

Mount Shasta Collection

John Muir

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SHASTA IN WINTER.

John Muir, the Geologist and Explorer, Ascends It.

A Hard and Perilous Undertaking--Among the Glaciers, Lava-beds, and Storm-clouds.

[SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE BULLETIN.]

SISSON'S STATION, November 24, 1874.

SHASTA STORMS.

Snow is falling on icy Shasta. Its rugged glaciers, steep lava-slopes, and broad, swelling base are all gloriously snow-covered, and day and night snow is still falling--snow on snow. The October storms that began a month ago and extended so generally throughout the State, fell with special emphasis upon the lofty cone of Shasta, weaving and felting its lavish cross of snow-crystals, fold over fold, and clothing the whole massive mountain in richest winter white. The big dark cluster of November storms was separated from those of October by a week of brilliant sunshine, during which I sauntered leisurely Shastaward, allowing time for the snow, that I knew had fallen, to settle somewhat, with a view to making the ascent of the mountain. This bright lane of cloudless weather was exceedingly buoyant and delightful; every mountain and valley seemed exhilarated with their magnificent storm-bath. The Indian summer disappeared, leaving the atmosphere intensely clear, yet not without a racy autumnal mellowness. The washed colors of the dogwood and the maple shone out gorgeously along every water-course. The pine-needles thrilled and sparkled as if tuned anew; flies danced in the warm sunbeams; the bent and dripping grasses rose again, and the dainty squirrels came out, with every hair of their tails dry and electric, as if they had never known a single rain-drop; even the teamsters, dragging toilsomely through the turn-pike mud, began to swear in lower tones and look hopeful.

A PEDESTRIAN IN THE MOUNTAINS--A ROUGH TRIP.

I followed the main Oregon and California stage-road from Redding to Sisson's, and besides trees, squirrels, and beautiful mountain-streams, I came upon some interesting

men, rugged, weather-beaten fellows, who, in hunting and mining, had been brought face to face with many a Shasta storm. Most of them were a kind of almanac, stored with curious facts and dates and ancient weather-notes, extending through a score of stormy mountain years. Whether the coming winter was to be mild or severe was the question of questions, and the diligence and fervor with which it was discussed was truly admirable. A picturesque series of prognostications were offered, based by many different methods upon the complexion of the sky, the fall of leaves, the flight of wild geese, etc., each of which seemed wholly satisfactory only to its author.

A pedestrian upon these mountain-roads is sure to excite curiosity, and many were the interrogations put concerning my little ramble. When told that I came from town for an airing and a walk, and that icy Shasta was my mark, I was invariably informed that I had come the wrong time of year. The snow was too deep, the wind too violent, and the danger of being lost in blinding drifts too great. And when I hinted that clean snow was beautiful, and that storms were not so bad as they were called, they closed the argument by directing attention to their superior experiences, declaring most emphatically that the ascent of "Shasta Butte" through the snow was impossible. Nevertheless, I watched the robins eating wild cherries, and rejoiced in brooding over the miles of lavish snow that I was to meet. Sisson gave me bread and venison, and before noon of the 2d of November I was in the frosty azure of the summit.

MOUNT SHASTA--A GLORIOUS PICTURE.

In journeying up the valley of the Sacramento one obtains frequent glimpses of Mt. Shasta through the pine-trees from the tops of hills and ridges, but at Sisson's there is a grand out-opening both of the mountains and the forests, and Shasta stands revealed at just the distance to be seen most comprehensively and impressively. It was in the middle of the last day of October that I first beheld this glorious picture. Gorgeous thickets of the thorn, cherry, birch, and alder flamed around the meadow. There were plenty of bees and golden-rods, and the warm air was calm as the bottom of a lake. Standing on the hotel-veranda, and looking only at outlines, there, first of all, is a brown meadow with its crooked stream, then a zone of dark forest--its countless spires of fir and pine rising above one another, higher, higher in luxuriant ranks, and above all the great white Shasta cone sweeping far into the cloudless blue; meadow, forest and mountain inseparably blended and framed in by the arching sky. I was in the heart of this beauty next day. Sisson, who is a capital mountaineer, fitted me out for calms or storms as only a mountaineer could, with a week's provisions so generous in kind and quantity it could easily be made to last a month in case of a fortunate snow-bound. Of course I knew the weariness of snow-climbing, and the stinging frosts, and the so-called dangers of mountaineering so late in the year, therefore I could not ask any guide to go with me. All I wanted was to have blankets and provisions deposited as far up in the timber as the snow would allow a pack-horse to go. Here I could make a storm-nest and lie warm, and make raids up or around the mountain whenever the weather would allow. On setting out from Sisson's my barometer as well as the sky gave notice of the approach of another storm, the wind sighed in the pines, filmy, half-transparent clouds began to dim the sunshine. It was one of those brooding days that Keith so well knows how to paint, in

which every tree of the forest and every mountain seems conscious of the approach of some great blessing, and stands hushed and waiting.

ASCENDING SHASTA IN WINTER.

The ordinary and proper way to ascend Shasta is to ride from Sisson's to the upper edge of the timber line,--a distance of some eight or ten miles--the first day, and camp, and rising early push on to the summit, and return the second day. But the deep snow prevented the horses from reaching the camping-ground, and after stumbling and wallowing in the drifts and lava blocks we were glad to camp as best we could, some eight or ten hundred feet lower. A pitch-pine fire speedily changed the climate and shed a blaze of light on the wild lava slope and the straggling storm-bent pines around us. Melted snow answered for coffee-water and we had plenty of delicious venison to roast.

Toward midnight I rolled myself in my blankets and slept until half-past one, when I arose and ate more venison, tied two days' provisions to my belt, and set out for the summit. After getting above the highest flexilis pines it was fine practice pushing up the magnificent snow-slopes alone in the silence of the night. Half the sky was clouded; in the other half the stars sparkled icily in the thin, frosty air, while everywhere the glorious snow fell away from the summit of the cone in flowing folds more extensive and unbroken than any I had ever yet beheld. When the day dawned the clouds were crawling slowly and massing themselves, but gave no intimation of immediate danger. The snow was dry as meal, and drifted freely, rolling over and over in angular fragments like sand, or rising in the air like dust. The frost was intense, and the wind full of crystal dust, making breathing at times rather difficult. In pushing upwards I frequently sank to my arm-pits between buried lava-blocks, but most of the way only to my knees. When tired of walking I still wallowed forward on all fours. The steepness of the slope--thirty-five degrees in many places--made any species of progress very fatiguing, but the sublime beauty of the snowy expanse and of the landscapes that began to rise around, and the intense purity of the icy azure overhead thrilled every fibre with wild enjoyment and rendered absolute exhaustion impossible. Yet I watched the sky with great caution, for it was easy to see that a storm was approaching. Mount Shasta rises 10,000 feet above the general level in blank exposure to the deep gulf-streams of air, and I have never been in a labyrinth of peaks and canyons where the dangers of a storm seemed so formidable as here. I was, therefore, in constant readiness to retreat into the timber. However, by half past 10 o'clock I reached the utmost summit.

AMONG THE GLACIERS AND THE LAVA--THE DESCENT.

I have seen Montgomery street, and I know that California is in a hurry, therefore I have no intention of saying anything here concerning the building of this grand fire-mountain, nor of the sublime circumference of landscapes of which it is the centre. I spent a couple of hours tracing the outlines of its ancient lava-streams, extending far into the surrounding plains and the path-ways of its ancient glaciers, but the wind constantly increased in violence, raising the snow in magnificent drifts, and forming it into long, wavering banners that flowed in the sun. A succession of small storm-clouds struck

against the summit pinnacles, like icebergs, darkening the air as they passed, and producing a chill as definite and sudden as if ice-water were dashed in one's face. This is the kind of cloud in which snow-flowers grow, and I was compelled to begin a retreat, which, after spending a few minutes upon the main Shasta glacier and the side of the "Crater Butte," I accomplished more than an hour before dark, so that I had time to hollow a strip of ground for a nest in the lee of a block of red lava, where firewood was abundant.

AMONG THE STORM-CLOUDS.

Next morning, breaking suddenly out of profound sleep, my eyes opened upon one of the most sublime scenes I ever beheld. A boundless wilderness of storm-clouds of different age and ripeness were congregated over all the landscape for thousands of square miles, colored gray, and purple, and pearl and glowing white, among which I seemed to be floating, while the cone of Shasta above and the sky was tranquil and full of the sun. It seemed not so much an ocean as a land of clouds, undulating hill and dale, smooth purple plains, and silvery mountains of cumuli, range over range, nobly diversified with peaks and domes, with cool shadows between, and with here and there a wide trunk canyon, smooth and rounded as if eroded by glaciers. I gazed enchanted, but cold gray masses drifting hither and thither like rack on a wind-swept plain began to shut out the light, and it was evident that they would soon be marshalled for storm. I gathered as much wood as possible, and snugged it shelteringly around my storm-nest. My blankets were arranged, and the topmost fastened down with stakes, and my precious bread-sack tucked in at my head, I was ready when the first flakes fell. All kinds of clouds began to fuse into one, the wind swept past in hissing floods, and the storm closed down on all things, producing a wild exhilaration.

My fire blazed bravely, I had a week's wood, a sack full of bread, and a nest that the wildest wind could not demolish, and I had, moreover, plenty of material for the making of snow-shoes if the depth of the snow should render them necessary.

The storm lasted about a week, and I had plenty to do listening to its tones and watching the gestures of the flexilis pine, and in catching snow-crystals and examining them under a lens and observing the methods of their deposition as summer fountains.

BACK TO SISSON'S.

On the third day Sisson sent up two horses for me, and his blankets, notwithstanding I had expressed a wish to be let alone in case it stormed. The horses succeeded in breaking through on the trail they made in coming up. In a few hours more this would have been impossible. The ride down through the forest of silver firs was truly enchanting, the thick flakes falling aslant the noble columns decorated with yellow lichen, and their rich, fronded branches drooped and laden in universal bloom. Farther down, the sugar-pines with sublime gestures were feeding on the storm and waving their giant arms as if in ecstasy. At an elevation of 4,000 feet above the sea the snow became rain, and all the chaparral, cherry, manzanita and ceanothus were bright and dripping.

A GOOD CENTRE FOR STORM NEWS.

Sisson's Station seems to be a favorite resort of teamsters as well as of tourists, and one could hardly be more advantageously situated for the reception of storm news. Drivers from Oregon and California meet here almost every night, and while gathered--steaming and mud-bedraggled--around the bar-room fire compare road and weather notes in terms more picturesque than exact. California storms seem at present to be about as continuous as those of Oregon, for they are alike described as "never letting up," and I can hear of but two species, namely, "dam'd" and "damndest." Meanwhile, the grand storm continues. The wind sings gloriously in the pine-trees. Snow is still falling on icy Shasta, snow on snow, treasuring up food for forests and glaciers and for the thousand springs that gush out around its base.

JOHN MUIR