Galen Clark

John Muir

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Galen Clark was the best mountaineer I ever met in the Sierra, and one of the kindest and most amiable. I first met him at his Wawona ranch forty-two years ago on my first visit to Yosemite Valley. I had entered the valley with one companion by way of Coulterville and was returning by what was then known as the Mariposa Trail. The snow was still deep in the sugar-pine and silver-fir regions, obliterating not only the trails but the blazes on the trees. We had no great difficulty, however, in finding our way by the trends of the main features of the topography. Botanizing by the way, we made slow plodding progress and were again about out of provisions when we reached Clark's hospitable cabin at Wawona. He kindly furnished us with flour and a little sugar and tea, and my companion, who complained of the benumbing poverty of a strictly vegetarian diet, gladly accepted Mr. Clark's offer of a piece of a bear that had just been killed. After a short talk about bears and the forests we inquired the way to the Big Trees, pushed on up through the Wawona silver-firs and sugar-pines, and camped in the now famous Mariposa Grove. Later on, after making my home in the Yosemite Valley, I became well acquainted with Mr. Clark while he was Guardian. He was elected again and

*Galen Clark was born in the town of Dublin, Cheshire County, New Hampshire, March 28, 1814. He died March 24th of this year, thus having reached the great age of 96. He was buried in Yosemite Valley in a grave prepared by himself.

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again by different Boards of Commissioners to this
important office on account of his efficiency and real love
of the valley.

Although nearly all my mountaineering has been done
alone, I had the pleasure of having Galen Clark with me
on three excursions. About thirty-five years ago I invited
him to accompany me on a trip through the big Tuolumne
Cañon from Hetch Hetchy Valley. The cañon up to
that time had not been explored, and, knowing that the
difference in the elevation of the river at the upper and
lower ends of the cañon amounted to about 5,000 feet,
we expected to find some magnificent cataracts or falls;
nor were we disappointed. It was while exploring this
rough cañon that Mr. Clark's skill and endurance as a
mountaineer was displayed. Before leaving Yosemite
Valley for Hetch Hetchy to begin our hard trip, a
Yosemite tourist, an ambitious young man, begged leave
to join us. I strongly advised him not to attempt such a
trip, as nothing was known of the cañon, and on account
of its great depth and length it would undoubtedly prove
very trying to an inexperienced climber. He assured us,
however, that he was able for anything, would gladly
meet every difficulty as it came, and cause no hindrance or
trouble of any sort; so at last, after repeating our advice
that he give up the trip, we consented to his joining us.
We entered the cañon by way of Hetch Hetchy Valley,
each carrying his own provisions and making his own tea,
porridge, beds, etc.

In the morning of the second day out from Hetch
Hetchy we came to what is now known as the Muir Gorge,
and Mr. Clark without hesitation began to force a way
through it, wading and jumping from one submerged
slippery boulder to another through the torrent, bracing
himself with a stout pole. Though then at a time of
rather low water, the roar and swift surging of the cur-
rent was nerve-trying. I managed to get our adventurous
tourist safely through the gorge by lending a hand
at the wildest places, but this experience, naturally
enough, proved too much, and he informed us that he could go no further. I gathered some wood at the upper throat of the gorge, made a fire for him and advised him to feel at home and make himself comfortable, and hoped he would enjoy the songs of the water-ousels which haunted the gorge, assuring him that we would return some time that night, though it might be late, as we wished to go on through the entire cañon if possible. We pushed our way through the dense chaparral and over the earthquake taluses with such speed that we reached the foot of the upper cataract while we had still an hour or so of daylight for the return trip. It was long after dark when we reached our adventurous but nerve-shaken companion, who, of course, was anxious and lonely, not being accustomed to complete solitude. Not attempting either to return down the gorge in the dark or to climb around it, we concluded to spend the night where we were, without blankets or provisions, which we had left in the morning hung up on trees at the foot of the gorge. I remember Mr. Clark remarking that if he had his choice that night between provisions and blankets he would choose his blankets. We had a good fire and suffered nothing worth mention, although we were hungry.

The next morning in about an hour we had crossed over the ridge through which the gorge is cut, reached our provisions, made tea and had a good breakfast, and finished the preliminary exploration of about three-fourths of the cañon. As soon as we had returned to Yosemite I obtained fresh provisions, pushed off alone up to the head of Yosemite Creek basin, entered the cañon by a side cañon, and completed the exploration up to the Tuolumne Meadows.

It was on this first trip from Hetch Hetchy to the upper cataracts that I had such convincing proofs of Mr. Clark's daring and skill as a mountaineer, particularly in fording torrents and in forcing his way through thick chaparral. I found it somewhat difficult to keep up with him in dense tangled brush, though in jumping on
boulder taluses and slippery cobble-beds I had no difficulty in leaving him behind.

After I had discovered the glaciers on Mt. Lyell and Mt. McClure, Mr. Clark kindly made a second excursion with me to assist in establishing a line of stakes across the McClure glacier to measure its rate of flow. On this trip we also climbed Mt. Lyell together, when the snow which covered the glacier was melted into upleaning icy snow blades which were extremely difficult to cross, not being strong enough to support our weight, nor offering any level spaces between them for steps. Here, being lighter, I kept ahead of Mr. Clark, who, at each awkward fall he had, would gaze at the marvelous ranks of leaning snow blades and say: "I think I have traveled all sorts of roads and rock-piles, and through all kinds of brush and snow, but this gets me."

Mr. Clark, at my urgent request, joined my small party on a trip along the range to the Kings River Yosemite, most of the way without any trail. He joined us at the Mariposa Big Tree Grove and intended to go all the way, but finding that the time required was much greater than he expected, on account of the difficulties encountered, he turned back near the head of the north fork of the Kings River.

In cooking his mess of oat-meal porridge and making tea, his pot was always the first to boil; and I used to wonder why, with all his skill in scrambling through brush in the easiest way and preparing his meals, he was so utterly careless about his beds. He would lie-down anywhere on any ground, rough or smooth, without taking pains even to remove cobbles or sharp-angled rocks protruding through the grass or gravel, saying that his old bones were as hard as the rocks.

His kindness to Yosemite visitors and mountaineers was marvelously constant and uniform and brought him the sincere respect of all he met.

He was not a good business man, and in building a large hotel and barn at Wawona before the travel to
Yosemite had been greatly developed, he borrowed money, mortgaged his property and lost it.

Though not the first to see the Mariposa Big Tree Grove, he was the first to explore it, after he had heard from a prospector who had passed through it that there were some wonderful big trees on the Wawona ridge, perhaps as big as the Sequoias, which had become so famous and well known in the Calaveras Grove. On this indefinite information Galen Clark told me he went up the ridge, thoroughly explored the grove and described it. In this sense he may be said to be the real discoverer of the grove. He then explored the forest to the southward and discovered the much larger Fresno Grove of about two square miles, six or seven miles distant from the Mariposa Grove. Most of the Fresno Grove, unfortunately, has been cut down and made into lumber.

Mr. Clark was truly and literally a gentleman. I never heard him utter a single hasty angry fault-finding word. His voice was uniformly pitched at a rather low tone, perfectly even, although glances of his eyes and slight intonations of his voice oftentimes indicated that something funny or mildly sarcastic was coming, but upon the whole he was serious and industrious, and however fun-provoking a story might be he never indulged in loud, boisterous laughter.

He was very fond of scenery and often told me that he liked “nothing in the world better than climbing to the top of a high ridge or mountain and looking off.” But above all, he preferred the mountain ridges and domes in the Yosemite region on account of their noble grandeur and the glorious beauty of the falls and forests about them. Oftentimes he would take his rifle, a few pounds of bacon, a few pounds of flour and a single blanket and go off hunting, for no other reason than to explore and get acquainted with the most beautiful points of view within a journey of a week or two from his Wawona home. On these trips he was always alone and could indulge in tranquil enjoyment of Nature to his heart’s content. He
said that on those trips, when he was at a convenient dis-
tance from home in a neighborhood where he wished
to linger, he always shot a deer, and, after eating a consid-
erable part of it, loaded himself with the balance of the
meat on his way home. In this way his cabin was always
well supplied with venison, and occasionally with bear-
meat and grouse, and no weary traveler ever went away
from it hungry.

The value of mountain air in prolonging life is well
exemplified in the case of Mr. Clark, who, while working
in mines, had contracted a severe cold that settled on his
lungs and finally caused severe inflammation and bleed-
ing. None of his friends thought he would ever recover,
for the physicians told him he had but a short time to live.
It was then that he repaired to the beautiful sugar-pine
woods at Wawona and took up a claim, including the fine
meadows there, built his cabin and began his life of
wandering and exploring in the adjacent neighborhood,
usually going bareheaded. In a remarkably short time
his lungs were healed.

He was one of the most sincere tree lovers I ever knew.
About twenty years before his death he made choice of
a plat in the Yosemite cemetery on the north side of the
valley, not far from the Yosemite Fall, and selecting a
dozen or so of seedling Sequoias in the Mariposa Grove
he brought them to the valley and planted them around
the ground he had chosen for his grave. The soil there
is gravelly and dry, but by careful watering he finally
nursed most of them into good, thrifty, hopeful saplings
that doubtless will long shade the grave of their friend
and lover.