

# **MODOC MEMORIES.**

A Visit to the Lava Beds By Muir the Geologist  
and Explorer--The Spot where Gen. Canby  
Fell--Sad Relics of the War.

[FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.]

## **VISIT TO THE MODOC LAVA BEDS.**

"The Lava Beds," rendered famous by the Modoc war, lie on the southern shore of Rhett or Tule lake, at an elevation above sea-level of about 4,500 feet. They are a portion of an ancient flood of dense black lava, dipping north-eastward at a low angle. They are about as destitute of soil as a glacial pavement, and though the surface is generally level, it is dotted with hillocks and rough crater-like pits and traversed in every direction by a network of yawning fissures, forming a combination of topographical conditions of a very rare and striking character. While hunting the wild sheep around Mount Bremer, our camp was enlivened with visits from the hunters and trappers, and roving vaqueros of the region. Some of these were as nomadic as Modocs, and had fought in the lava beds, and because the events of the war were still fresh in their minds we were presented with many lively scraps of history and picturesque sketches of the character and personal appearance of Captain Jack, Boston Charley, and Black Jim, most of which had the strangely crevassed and caverned Lava Beds for a background. Our whole party became so eagerly interested that a visit to the war grounds was at once planned, with the eldest Van Bremer, who had fought the Modocs, and was familiar with the whole region, as guide. Our route lay down the Bremer meadows, past many a smooth grassy knoll and jutting cliff, and along the shore of Lower Klamath Lake, thence across a few rough, gray miles of sage plain, making a journey some six or seven hours in length. We got into camp in the middle of the afternoon, on top of a lava bluff 450 feet high.

Toward sunset I sauntered down to the edge of the bluff, which commands a fine map-like view both of the lava beds and the picturesque region adjacent to them. Here you are looking south-eastward, and the grand Modoc landscape, which at once fills and takes possession of you, lies revealed in front. It is composed of three principal parts. There on your left lies a calm lake; on your right a calm forest, and the black lava beds in the middle.

## **THE LAKE--THE LAVA-PLAIN.**

The lake is fairly blooming in purple light, and is so responsive to the sky, both in calmness and color, that it seems itself a sky. No mountain shores hide its loveliness. It lies wide open for many a mile, veiled in no other mystery than the mystery of light. The forest also is flooded with sun-purple, and white Shasta rises above it, rejoicing in the ineffable beauty of the alpen glow. But neither the glorified woods on the one hand, nor the lake on the other, can at first hold the eye; it is that dark, mysterious lava-plain between them. Here you trace yawning fissures, there clusters of sombre pits; now you

mark where the lava is bent and corrugated into swelling ridges--here again where it breaks in a foam of boulders.

Tufts of grass grow here and there, and bushes of the hardy sage, but they have a singed appearance and do not hide the blackness. Deserts are charming, all kinds of bogs, barrens, and heathy moors, but the Modoc lava beds have an uncanny look, that only an eager desire to learn their geology could overcome. The sun-purple slowly deepened over all the landscape, then darkness fell like a death, and I crept back to the blaze of the camp-fire.

### **A TRAGIC SPOT--THE MODOC STRONGHOLD.**

Next morning the Modoc plains and mountains were born again, and Van Bremer led us down the bluff. Just at the foot you come to a square, enclosed by a rough stone wall. It is a graveyard, where some thirty soldiers lie, most of whom met their fate on the 26th of April, surprised by the Modocs while eating lunch, scattered in the lava beds, and shot down like bewildered sheep. Picking our way over the strange ridges and hollows of the "beds," we come, in a few minutes, to a circular flat a score of yards or so in diameter, where the comparative smoothness of the lava and a few handfuls of soil have caused the grass tufts to grow taller. This is where General Canby met his fate. From here our guide led us around the shore of the lake to the main Modoc stronghold, a distance of about two and a half miles. The true strongholds of Indians are chiefly fields of tall grass, brushy woods, and shadowy swamps, where they can crouch like panthers and make themselves invisible, but the Modoc castle is in the rock. When the Yosemite Indians made raids upon the early settlers of the lower Merced they withdrew with their spoils into Yosemite valley, and the Modocs are said to have boasted that in case of war they possessed a stone house into which no white man could come. Notwithstanding the height and sheerness of Yosemite walls, the Indians were unable to hold it against the soldiers for a single day, but the Modoc castle was held defiantly for months. It consists of numerous redoubts, formed by the unequal subsidence of portions of the lava flow, and of a complicated network of redans abundantly supplied with salient and re-entering angles, and these redans are united with one another and with the redoubts by a labyrinth of open and covered corridors, some of which expand at intervals into spacious caves, forming altogether the strongest and most complete natural Gibraltar I ever beheld.

Other lava castles, scarcely less strong, are connected with this by subterranean passages known only to the Indians. While the unnatural blackness of the rock out of which nature has constructed these defenses and the weird inhuman physiognomy of the whole region are well calculated to inspire terror of themselves. Before coming to the battle-ground we frequently hear it remarked that our soldiers merited the fate that befel them. "They were unplucky," "too incautious," "too drunk," etc. But here we could only pity the poor fellows called to so deadly a task.

### **THE MODOC CAPTURE.**

In the capture of this Modoc castle there was no scope for what is known as "brilliance and knightliness." The strategy of a Von Moltke, or impetuous valor of a Hotspur were alike inapplicable, nor was it possible to achieve here any of that class of bulky victories styled "glorious" which fill newspapers and are followed in due course of time by clerical hallelujahs. On the contrary it was all cat-crouching and gliding--every soldier for himself--while the flinty jaggedness of the ground was such that individual soldiers could scarce keep themselves together as units; one limb straddled here, another there; and while thus sprawling to the assault, unseen rifles were leveled upon them with deadly aim. On the other hand, the Modocs were at home. They had hunted the wild sheep and the bear in these lava beds; now they were hunting men in the very same way. Their guns were thrust through chinks while they lay safely concealed. If they wished to peer above their breast-works they tied bunches of sage-brush around their heads. They were familiar with by-ways both over and under ground, and could at any time sink out of sight like squirrels among boulders. Our bewildered soldiers heard and felt them shooting, now before them, now behind them, as they glided from place to place along fissures and subterranean passes, all the while maintaining a more perfect invisibility than that of modern ghosts. Modocs, like most other Indians, are about as unknighly as possible. The quantity of the moral sentiment developed in them seems infinitely small, and though in battle they appear incapable of feeling any distinction between men and beasts, even their savageness lacks fullness and cordiality. The few that have come under my own observation had something repellant in their aspects, even when their features were in sunshine and settled in the calm of peace; when, therefore, they were crawling stealthily in these gloomy caves, in and out on all fours, unkempt and begrimed, and with the glare of war in their eyes, they must have looked very devilish. Our guide led us through the mazes of the castle, pointing out its complicated lines of redoubts and redans, and our astonishment at the wild strength of the place was augmented at every turn.

### **CAPTAIN JACK'S CAVE--GEOLOGICAL PHENOMENA.**

Captain Jack's cave is one of the many sombre mansions of the castle. It measures about 25 or 30 feet in diameter at the opening, and extends but a short distance in a horizontal direction. The floor is littered with bones and horns of the animals slaughtered for food during the war--a good specimen of a human home of the Stone Age. The sun shines freely into its mouth, and graceful bunches of grasses and eriogonae and sage grow around it, redeeming it from all its degrading associations, and making it lovable notwithstanding its unfinished roughness and blackness. One of our party was a relic-seeker and we were unremitting in our endeavors to satisfy his cravings. Captain Jack's drinking-cup, fragments of his clothing, buttons, etc., were freely offered, but only gold watches or pistols said to have been plundered from the dead and hidden in some of these endless caves were sufficiently curious for his refined tastes.

The lava beds are replete with phenomena of great geological interest. Here are true fissures from a few inches to 8 or 10 feet in width, abrupt and sheer-walled as the crevasses of glaciers, and extending continuously for miles. Miniature hills and dales also and lake basins and mountain ranges, whose formation is due neither to direct upheaval nor to erosion. Where the lava meets the lake there are some fine curving bays beautifully

embroidered with rushes and polygonums, a favorite resort of waterfowl. Riding homeward we created a noisy plashing and beating of wings among the cranes and geese, but the ducks were more trustful and kept their places, merely swimming in and out through openings in the rushes, and rippling the glassy water on which the sun was beaming. The countenance of the lava beds became beautiful. Tufts of pale grasses, relieved on the jet-rocks, looked like bouquets on a mantel; besides, gray and orange lichens, cushions of green mosses appeared, and one tuft of tiny rock-fern. Bountiful Nature gives all this "beauty for ashes" in this sombre region of volcanic fire.