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John Muir

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HETCH-HETCHY—THE TUOLUMNE YOSEMITE.

The Hetch-Hetchy Valley, "that wonderful counterpart of Yosemite," as State Geologist Whitney called it, was discovered by Mr. Joseph Screech in 1850, the year before the discovery of Yosemite, when the Digger Indians held possession of it as an acorn orchard. After my first visit, in the autumn of 1871, I have always called it the Tuolumne Yosemite, for it is a wonderfully exact counterpart of the great Yosemite, not only in its crystal river and sublime rocks and waterfalls, but in the gardens, groves, and meadows of its flowery parklike floor. The floor of Yosemite is about 4,000 feet above the sea, the Hetch-Hetchy floor about 3,700; the walls of both are of gray granite, rise abruptly out of the flowery grass and groves, are sculptured in the same style, and in both every rock is a glacial monument.

Standing boldly out from the south wall is a strikingly picturesque rock called "Kolana" by the Indians, the outermost of a group 2,300 feet high corresponding with the Cathedral Rocks of Yosemite both in relative position and form. On the opposite side of the valley facing Kolana there is a counterpart of the El Capitan of Yosemite rising sheer and plain to a height of 1,800 feet, and over its massive brow flows a stream which makes the most graceful fall I have ever seen. From the edge of the cliff it is perfectly free in the air for a thousand feet, then breaks up into a ragged sheet of cascades among the boulders of an earthquake talus. It is in all its glory in June, when the snow is melting fast, but fades and vanishes toward the end of summer. The only fall I know with which it may fairly be compared is the Yosemite Bridal Veil; but it excels even that favorite fall both in height and fineness of
fairy airy beauty and behavior. Lowlanders are apt to suppose that mountain streams in their wild career over cliffs lose control of themselves and tumble in a noisy chaos of mist and spray. On the contrary, on no part of their travels are they more harmonious and self-controlled. Imagine yourself in Hetch-Hetchy on a sunny day in June, standing waist-deep in grass and flowers (as I have oftentimes stood), while the great pines sway dreamily with scarce perceptible motion. Looking northward across the valley you see a plain gray granite cliff rising abruptly out of the gardens and groves to a height of 1,800 feet, and in front of it Tuceulala’s silvery scarf burning with irised sun-fire in every fiber. In the first white outburst of the stream at the head of the fall there is abundance of visible energy, but it is speedily hushed and concealed in divine repose; and its tranquil progress to the base of the cliff is like that of downy feathers in a still room. Now observe the fineness and marvelous distinctness of the various sun-illumined fabrics into which the water is woven: they sift and float from form to form down the face of that grand gray rock in so leisurely and unconfused a manner that you can examine their texture, and patterns, and tones of color as you would a piece of embroidery held in the hand. Near the head of the fall you see groups of booming comet-like masses, their solid white heads separate, their tails like combed silk interlacing among delicate shadows, ever forming and dissolving, worn out by friction in their rush through the air. Most of these vanish a few hundred feet below the summit, changing to the varied forms of cloudlike drapery. Near the bottom the width of the fall has increased from about twenty-five to a hundred feet. Here it is composed of yet finer tissues, and is still without a trace of disorder—air, water, and sunlight woven into stuff that spirits might wear.

So fine a fall might well seem sufficient to glorify any valley; but here as in Yosemite Nature seems in no wise moderate, for a short distance to the eastward of Tuceulala booms and thunders the great Hetch-Hetchy fall, Wapama, so near that you have both of them in full view from the same standpoint. It is the counterpart of the Yosemite Fall, but has a much greater volume of water, is about 1,700 feet in height, and appears to be nearly vertical though considerably inclined, and is dashed into huge outbounding bosses of foam on the projecting shelves and knobs of its jagged gorge. No two falls could be more unlike—Tuceulala out in the open sunshine descending like thistledown; Wapama in a jagged shadowy gorge roaring and thundering, pounding its way with the weight and energy of an avalanche. Besides this glorious pair there is a broad massive fall on the main river a short distance above the head of the valley. Its position is something like that of the Vernal in Yosemite, and its roar as it plunges into a surging trout-pool may be heard a long way, though it is only about twenty feet high. There is also a chain of magnificent cascades at the head of the valley on a stream that comes in from the northeast, mostly silvery plumes, like the one between the Vernal and Nevada falls of Yosemite, half-sliding, half-leaping on bare glacier-polished granite, covered with crisp clashing spray into which the sunbeams pour with glorious effect. And besides all these a few small streams come over the walls here and there, leaping from ledge to ledge with birdlike song and watering many a hidden cliff-garden and fernery, but they are too unshowy to be noticed in so grand a place.

The correspondence between the Hetch-Hetchy walls in their trends, sculpture, physical structure, and general arrangement of the main rock-masses has excited the wondering admiration of every observer. We have seen that the El Capitan and Cathedral Rocks occupy the same relative positions in both valleys, so also do their Yosemite Points and North Domes. Again that part of the Yosemite north wall immediately to the east of the
Yosemite Fall has two horizontal benches timbered with gold-cup oak at about 500 and 1,500 feet above the floor. Two benches similarly situated and timbered occur on the same relative portion of the Hetch-Hetchy north wall, to the east of Wapaining Fall, and on no other. The Yosemite is bounded at the head by the great Half Dome. Hetch-Hetchy is bounded in the same way, though its head rock is far less wonderful and sublime in form.

The floor of the valley is about three and a half miles long and from a fourth to half a mile wide. The lower portion is mostly a level meadow about a mile long with the trees restricted to the sides, and partially separated from the upper forested portion by a low bar of glacier-polished granite, across which the river breaks in rapids.

The principal trees are the yellow and sugar pines, Sabine pine, incense cedar, Douglas spruce, silver fir, the California and gold-cup oaks, Balm of Gilead poplar, Nuttall's flowering dogwood, alder, maple, laurel, tumion, etc. The most abundant and influential are the great yellow pines, the tallest over 200 feet in height, and the oaks with massive rugged trunks four to six or seven feet in diameter, and broad arching heads, assembled in magnificent groves. The shrubs forming conspicuous flowery clumps and tangles are manzanita, azalea, spiraea, brier-rose, ceanothus, calycanthus, philadelphus, wild cherry, etc.; with abundance of showy and fragrant herbaceous plants growing about them, or out in the open in beds by themselves—lilies, Mariposa tulips, brodiaz, orchids—several species of each,—iris, spraguea, draperia, collomia, collinsia, castilleia, nemophila, larkspur, columbine, goldenrods, sunflowers, and mints of many species, honeysuckle, etc., etc. Many fine ferns dwell here, also; especially the beautiful and interesting rock-ferns,—pellaea, and cheilanthes of several species,—fringing and rosetting dry rock-piles and ledges; woodwardia and asplenium on damp spots with fronds six or seven feet high, the delicate maidenhair in mossy nooks by the falls, and the sturdy broad-shouldered pteris beneath the oaks and pines.

It appears therefore that Hetch-Hetchy Valley, far from being a plain common rockbound meadow, as many who have not seen it seem to suppose, is a grand landscape garden, one of Nature's rarest and most precious mountain mansions. As in Yosemite, the sublime rocks of its walls seem to the nature-lover to glow with life, whether leaning back in repose or standing erect in thoughtful attitudes giving welcome to storms and calms alike. And how softly these mountain rocks are adorned, and how fine and reassuring the company they keep—their brows in the sky, their feet set in groves and gay emerald meadows, a thousand flowers leaning confidingly against their adamantine bosses, while birds, bees, and butterflies help the river and waterfalls to stir all the air into music—things frail and fleeting and types of permanence meeting here and blending, as if into this glorious mountain temple Nature had gathered her choicest treasures, whether great or small, to draw her lovers into close confiding communion with her.

Strange to say, this mountain temple, next to Yosemite the finest and greatest in the Yosemite National Park, is now in danger of being dammed and made into a reservoir to help supply San Francisco with water and light. This use of the valley, so destructive and foreign to its proper park use, has long been planned and prayed for, and is still being prayed for by the San Francisco board of supervisors, not because water as pure and abundant cannot be got from adjacent sources outside the park,—for it can,—but seemingly only because of the comparative cheapness of the dam required.

Garden- and park-making goes on everywhere with civilization, for everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul. This natural beauty-hunger is displayed in poor folks' window-gardens made up of a few geranium slips in broken cups,
as well as in the costly lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National Parks,—the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, etc.—Nature’s own wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world. Nevertheless, like everything else worth while, however sacred and precious and well-guarded, they have always been subject to attack, mostly by despoiling gain-seekers,—mischief-makers and robbers of every degree from Satan to senators, supervisors, lumbermen, cattlemen, farmers, etc., eagerly trying to make everything dolarable, often thinly disguised in smiling philanthropy, calling pocket-filling plunder “Utilization of beneficent natural resources, that man and beast may be fed and the dear Nation grow great.” Thus long ago a lot of enterprising Jerusalem merchants made part of the temple into a place of business instead of a place of prayer, changing money, buying and selling cattle and sheep and doves. And earlier still the Lord’s garden in Eden, and the first forest reservation, including only one tree, was spoiled. And so to some extent have all our reservations and parks. Ever since the establishment of the Yosemite National Park by act of Congress, October 8, 1890, constant strife has been going on around its borders, and I suppose will go on as part of the universal battle between right and wrong, however its boundaries may be shorn or wild beauty destroyed. The first application to the Government by the San Francisco supervisors for the use of Lake Eleanor and the Hetch-Hetchy Valley was made in 1903, and denied December 22d of that year by the Secretary of the Interior. In his report on this case he well says: “Presumably the Yosemite National Park was created such by law because of the natural objects, of varying degrees of scenic importance, located within its boundaries, inclusive alike of its beautiful small lakes, like Eleanor, and its majestic wonders, like Hetch-Hetchy and Yosemite Valley. It is the aggregation of such natural scenic features that makes the Yosemite Park a wonderland which the Congress of the United States sought by law to preserve for all coming time as nearly as practicable in the condition fashioned by the hand of the Creator—a worthy object of national pride and a source of healthful pleasure and rest for the thousands of people who may annually sojourn there during the heated months.”

The most delightful and wonderful campgrounds in the park are the three great valleys—Yosemite, Hetch-Hetchy, and Upper Tuolumne; and they are also the most important places with reference to their positions relative to the other great features—the Merced and Tuolumne canons, and the High Sierra peaks and glaciers, etc., at the head of the rivers. The main part of the Tuolumne Valley is a beautiful spacious flowery lawn four or five miles long, surrounded by magnificent snowy mountains. It is about 8,500 feet above the sea, and forms the grand central High Sierra campground from which excursions are made to the noble mountains, domes, glaciers, etc.; across the range to the Mono Lake and volcanoes; and down the Tuolumne Cañon to Hetch-Hetchy. But should Hetch-Hetchy be submerged, as proposed, not only would it be made utterly inaccessible, but the sublime cañon way to the heart of the High Sierra would be hopelessly blocked. None, as far as I have learned, of all the thousands who have seen the park is in favor of this destructive water scheme. Public opinion is still asleep, but as soon as awakened by light probably more than nine tenths of even the citizens of San Francisco would oppose it. Anyhow, it would quickly become manifest that the Voice of the San Francisco board of supervisors in this affair is not the Voice of California.

JOHN MUIR.


 Extracts from State Geologist Professor J. D. Whitney's Yosemite Guide-Book (Published 1874)

 on the Hetch-Hetchy Valley, the Big Tuolumne Meadows, and the Tuolumne Canon, showing their relationship, etc.

 "The Hetch-Hetchy is 3,650 feet above the sea-level, or 300 feet below the Yosemite; it is three miles long east and west, but is divided into two parts by a spur of granite which nearly closes it up in the center. The portion of the valley below this spur is a large open meadow, a mile in length, and from an eighth to half a mile in width, with excellent grass, timbered only along the edge. The upper part of the valley is a mile and three quarters long, and from an eighth to a third of a mile wide, well timbered and grassed. The walls of this valley are not quite so high as those of Yosemite; but still anywhere else than in California they would be considered as wonderfully grand. On the north side of Hetch-Hetchy is a perpendicular bluff, the edge of which is 1,800 feet above the valley, and having a remarkable resemblance to El Capitan. In the spring, when the snows are melting, a large stream is precipitated over this cliff, falling at least 1,000 feet perpendicular. The volume of water is very large, and the whole of the lower part of the valley is said to be filled with its spray. A little farther east is the Hetch-Hetchy Fall, the counterpart of the Yosemite. The height is 1,700 feet. It is not quite perpendicular. The volume of water is much larger than that of the Yosemite Fall, and in the spring its noise can be heard for miles. The position of this fall in relation to the valley is exactly like that of the Yosemite Fall in its valley, and opposite to it is a rock much resembling the Cathedral Rock, and 2,270 feet high. . . .

 "The valley of the Tuolumne [or Big Tuolumne Meadows] is one of the most picturesque and delightful in the High Sierra. Situated at an elevation of between 8,000 and 9,000 feet above the sea-level, surrounded by noble ranges and fantastically shaped peaks which rise from 3,000 to 4,000 feet higher, and from which the snow never entirely disappears, traversed by a clear rapid river, along which meadows and clumps of pines alternate, the effect of the whole is indeed most superb. The vicinity of Soda Springs [on the north side of the valley], and, indeed, the whole region about the head of the upper Tuolumne, is one of the finest in the State for studying the traces of the ancient glacier system of the Sierra Nevada." Glacier-polished granite extends over a vast area, and "this is so perfect that the surface is often seen from a distance to glitter with the light reflected from it, as from a mirror. The main portion of the valley is about four miles long, and from half to a third of a mile wide." It is the focus of pleasure-travel in the High Sierra of the Park and the most important and magnificent campground, but this also has been surveyed for a reservoir site.

 "The cañon of the Tuolumne runs in a nearly east-and-west direction, about parallel with that of the Merced, and some twelve miles north of it. The length of the portion included between the Tuolumne Meadows, at Soda Springs, and the head of the Hetch-Hetchy, is about twenty-two miles. During this distance the river runs everywhere in a very narrow gorge, with lofty and very precipitous walls, and with frequent and beautiful cascades, as might be expected, since the fall of the river in the distance named is about 4,650 feet, or over 200 feet to the mile. It is to be regretted that it is not possible to pass through the cañon with animals, entering at the Hetch-Hetchy and coming out at the upper end, or vice versa. This will undoubtedly be done in time," by a trail or carriage-road, but which the damming of Hetch-Hetchy would completely block.

 John Muir.