



John Muir Writings

Yosemite in Winter

by John Muir (1872)

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Wild Weather — A Picturesque Christmas Dinner — Idyllic Amusements — Poetic Storms — A Paradise of Clouds.

YOSEMITE VALLEY, January 1st, 1872. Winter has taken Yosemite, and we are snowbound. The latest leaves are shaken from the oaks and alders; the snow-laden pines, with drooping boughs, look like barbed arrows aimed at the sky, and the fern-tangles and meadows are spread with a smooth cloth of snow. Our latest visitor fled two weeks ago. He came via Mariposa, and was safely conducted over the mountain snows by Galen Clark, the well-known pioneer and guardian of the Valley. The total number of visitors to the valley in 1870 was near 1,700, which was about 600 more than on any previous year. This season, about 2,150 entered the valley. As soon as bipeds left Yosemite, bears came in; not to grunt flattery to the falls, but to dine upon ridden-to-death horses. One burly old chief was killed at Nevada Falls by a party of Mono Indians. He was a brown or cinnamon bear, the prevailing species of the region.

Another of the same kind was seen down the valley on the meadow of the Bridal Veil, and another on the Mariposa trail, near the hermitage, and the smooth sand which rims Mirror Lake is grandly printed with their matchless paws. These bears are our grandest game, noblest expressions of mountain power. They deserve a Yosemite home, and the Sierras require them to companion their rocks and domes, and to blend in with their brown sequoias and cedars, and tangles of chaparral. Our winter population—not including the bears—totals twenty-six, employed as follows. Making lumber, ten; making a trail, two; feeding poultry, two; building fences, one; rebuilding a house, one; women, two; children, six, and a pair of Digger Indians with no visible means of support. All of our landlords except one, have disappeared, and doubtless are engaged in concert with stage and railroad companies, with next year’s problems of travel, sorting their labyrinth of tolls and trails—their webs for the flies of ’72. The 20th of November first brought us

signs of winter. Broad, fibrous arcs of white cloud, spanned the valley from wall to wall; grand, island-like masses, bred among the upper domes and brows, wavered doubtfully up and down, some of them suddenly devoured by a swoop of thirsty wind; others, waxing to grand proportions; drifted loosely and heavily about like bergs in a calm sea, or jammed and wedged themselves among spiry crests, or, drawing themselves out like woolen rolls, muffled the highest brows sometimes leaving bare summits cut off from the walls with pine tops atop, that seemed to float loose as the clouds. Tissiack was compassed by a soft, furry cloud, upon which her dome seemed to repose clear and warm in yellow light. At the end of these transition days, the whole company of valley clouds were marshaled for storm; they fused close, and blended, until every seam and bay of blue sky was shut, and our temple, throughout all of its cells and halls, was smoothly full. Rain and snow fell steadily for three days, beginning November 24th, giving about four feet of snow to the valley rim. The snow line descended to the bottom of the valley on the night of November 25th, but after-rains prevented any considerable accumulation.

Then the rocks began to fall. During our equable rainless summers, atmospheric disintegration goes on with the greatest gentleness, and scarce a rock is cast down, but the first rains find many a huge mass ripe for change, and after-slopes made slippery, seams washed out, and water-wedges driven. Constant thunder proclaims the magnitude of accomplished work. We ran repeatedly from the house to hear the larger masses journeying down with a tread that shook the valley.

This three days' chapter of rain was underscored by a seam of sunshine half a day in width, beneath which darkness began to gather for a chapter of snow; heavy cloud-masses rolled down the black-washed walls, circling cathedral rocks and domes, and hiding off all the upper brows and peaks. Thin strips of sunshine slid through momentary seams that were quickly blinded out. The darkness deepened for hours, until every separating shade and line were dimmed to equal black, and all the bright air of our gulf was sponged up, and fastened windless and pulseless in universal cloud. "It's bound to snow," said a mountaineer to me, as he gazed into the heavy gloom, "bound to snow when it gathers cloud material gradual as this. We'll have a regular old-fashioned storm afore long." Scarce had he delivered himself of this meteorological prophecy, ere the beginning flakes appeared, journeying tranquilly down with waving, slow-circling gestures, easy and confident as if long familiar with the paths of sky. Before dark they accomplished a most glorious work of gentle, noiseless beauty. Twelve inches of snow fell during the night and when morning opened our temple, there was more of beauty than pen can tell—from meadow to summit, from wall to wall, every tree and bush, and sculptured rock was muffled and dazzled in downy, unbroken, undrifted snow. Transparent film-clouds hung in the open azure or draped the walls, the gray granite showing dimly through their fairy veil. This after-storm gauze is formed when vapor is made by sun-rays upon exposed portions of the wet walls, which is of higher temperature than the air with which it drifts into contact.

One day usually is sufficient to dry the warmest portions of the wall and to lave and mix the air until it is about equal in temperature to the rocks which contain it—then that reeky storm-tissue disappears. After every heavy snow-fall, numerous avalanches are born upon all of the slopes and cañons of suitable steepness. In general appearance they resemble waterfalls of the highest free-falling kind, being like them, close, opaque, white in color, and composed of companies of comets shooting downward with unequal velocity, amid a casing atmosphere of whirling dust. They are most numerous about the slopes of Glacier Point and Tissiack, but by far the grandest avalanches of this Yosemite region are those of Clouds Rest, on the north side, up Tenaya Cañon. The highest Clouds Rest avalanches have a clear, unbroken course of not less than 5,000 feet, and they frequently wipe down great quantities of granite, pushing it a considerable distance up the opposite slope of the cañon. The avalanches of the Summit Mountains often-times descend below the thick zone of pines that grow upon their bases, cutting straight gaps, without leaving a single tree.

The latter half of December was one vast snow-storm, stained and washed by torrents of rain. We have had only one mail in two months, and if our everlasting mountains are to have such everlasting storms, you may not receive this before June or July. The average temperature of last month at Black's on the south side the valley, was at sunrise, 33° Fahrenheit; at noon 39°; maximum morning temperature, 41°; minimum morning temperature, +13°; maximum noon temperature, 55°; minimum noon temperature, 34°; 21 inches of rain and 41 inches of snow fell during the month up to December 25th. The morning temperature of the sunny, eclipsed side of the valley does not differ much from the south side, but the noon temperature of the north side in clear weather is often as much as 20° higher. Also owing to the difference in height and angle of the various parts of the valley walls and to the irregular form of the bottom of the valley, both north and south sides have a number of well-marked climates. The delta of Indian Cañon is the warmest

portion of the valley, both in winter and summer.

[*Illegible*. . .] Yosemite and we slid smoothly over the astronomical edge of '71; Santa Claus came with very little ado, gave trinkets to our half-dozen younglings, and dropped crusted cakes into bachelors' cabins; but upon the whole our holidays were sorry, unhilarious, whiskified affairs. A grand intercampal Christmas dinner was devised on a scale and style becoming our peerless valley; heaps of solemn substantials were to be lightened and broidered with cookies, and backed by countless cakes, blocky and big as boulders, and a craggy trough-shaped pie was planned for the heart and soul of the feast. It was to have formed a rough model of Yosemite, with domes and brows of "duff" and falls of buttering gravy.

"South Dome be mine," cried one, "softened with sauce of Pohono. "

"I'll eat Royal Arches," cried another, "salted with Bachelor's Tears."

"And I'll choose Riverbank Meadow, plumed with avalanche boulders. And some purple granite for me, cut smooth from the cliffs of El Capitan." etc. etc.—all very well conceived but, alas, like all other ladyless feasts, it was a failure. In my last [*illegible*] I gave you a list of our inhabitants, together with their various employments; now you may peep at our social life, quarrels, amusements, etc. Of course you will guess that in our glorious home we gather on the meadow when our work is done, to feast on the moonlit rocks or dark pines spiring up in the stars, and to drink song from the falls like water, and breathe the deep spirit-hush of the winter. But, alas—no! We only quarrel and gossip, and [*illegible*] whisky! And, to show you how much our rocks and quarrels correspond in magnitude, I will give you our last in detail, which is, perhaps, one of average size.

At the close of this last visiting season each hotel-keeper found among his remaining provisions a living mutton, and it was desirable that these three sheep should be kept over winter in the valley to be in readiness for the first pilgrim customers of '72. Now, in winters of ordinary severity, sheep can care far themselves with but little attention from the shepherd, and at first our sheep seemed to have promise of a mild winter. They had rich, sunny days with noontimes dreamily warm. They nibbled the willow bushes on the meadows and silver lupines beneath the pines, and gathered bunch grass and later eriogonums up on the rugged debris, but a month ago, when heavy snow fell, they had to be cared for, and trouble began. The three shepherds were equally concerned in the three sheep, and bickerings arose about turns in hunting them up; also about the depth of snow which rendered hunting them up necessary, Black's shepherd holding, with characteristic obstinacy, that in light storms the sheep were better let alone to nibble a living from chaparral in the lee of big rocks. Also, it was proposed that when they were driven up, instead of outraging their gregarious instincts by compelling each to eat his bog sedges in solitude, they should be kept together and "boarded round" from barn to barn. But this union could not be effected, because the three sheep were not equal in size, and moreover, Mr. Black's hay was cut on the Bridal Veil Meadow, while Mr. L's was cut on the Bachelor's Tears, and it was argued that one tun of Bachelor's Tears hay was worth two tuns of Bridal Veil, because the Bachelor's Tears was sweet, while the Bridal Veil article was boggy and sour. Black's shepherd denied all this, affirming that Bridal Veil carex was as good as Bachelor's Tears carex, or Virgin's Tears carex, or any other in the valley, salt or sour. The geographical position of H's meadow midway between the Veil and Tears, determined the quality of its carex as medium. These bickerings increased in acrimony, and as Black's shepherd was Scotch, L's Dutch, and H's Yankee, there was grave danger of a war of the races. But by brain-racking diplomacy, and a profusion of bloodless blixen, our pastoral sky was cleared, and now all goes heartily well, and each sheep eats its own sedge in its own barn, tended by its own shepherd. All this beneath Tutocahnula and the domes. Ruskin who deals in the relationships of men and mountains, may find some difficult problems here. In striking contrast with these diminutive wranglings are the broad, loving harmonies of our whisky soirees of which about seven are held weekly.

Each of the two bars now open has its own particular friends and patrons, but neither between dealers nor patrons does there exist the faintest trace of opposition or jealousy. This dealer A gathers up his patrons and repairs to the whisky of B which, together with cards, and bear stories, and shooting scrapes of early days, are freely discussed. Next evening B gathers his patrons and repairs to the whisky of A. The two whiskies are about a mile apart, and between them a nocturnal see-saw of admirable fidelity is maintained, although the two whiskies are not of the same species, one being "bushhead" and the other "golden" pronounced with a long lazy emphasis on the 'o'.

More shingle houses are being built, one of which is to be a saloon. At the present rate of progress, flimsy buildings will soon bedraggle the valley from end to end, making it appear like the raw pine towns of a new railroad. Also the meadows are being fenced up, with trees living and dead chopped down and the divine banks and thickets of the briar-rose and azalea are being trampled and cleared away under the name of d——d chaparral, and all destroyable natural beauty in general is fast fading before the armed presence of vulgar mercenary "improvement". But happily, by far the great portion of Yosemite is unimprovable. Her trees and flowers will melt like snow, but her domes and falls are everlasting. I have said that one-half of last month was filled with storm, but the first gift of December weather was a ripe cluster of golden days filling up all the other half. Days and nights glowed past in equal splendor, and not until the afternoon of the 16th was there any sign of coming storm. On the night of the 17th we had a light rain, which changed to snow, and in the morning about ten inches remained unmelted on the meadows. On the night of the 18th rain fell in torrents, but with a temperature of 34°, and the snowline remained high above the meadows. But some time after eleven o'clock the temperature was suddenly raised by a south wind to 42° carrying the snow line up to the tops of the valley and far beyond out on the upper basins, perhaps to the very summit of the range, and morning saw Yosemite in the grandeur of flood. Torrents of warm rain were washing the walls, and melting the snow of the surrounding mountains, and the liberated meltings joined with the rains, sang jubilee in glorious congregations of cascades and falls. On both sides [of] the Sentinel foamed a splendid cascade, and over on Three Brothers, half concealed by the pines, I could see fragments of an uncountable company of snowy falls and cascades of every form and voice, and I ran for the open meadows to see the whole circumference of living rocks at once. The meadow between Blacks and Hutchings was full of green lakes, edged and islanded with floating snow, but after fording many a young torrent, I succeeded in groping along the debris to a wadeable meadow between Hutchings and Laymans, in the open midst of the most glorious assemblage of waterfalls ever laid bare to mortal eyes. Between Blacks and Hutchings, there were ten majestic cascades and falls, around Glacier Point, six; on the shoulder of South Dome, facing the main valley, three; on South Dome, facing Mirror Lake, eight, between Mt. Watkins and Washington Column, ten; between Arch Falls and Three Brothers, nineteen—fifty-six newborn falls occupying this upper end of the valley, beside countless host of silvery arteries gleaming everywhere. In the whole valley there must have been nearly a hundred. And be it remembered that those falls were not mere momentary transient gushes, but noble-mannered waters, shooting from an average height of near three thousand feet—the very smallest with notes audible at a distance of several miles. From this meadow standpoint only one fall is normally seen, but on this jubilee day there were forty, all perfect and distinct.

The Upper Yosemite Fall is queen of all these mountain waters yet in the first half day of this jubilee her voice was scarcely heard and her manners betrayed no warmth of sympathy with the gushing enthusiasm that encompassed her. she sang her everyday song in everyday dress, but about three o'clock in the afternoon I suddenly heard an overwhelming crashing and booming mixed with heavy gaspings and rocky explosions. I ran from the house thinking that a rock avalanche had started, but quickly discovered that all this outbreak of overmastering sounds came from Yosemite Fall. The great flood wave gathered from many a glacier cañon of the Hoffman mountains had just arrived, sweeping logs and ice before it and plunging over the tremendous verge, at once blended in crowning grandeur with the universal anthem storm.

On November 28th came one of the most picturesque snow storms I have ever seen. It was a tranquil day in Yosemite. About midday a close-grained cloud grew in the middle of the valley, blurring the sun; but rocks and trees continued to cast shadow. In a few hours the cloud-ceiling deepened and gave birth to a rank down-growth of silky streamers. These cloud-weeds were most luxuriant about the Cathedral Rocks, completely hiding all their summits. Then heavier masses, hairy outside with a dark nucleus, appeared, and foundered almost to the ground. Toward night all cloud and rock distinctions were blended out, rock after rock disappeared, El Capitan, the Domes and the Sentinel, and all the brows about Yosemite Falls were wiped out, and the whole valley was filled with equal, seamless gloom. There was no wind and every rock and tree and grass blade had a hushed, expectant air. The fullness of time arrived, and down came the big flakes in tufted companies of full grown flowers. Not jostling and rustling like autumn leaves or blossom showers of an orchard whose castaway flakes are hushed into any hollow for a grave, but they journeyed down with gestures of confident life, alighting upon predestined places on rock and leaf, like flocks of linnets or showers of summer flies. Steady, exhaustless, innumerable. The trees, and bushes, and dead brown grass were flowered far beyond summer, bowed down in blossom and all the rocks were buried. Every peak and dome, every niche and tablet had their share of snow. And blessed are the eyes that beheld morning open the glory of that one dead storm. In vain did I search for some special separate mass of beauty on which to rest my gaze. No island appeared throughout the whole gulf of the beauty. The glorious crystal sediment was everywhere. From wall to wall of our beautiful temple, from

meadow to sky was one finished unit of beauty, one star of equal ray, one glowing sun, weighed in the celestial balances and found perfect.

Other New York *Tribune* articles

- [Yosemite Glaciers \(1871\)](#)
 - [Yosemite in Spring \(1872\)](#)
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