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John Muir

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San Francisco, September 5, 1879.

To the Editor of the Bulletin:

This rare town, oozy, angling, wrangling, was towards the end of July, in the middle of a block of the very brightest and best. The glacial fountains far back and concealed, others plainly visible, seemed like flowing down broad Yosemite valleys, their sunny waters, their green shores revealing, their blue curves seen on the glassy, transparent, lovely waters at the head of Lynn Canal, and so fine a day to sail away the shore lines to any appreciable extent. The glacial grooving of the water, the vessel drowsing in the pearl sky, the islands, the mountains, the sun clear as the polar star, and the ocean as distant as the eye can see, would be difficult to realize that we are on waters in any direct way connected with the ocean. We seem rather to be on glacier lakes, thousands of feet up between mountain spurs, the barometer was too low, the air too drowsy, the sea too glassy.

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How enchantingly lovely the landscape was that rare morning—land and water combined in lines and colors beautiful beyond expression, everywhere exciting and satisfying our best inspirations. The slant yellow sunshine was streaming over the islands, silvery the mirror water, and lighting a widening swath of flashing, shimmering spangles along the rippled wake of our boat. The natural love of wild beauty that forms an essential part of every human being began to declare itself. Every eye was beaming and appreciative. Gaze in any direction, forward, back on either hand, soul and sight were filled. Island beyond island in long perspective, with fluent, featherly lines passing and interblending, dark green in the foreground, varying tones of blue growing more and more tender in the distance, innumerable bays holding soft, hazy shadows, graduating insensibly out into the open fields of light, headland and promontory reacting calmly into the blue levels with their spiry evergreens in imposing array, their light sedgy edges showing in beautiful contrast; the headlands plunging boldly down at a sweep and dipping their feet into the deep, still water with fine arching insteps. Every island is forested to the summit save the largest, which rise here and there into snowy mountains, while the trees with a shaggy, leafy outer-fringe come down to the tide-line—the tallest underpinning wall out over deep water, so that one may sail in a canoe for miles beneath a luxuriant, arbored shade. For notwithstanding these long inland channels are at times swept by powerful storm-winds in the direction of their extension, no heavy swell-waves are raised to beat the shores and characters from top to bottom all along their courses. Every eye was turned to them and fixed. Forgotten now were the souls of the Chilcats and the whole system of seminary and pulpit theology, while the word of God was being read in those majestic hieroglyphics blazoned along the edge of the sky. The earnest, childish wonderment with which this glorious page of Nature's book was contemplated was hopeful and reassuring. All evinced a commendable desire to learn it. “Is that a glacier,” they asked, “down in that canyon? and is it all solid ice? How deep is it, think you? you say it flows. How can ice flow? And where does it come from?” From snow that is heaped up every winter on the mountains. “And how, then, is the snow transformed to ice? Are those masses we see in the hollows glaciers also? Are those bluish draggled masses hanging down from beneath the snowfields, what you call the snouts of the glaciers? What made the hollows that contain them? How long have they been there?” etc. While I answered as best I could, keeping up a running commentary on the subject in general, while busily engaged in sketching and noting my own observations, preaching the glacial gospel in a rambling way in season and out of season, while the Cassiar, slowly creeping along the coast, shifted our position so that the icy canons were opened to view and closed again in regular succession like the leaves of a book.
About the middle of the afternoon we were directly opposite a noble group of glaciers some ten miles long, flowing from a highly complicated chain of crater-like fountains, and guarded around their summits and well down their sides by deep cracks and open mouths in the face of the adjacent moraine ridges. From each of the larger clusters of fountains a wide sheer-walled Yosemite cañon opened down to the foot of the range, that will not down, water an hour or two before within a few feet of the sea level. In this group of fountains flowing in these main cañons descended to within a few feet of the sea. The Miramar was fed by eight or ten tributary glaciers, and probably about fifteen miles long, terminating in a magnificent cañon near the summit of Yo-semite Valley in an imposing wall of ice about two miles long, and from three to five hundred feet high, forming a series of fountains, and then extending from wall to wall. It was to this glacier that the ships of the Alaska Ice Company were to rescued for the consideration of the San Francisco and the Sandwich islands, and, I believe, also to China and Japan. They had only to motor the smaller engines to a short distance from the shore, and would of itself be well worth a visit to Alaska to any lowlander so unfortunate as to have seen a glacier before.

A GROUP OF NOBLE GLACIERS.

The boilers of our little steamer were not made to cope with the sea water, and it is hoped that fresh water would be found at available points along our course where the water is probably not alkaline. On the cliffs bounding the shore of the coast, where the ancient glaciers have receded, there are large and deep moraine lakes, and from one of them we found fresh water an hour or two before reaching Cape Faukseth, the supply of fifty tons brought in tanks from two miles to the south.

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Another, a few miles to the south of this one, receives two large tributaries about equal in size, and then divides into two a forest of fountains in a magnificent sweep to within a hundred feet or so of sea level. The third of this low-sounding series, however, we failed under the sheerest portions of the coast. In this particular, however, we failed under the sheerest portions of the coast. In this narrow passage between the towering peaks, the purser, the majority ruled that the Purser, the majority ruled that...

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beautiful bay, and as the long northern day had still an hour or two of light to offer, I gladly embraced the opportunity to go ashore with Dr. Lindley to see the rocks and plants. One of the Indians employed as a deck hand on the steamer landed us at the mouth of a bright singing stream. The tide was low, exposing a strip of shingly, shelty, dusky beach, which sent up a fine fresh smell from its luxuriant growth of algae. And these were composed of slate, quartz and granite, named in the order of abundance. The first land plant we met was a tall grass, nine feet high, forming a waving meadow-like margin; immediately in front of the dark, coniferous forest. Pushing my way through a tangle of bushes well back into the forest, I found it composed almost entirely of firs, especially A. Meriensis, with a few specimens of yellow cypress. The ferns were developed in remarkable beauty and size—two aspidums, one of which is about six feet high; a wodzia, comaria and polypodium. The underbrush is chiefly alder, rubus, cedum, three species of vaccinium and echinopanax horrida, the whole about from six to eight feet high, and in some places closely intertangled and hard to penetrate, especially the thorny echinopanax is well developed. On the open spots beneath the trees the ground is covered to a depth of two or three feet with mosses of indescribable softness and freshness. These were planted on their rich furred bosses, together with pyrola, coptis and Solomon's seal. The tallest of the trees measure about a hundred and fifty feet, with a diameter of about four feet, their branches mingling together and making a perfect shade. I was soon separated from my companion by the first darkening of evening, and at last alone, and as the twilight fell I sat down on the mossy instep of a spruce. Not a bush or tree was moving, every leaf seemed hushed in deep brooding repose. One bird, a thrush, sang, silently lancing the silence with his cheery notes and making it all the more keenly felt, while the solemn monotone of a wood ia, the contralto of the birds, seemed hushed in deep reverence. Not a bush or tree was moving, every pore like the very voice of God, humanized, terrestrialized, and more keenly felt, while the solemn monotone of the stream sifted through all the air, pervading the heart as to a home prepared for it. How strange seem these untamed solitudes of the wild free bosom of the Alaska woods. Nevertheless they are found necessarily and eternally familiar. Go where we will, they are always with us, over the world, we seem to have been there before.

The spruces on the banks of the stream lean over from side to side, making high, sharp arches, while it is bridged all along at short intervals with moss-embossed logs, which make its green, shady reaches exceedingly picturesque. The most beautiful bridge, wild or artificial, I have ever seen. The heavy, massive log is plunged to a depth of six inches or more with glossy, golden mosses of three or four species, their different tones of yellow shading finely into each other, while the delicate ferns and mosses, intermingling, are picked out in yellow, green, red, and blue, forming a perfect tangle of overlaps of leaves, every one of which seems to have been culled from the woods for this special use, so perfectly do they harmonize in size, shape, color, etc., with the moss floor of the bridge, the width of the span, and the massive brushy abutments.

Scattered over the beach I found four or five Indians getting water, with whom I returned aboard the steamer, thanking the Lord for so noble an addition to my life as was a big glacial day.