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THREE ADVENTURES IN THE YOSEMITE

BY JOHN MUIR

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From a photograph by the Hilbery Picture Co.

THE YOSEMITE FALL

I. A PERILOUS EXPLORATION OF THE YOSEMITE FALL

A WILD scene, but not a safe one, is made by the moon as it appears through the edge of the Yosemite Fall when one is behind it. Once, after enjoying the night-song of the waters and watching the formation of the colorful bow as the moon came round the domes and sent her beams into the wild uproar, I ventured out on the narrow bench that extends back of the fall from Fern Ledge and began to admire the dim-veiled grandeur of the view. I could see the fine, gauzy threads of the fall's filmy border by having the light in front; and wishing to look at the moon through the meshes of some of the denser portions of the fall, I ventured to creep farther behind it while it was gently wind-swayed, without taking sufficient thought about the consequences of its swaying back to its natural position after the wind-pressure should be removed. The effect was enchanting: fine, savage music sounding above, beneath, around me; while the moon, apparently in the very midst of the rushing waters, seemed to be struggling to keep her place, on account of the ever-varying form and density of the water masses through which she was seen; now veiled or eclipsed by thick-headed comets, now flashing through openings between their tails. I was in fairy-land, between the dark wall and the wild illumined waters, but suffered disenchantment; for, like the witch-scene in Alloway Kirk.

In an instant it was dark.

Down came a dash of spent comets, thin and harmless-looking in the distance, but desperately solid and stony when they struck my shoulders, like a mixture of choking spray and gravel and big hailstones. Instinctively dropping on my knees, I gripped an angle of the rock, curled up like a young fern frond, with my face pressed against my breast, and in this attitude submitted as best I could to my thundering bath. The heavier masses seemed to strike like cobbles, and there was a confused noise of many waters about my ears, hissing, gurgling, clashing sounds that were not heard as music.

The situation was quickly realized. How fast one's thoughts burn in such times of stress! I was weighing chances of escape. Would the column be swayed a few inches away from the wall, or would it come yet closer? The fall was in flood and not lightly would its ponderous mass be swayed. My fate seemed to depend on a breath of the "idle wind." Then the fall was moved gently forward, the pounding ceased, and I was once more visited by glimpses of the moon. But fearing I might be caught at a disadvantage in making too hasty a retreat, I moved only a few feet along the bench to where lay a block of ice. I wedged myself between the ice and the wall, and lay face downward, until the steadiness of the light gave encouragement to rise and get away. Somewhat nerve-shaken, drenched, and benumbed, I made out to build a fire, warmed myself, ran home, reached my cabin before daylight, got an hour or two of sleep, and awoke sound and comfortable, better, not worse, for my hard midnight bath.

II. A RIDE ON AN AVALANCHE

Few Yosemite visitors ever see snow avalanches, and fewer still know the exhilaration of riding on them. In all my mountain-climbing I have enjoyed only one avalanche-ride, and the start was so sudden and the end came so soon I had but little time to think of the danger that attends this sort of travel. One fine Yosemite morning, after a heavy snowfall, being eager to see as many avalanches as possible and to get wide views of the forest and summit peaks in their new, white robes before the sunshine had time to change them, I set out early to climb by a side canyon to the top of a commanding ridge a little over three thousand feet above the valley. On account of the looseness of the snow that blocked the canyon, I knew the climb would require a long time; some three or four hours, as I estimated; but it proved far more difficult than I had anticipated. Most of the way I sank waist-deep, in some places almost out of sight. After spending the whole day to within half an hour or so of sundown, I was still several hundred feet below the summit. Then my hopes were reduced to getting up in time to see the sunset. But I was not to get summit views of any sort that day, for deep trampling near the canyon head, where the snow was strained, started an avalanche, and I was swished down to
the foot of the cañon as if by enchantment! The wallowing ascent had taken nearly all day, the descent only about a minute. When the avalanche started, I threw myself on my back and spread my arms to try to keep from sinking. Fortunately, though the grade of the cañon is very steep, it is not interrupted by precipices large enough to cause ouitbouldering or treed. Of sorts, part of the rush which was buried I was only moderately imbedded on the surface or at times a little below it, and covered with a veil of back- streaming dust particles; and as the whole weight of the avalanche was against me I joined in the flight, there was no friction, though I was tossed here and there and lurched from side to side. When the avalanche came to a rest, I found myself on top of the crumpled pile without a bruise or scar.

This was a fine experience. Hawthorne says somewhere that steam has spiritualized travel, though unspiritual smells, smoke, etc., still attend it. This flight in what might be called a milky way of snow stars was the most spiritual and exhilarating of all the modes of motion I have ever experienced. Eljiah's flight in a chariot of fire or wind or water had been more gloriously exciting.

III. EARTHQUAKE STORMS

The avalanche taluses leaning against the walls at intervals of a mile or two are among the most striking and interesting of the secondary features of the Yosemite Valley. They are from about 500 to 1000 feet high, made up of huge, angular, well-preserved, unshifting boulders, and instead of being slowly weathered from the cliffs, like ordinary taluses, almost every one of them had been formed suddenly in a single avalanche, and had not been increased in size during the last three or four centuries; for trees three or four hundred years old are growing on them, some standing close to the wall at the top without a bruise or broken branch, showing that scarcely a single boulder had ever fallen among them. Furthermore, all these taluses throughout the range seemed by the trees and lichens growing on them to be of the same age. All the phenomena thus pointed to a rest, I found myself on top of the talus when it had to be a grand, ancient earthquake. Yet for years I left the question open, went on from cañon to cañon, observing again and again; measuring the heights of taluses throughout the range on both flanks, and the variations in the angles of their sides; studying their boulders had been assorted and related and brought to rest, and their correspondence in size on both flanks, and the variations in the angles of their sides; studying their taluses, and the way in which their boulders had been assorted and related and brought to rest, and their correspondence in size on both flanks, and the variations in the angles of their sides, to have found a voice and be calling to her sister-planets. In trying to tell something of the size of this awful sound, it seems to me that if all the thunder of all the great boulders I had so long been studying, pouring to the valley floor in a free curve luminous from friction, making a terribly sublime spectacle—an arc of glowing passion, fire, fifteen hundred feet span, as true in form and as serene in beauty as a rainbow in the midst of the stupendous, roaring rock-storms. The sound was so tremendously deep and broad and earnest that the whole earth, like a living creature, seemed to last to have found a voice and to be calling to her sister-planets. In trying to tell something of the size of this awful sound, it seems to me that if all the thunder of all the storms I had ever heard were condensed into one roar, it would not equal this roar. The sound was so tremendously deep and broad and earnest that the whole earth, like a living creature, seemed to know the shaking it suffered.

After a second startling shock, about half-past three o'clock, the ground continued to tremble gently, and smooth, low, rumbling sounds, not always distinguishable from the agitated, explosive sounds of the falls, came deep in the mountains in a northern direction.

The few Indians fled from their huts to the middle of the valley, fearing that angry spirits were trying to kill them; and, as I afterward learned, most of the Yosemite tribe, who were spending the winter at their village on Bull Creek, forty miles away, were so terrified that they ran into the river and washed themselves clean enough to say their prayers, I suppose, or to die. I asked Dick, one of the Indians with whom I was acquainted, "What made the ground shake and jump so much?" He only shook his head and said: "No good," and looked appealingly to me to give him hope that his life was to be spared.

In the morning I found the few white settlers assembled in front of the old Hutchings Hotel, comparing notes and meditating flight to the lowlands, seemingly as sorely frightened as the Indians. Shortly after sunrise a low, blustery, muffled rumbling, like distant thunder, was followed by another series of shocks, which,
though not nearly so severe as the first, made the cliffs and domes tremble like jelly, and the big pines and oaks thrill and swing and wave their branches with startling effect. Then the talkers were suddenly hushed, and the solemnity on their faces was sublime. One of these winter neighbors in particular, a somewhat speculative thinker on the subject, had often conversed, was a firm believer in the cataclysmic origin of the valley; and I now jokingly remarked that his wild tumble-down-and-engulfment hypothesis might soon be proved, since these underground rumblings and shakings might be the forerunners of another Yosemite-making cataclysm, which would perhaps double the depth of the valley by swallowing the floor, leaving the ends of the roads and trails dangling three or four thousand feet in the air. Just then came the third series of shocks, and it was fine to see how awfully silent and solemn he became. His belief in the existence of a mysterious abyss into which the suspended floor of the valley and all the domes and battlements of the walls might at any moment go roaring down mightily troubled him. To diminish his fears and laugh him into something like reasonable faith, I said, "Come, cheer up; smile a little, and clap your hands, now, as if nothing extraordinary had occurred, although perhaps he was curious to know what all the noise was about. His "hoot-too-hoot-too-hoo" might have meant, "What's a' the steer, kimmer?"

It was long before the valley found perfect rest. The rocks trembled more or less every day for over two months, and I kept a bucket of water on my table to learn what I could of the movements. The blunt thunder in the depths of the mountains was usually followed by sudden jarring, horizontal thrusts from the northward, often succeeded by twisting, jolting movements. More than a month after the first great shock, while I was standing on a fallen tree up the valley, near Lamon's winter cabin, I heard a distinct bubbling thunder from the direction of Tenaya Cañon, and Carlo, a large, intelligent St. Bernard dog standing beside me seemed greatly astonished, and looked intently in that direction, with mouth open, and uttered a low wuff! as if saying, "What's that?" He must have known that it was not thunder, though like it. The air was perfectly still, not the faintest breath of wind perceptible, and a fine, mellow, sunny hush pervaded everything; then suddenly there came that subterranean thunder. Then, while we gazed and listened, came the corresponding shocks, as distinct as if some mighty hand had shaken the ground. After the sharp horizontal jars died away, they were followed by a gentle rocking and undulating of the ground so distinct that Carlo looked at the log on which he was standing to see who was shaking it. It was the season of flooded meadows, and the pools about me, as calm as sheets of glass, were suddenly thrown into low, ruffling waves.

Judging by its effects, this Yosemite, or Inyo earthquake, as it is sometimes called, was gentle in comparison with the one that gave rise to the grand talus system of the range and did so much for the cañon scenery. Nature, usually deliberate in her operations, then exerted, as we have seen, a new set of features simply by giving the mountains a shake, changing not only the high peaks and cliffs, but the streams. As soon as these rock avalanches fell, the streams began to sing new songs; for in many places thousands of boulders were hurled into their channels, roughening and half damming them, compelling the waters to surge and roar in rapids where before they glided smoothly. Some of the streams were completely dammed, driftwood, leaves, etc., gradually filling the interstices between the boulders, thus giving rise to lakes and level reaches; and these again, after being gradually filled in, were changed to meadows, through which the streams are now silently meandering; while at the same time some of the taluses took the places of old meadows and groves. Thus rough places were made smooth, and smooth places rough. But, on the whole, by what at first sight seemed pure confused confusion and ruin, the landscapes were enriched; for gradually every talus was covered with groves and gardens, and made a finely proportioned and ornamental base for the cliffs. In this work of beauty every boulder is prepared and measured and put in its place more thoughtfully than the stones of temples. If for a moment you are inclined to regard these taluses as mere dragged, chaotic dumps, climb to the top of one of them, and run down without any haggling, purring hesitation, boldly jumping from boulder to boulder with even speed. You will then find your feet playing a tune, and quickly discover the music and poetry of these magnificent rock piles—a finer lesson. And all Nature's wildness tells the same story: the shocks and outbursts of earthquakes, volcanoes, geysers, roaring, thundering waves and floods, the silent uprush of sap in plants, storms of every sort, each and all, are the orderly, beauty-making love-beats of Nature's heart.