters and choked the smaller tributaries. But toward midnight the temperature suddenly rose to 42 degrees, carrying the snowline above the rim of the Valley over the upper basins, and next morning the Valley was white, not with snow, but with waterfalls. The warm rain falling on the snow was at first absorbed and held back in perfect hushed silence, and so also was that portion of the snow that the rain melted, and all that was melted by the roaring, devouring flood of warm wind until the whole mass of the snow was saturated, became sludgy, and at length slipped, melted, and rushed simultaneously from a thousand slopes into the upper channels in wild, overwhelming extravagance, swelling and heaping flood over flood, and plunging down the cliffs in stupendous rock-shaking avalanches.

Called by the glorious storm, I made haste into the midst of it. The rain was like one vast cataract, and the wind blowing a gale was working in passionate accord with the rain and the streams. The section of the north wall of the valley opposite my cabin was covered with a network of falls and cascades, a glorious company of visitors that seemed strangely out of place, coming down everywhere like the rain without any apparent reference to channels. The two Sentinel cascades back of my cabin, scarce noticeable in summer, rivaled the great falls at ordinary stages, and across the Valley by the Three Brothers there were more falls and cascades than I could readily count, while the whole Valley, throbbing and trembling, was filled with an awful, solemn, sea-like roar. Gazing awhile in glad bewilderment, too rich and happy to know what to do, I at length tried to reach the upper meadow, where the Valley is widest, to gain general views. But the river by this time was over its banks, and the flooded meadows were lakes dotted with blue islands of half-melted snow. Along the sides of the Valley innumerable streams were hurrying to the river scattering gravel and tree ruins over the smooth garden levels. By climbing talus slopes, where the strength of these gray torrents is divided among earthquake boulders, I made out to cross them, forced my way up the Valley to Hutching’s bridge,
crossed the river, and waded out to the middle of the upper meadow. Here most of the new falls were in sight, the most glorious congregation of waterfalls I ever saw or dreamed of. On that portion of the south wall between the Sentinel rock and a point opposite the Hutching’s bridge there were ten falls plunging and booming from a height of nearly three thousand feet, the smallest of which might have been heard miles away. In the neighborhood of Glacier Point there were six; between the Three Brothers and Yosemite Fall, nine; between the Yosemite and Royal Arch Falls, ten; from Washington Column to Mount Watkins, ten; and on the shoulder of Half Dome facing the Valley, three; on the slopes of Half Dome and Cloud’s Rest, eight—fifty-six new falls in the upper half of the Valley. In the whole Valley there must have been more than a hundred, besides a countless host of silvery embroidering threads and ribbons gleaming everywhere. As if celebrating some great Sierra event, these enthusiastic streams in holiday attire came thronging into the Yosemite temple from all the surrounding mountains, waving white banners, shouting, rejoicing, arousing every rock and crystal of the mighty walls to throb and tingle in glad accord.

Those who have visited the Valley in summer will remember the comet-like forms of the Upper Yosemite Fall and the laces of the Nevada and Bridal Veil. In this winter jubilee the lace forms predominated, but there was no lack of heavy, hard-headed thundering comets rushing through the air in rows and clusters with sublime display of beauty and power. The lower part of one of the Sentinel cascades was composed of two main white shafts, and the space between them was filled in with chained and beaded gauze of intricate pattern, through the singing threads of which the purplish gray wall could be dimly seen. The group above Glacier Point was still more complicated in structure, displaying every imaginable form and action that water might be dashed, drawn out, combed, and woven into. Those on the north wall between Washington Column and the Royal Arch Fall were so closely related that they formed an almost continuous sheet, only slightly separated from those about Indian Canon and the magnificent series extending to Mount Watkins. The Three Brothers and El Capitan groups were indescribably braided and netted and adorned with clusters of long-tailed comets on account of peculiarities of rock cleavage. The Dome Falls were smaller and finer. The great Half Dome at the head of the Valley, clad in light or cloud, veiled in mist or avalanches, has always seemed to me the noblest of Sierra rocks, and never nobler than in this jubilee arrayed in living water.

In the midst of all this passionate music and motion the main Yosemite Fall sang its old every-day song, as if nothing unusual was going on, until afternoon. Then, just when the storm glory seemed highest, I heard a stupendous, overbooming explosive crash and roar, as if one of the great headland rocks was falling. This was the gathered, heaped-up flood-waters of Yosemite Creek, which had just arrived, laden with logs and ice, delayed by the distance the widespread tributary streams had to travel and the comparative levelness of their basin. Now, with volume more than tenfold increased above even its springtime fullness, the great fall took its place as leader of the glorious choir.

Thus, two days and nights, sang the Yosemite waters. Then came frost; the flood visitors vanished, and the common-weather glory of sunshine and clouds, snow-storms and wind-storms, flowed on in divine winter rhythm.