

JOHN MUIR IN FISH CAMP, CALIFORNIA, 1875

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Endnotes by Tom Bopp [marked with “—tb.”]

Chapter IV, pp. 211 - 218

August, 1875

Camp in Upper Fresno Basinⁱ. 5 P.M.

Now an old brown log is glorified with the evening sun-glow. Two bars of mellow light shoot up the meadow; both margins are in shadow, with scarce a flower panicle stirring in the hush. Here and there a willow-tuft glows against the gray shade. One grand promontory of firs stands full in the light, the long branches clad in yellow lichen. Farther back the brown trunks are flecked with sunshine, and on the north side one young pine towers transfigured, while all its companions are in shadow.

Tamiasⁱⁱ is frisking, now near, now retired and sitting on the top of a stake, calmly watching and listening. A big cone falls near-by with a hearty thud, but he has heard that before and knows it well enough. Now the logcockⁱⁱⁱ clucks, but he has heard that also, and the woodpecker's rap. But to the tiniest uncommon sound he listens attentively. . . .

A few rays slant into the shadowy amber deep. Now the highest tops of trees are in night. Far up the mountain the slopes are still steeped in thick unshining purple, and we think of the alpenglow still farther beyond, inspiring the snowy peaks.

Night.

A few moments later the day is done, and all is changed to dull gray. Fainter, fainter grows the twilight. . . . The brownest trunks lose their color. . . . How solemn the hush, the rest! Not a squirrel note now. Every one is at home motionless, sleeping in a rolled ball, all his lightning-filled limbs wrapt about with his tail for warmth. The dew is falling. The violets and daisies are drinking. Not a breath stirs the innumerable plumes of fir. Go out into the latest twilight on the mead and see even the airy panicles of Agrostis^{iv} scarce moving. Yet the heart of Nature is still beating.

Now the architecture of the forest is seen in all its grandeur. In the daylight we see too much—more than we can attend to or appreciate. But at night all is massed, and the spires and towers of black shoot up to the gray sky along the meadow, forming a wall, a street of trees. . . . How palpably this studied arrangement strikes the dullest eye!

Morning.

A whiz and a swoop as of a bolt from the heavens. Care look and see a hawk pouncing on a buzzard. . . . The forest opens and a gray dome rises into the sky.

There before us is the grand wide-open basin of the Upper Fresno, with innumerable trees—spiry firs, yellow pines, and sugar pines with outstretched arms, and on the distant hills the kingly sequoias^v. . . . Now the sound of rushing water-cascades mazing carelessly to the sea. . . .

We come upon the highways and byways of deer. Young squirrels watch from tree limbs. If you cannot see the squirrels, don't go to seek them, but bide a wee, and they will come perchance on their own errands, or from sheer curiosity. You hear a strange note of questioning, of wonderment, and lo! there he is, gazing with fearless eyes. A moment more and he darts upon you, running across your legs, if you have the nerve to remain motionless—electrifying you like a stream of lightning What a world of expression in his eye, as if of the woods condensed. No eye so bold, so unflinching.^{vi} Perhaps he tries to drive you away with a sudden onset, screaming “Pyow, pyow, pyow,” like a bubble bursting in a laugh. Or perhaps he leaves without a word, and returns to nutting. His whole flesh exhales the odor of balsam, and tastes of pine needles and rosin - every fiber leavened. . . . No man incapable of calm waiting will see wood-dwellers, winged or footed.

In seeds what plans for future centuries ! . . . In meadow pools, with beetles and skaters, what a world of faerie!

As we walk nature in the noon glow lies beautified. Passive, yet active, immortal.

Cool coverts for deer in the chaparral, pressed and outspread by winter snow, then rising elastic a few feet, forming a bower and dim retreat.

Wah Mello (Fresno Dome).
Headwaters of North Fork
of San Joaquin River.

Coming in sight of the massive dome, rounded and bare, it seems so ethereal after the still terrestrial woods that our thoughts undergo a change. New landscapes span the far horizon. A mile away is a ridge of pre-glacial lava, the residual mass of fiery floods. . . . And over the meadows an avalanche of water, rocks, and logs swept a few years ago—a terrible manifestation of Nature's power. But the law of these things how few can see! . . . The cooled lava is forested now. The sun shines lovingly upon it, and all is joyous life. New flowers are already planted on the flood belts, showing Nature's modes of working towards beauty and joy. . . . Over all came floods of glacial ice, bringing all landscapes, forests, and gardens with their tender loveliness. We read our Bibles and remain fearful and uncomfortable amid Nature's loving destructions, her beautiful deaths. Talk of immortality! After a whole day in the woods, we are already immortal. When is the end of such a day? . . .

There is no rankness now in the flower stalks, or lushness in the grass. No fiery tropic splendor, but warm mellow lights on rock and tree and mead—subdued tones and gray transparent shades, and from the west an amber flood of glory! . . .

Walking these woodland paths we find ourselves following deer and bear. Fragrance from beautiful mountain carpets greets us in open places where the pines stand well apart. Here is the snow-flower gone to seed, yet wonderful in crimson color. And Ceanothus still in bloom, and sweet hawthorn fragrance.

We are heated on the open hills, and soon descend to the valley, where water runs cool amid saxifrages, brawling calmly and leisurely now . . . from pool to pool, over boulders once flood-rolled. And we enjoy the flood-music once again, for it is all well written on channels of rock and boulder walls, and stranded, battered logs.

Every flower, every needle is exhaling odor. Amid such innumerable fragrance fountains, how wonderful that Nature keeps so admirable a balance! The air is never gross, but subtle essences combine to give health and pleasure. So also the streams of our meadows are mixed with the juices of a thousand flowers—aye, and minerals too, for water is a universal solvent. . . . Yet how rich and pure and exhilarating a drink for gods!

Dawn.

Morning comes again, hallowed with all the deeds of night. Here it is six or seven thousand feet above the sea, yet in all this tranquil scene we feel no remoteness, no rest from care and chafing duties because here they have no existence. Every sense is satisfied. For us there is no past, no future. We live in the present and are full. No room for hungry hopes, none for regrets, none for exultation, none for fear.

Down in the willow wilderness are found the red-stemmed cornel, and giant larkspur eight feet high, interspersed with *Castilleja* and lupine, and boat-leaved *Veratrum*. And *Leersia*, finest of mountain grasses. And among drier woods the mottle-leaved *Goodyera*, and thickets of tall arching grasses.

A cow comes through the woods exploring the meadow, and I know by her tracks she has been here before. Will all this garden be made into beef and mutton pastures, and be delved by the hog-herd and ditcher's^{vii} spade? I often wonder what man will do with the mountains – that is, with their utilizable, destructible garments. Will he cut down all the trees to make ships and houses? If so, what will be the final and far upshot? Will human destructions like those of Nature – fire and flood and avalanche work out a higher good, a finer beauty? Will a better civilization come in accord with obvious nature, and all this wild beauty be set to human poetry and song? Another universal outpouring of lava, or the coming of a glacial period, could scarce wipe out the flowers and shrubs more effectually than do the sheep. And what then is coming? What is the human part of the mountains' destiny?

The Sierra crop of conifers is ripe, and will no doubt be speedily harvested. New lumber companies are being created almost every year, and a flume is being rapidly pushed to completion to extend to the railroad, when the magnificent firs and pines of the Fresno Valley^{viii} – not excepting the sequoias – will be lumbered and floated to market.

Night.

Now a pale spirit light broods over the meadow and willow-fringed bosses. The trees are bordered in white, their trunks clearly outlined against the intense jet of the darkness beyond. . . .

Morning.

An owl, prince of lunatics. Health in his soft, angleless 'too-who'-hoo-hoo'.⁹ Sometimes he is heard an hour after sunrise. A yellow flicker, a noble pileated woodpecker, and a robin. The jay is not so vociferous here as east of the plain. He chaffers pleasantly enough, but his scream seems out of tune, as if a pine needle or a butterfly wing were in his throat.

Linnets and nuthatches are below, pecking the moss of tree trunks, and flycatchers with silvery bosoms and wings black as wood-shadows.

Here and there sounds the tap-a-rap of a woodpecker, and presently a hawk sails majestically over all.

Forest shadows fall across the mead in front of us. The brown woodland slope beyond the trees is half in shadow. The fine brown trunks – some are wholly in light on one side, others are flecked and mottled. Brown tones of meadow sedges, grayish green of willows, still grayer huckleberry patches and dark green of alder.

Compare walking on dead planks with walking on living rock where a distinct electric flash seems to attend each step. Then there's the soothing softness of mossy bogs, and brushing past lily stalks and columbines in ravines. . . . There is no danger in night walking.

A garden with Senecio and yarrow, dense mosses, Camassia, and Viola with purple-striped lip, oval opposite petals turning back, delicate spurs seen between short stems, every hair tipped with dew. The young buds look like the bills of gorbings^{ix}, and the heart-shaped round leaves mingle both the primrose and Mimulus.

Dainty rosettes of liverwort pasted down on the ground. Alpine clove white-flowered. Farther out are long leaves of Dodecatheon, and taller brown mosses. Long stemmed Calamagrostis waves in the faintest breeze. Towers of Spiranthes, and daisy-like dandelions, and sprawling rushes. A crooked stream with black mud bottom, bays of shadow, and promontories of moss, bossy and rich and lustrous.

Around crinkled willows grow the tall crimson paintbrush, and *Hosackia grandiflora*, Helenium, and towering spikes of mint. Brooklime with running stems and blue flowers, lupine and Epilobium, Polygonum and long-leaved runnel and tall

rue, also pretty beds of Galium.

On the dry meadow-margin ferny leaves and flowers make a fine carpet. St. John's-wort, yellow-starred, makes the softest mats of all. Monardella, Gayophytum, musk Mimulus, pink Gilia, and blue-curly in moist shadows, with a margin of ferns

And life-everlasting. *Rubus nutkanus* under the trees. Potentilla, snowberry, and purple Eunanus, purple-flowered Malva, and a violet like a hairy wood rush.

Camp between two forks of Big Creek. *August.*

A Forest Dawn. Bird time of day is the morning when the sunbeams begin to sift through the treetops. Lie down in a silver far thicket at night and wait for their coming in the wakening day. Fifty or sixty visited my grove this morning on the edge of a green forest meadow where white violets grow all the year.

The night wind was a mere soft breathing, and the meadow brook was heard plainly speaking and singing its pebbly words and songs. The stars made themselves felt like flowers with exciting fragrance. The great moon looked down into the recesses of the shadowed wood as if giving all her attention to its concerns. Some bird – I regret a stranger to me – uttered a sweet low note, simple and unrelated, at intervals of three or four seconds. Then a broad-voiced owl hooted across the meadow. Soon these become silent, and all the night was given to the moon and stars. Only the brook spoke more and more earnestly and eloquently.

At dawn a multitude of bird voices were heard aloft in the tall firs and sugar pines far and near. Soon they came to my grove, perching above my head, looking down with merry morning twittering, pecking at the fir buds and burrs for breakfast. . . . One little full-breasted nubbins with white belly and dark back and wings. . . . Also a brown wren following the curves of furrows in bark of fir, and a dainty canary^x with orange bosom uttering sweet spicules of music that filled the air like frost crystals on a frosty morning. Steller jay was here too, and the woodpecker. But by nine o'clock every wing was still.

Then came butterflies on the meadow, and dragonflies and buzzing bluebottles and a few small gray mosquitoes.

And the wind waked the sleeping firs, which threw tremulous and warm shadows on the green meadow ground, and tall stumps barred it with shadows black and straight

as if ruled. Squirrel notes were mingled with the birds' earliest. Their first note is a fine musical sparrow half chatter, half chirp. They began their work, and soon were heard the thumping sounds of falling cones, for they are all ripe now, and the squirrels are cutting them off to store away for winter beneath logs and leaves.

One fine confiding and bold fellow eyed me for a time, then came towards me in nervous birdlike dartings along the small fir boughs above my head, then, descending, ran across my coat skirts and hastened away, looking over his shoulders as if filled with unsatisfied curiosity and astonishment.

The forest edgings are here intensely and excitingly beautiful. Tall spires of fir are mingled with sugar pines with outstretched arms, fringed along the base with chestnut and dogwood and with shadows shimmering and waving on the smooth mead. . . .

Night.

A Campfire. The glories of a mountain campfire are far greater than may be guessed. . . . One can make a day of any size, and regulate the rising and setting of his own sun and the brightness of its shining. You gaze around at the illumined trees as if you never saw trees before. How marvelously the plummy fronds of the fir show out their beauty, as if the tree had ferns for branches. And each grass and daisy, now the attention is directed, may be seen for what it is, the shining corolla and panicles waving and nodding in sympathy with the flashing flames. . . . The bossy boles and branches ascend in fire to heaven, the light slowly gathered from the suns of centuries going again to the sun, in clear eddying sparks and flames of ever-changing motion, the very type of unwearable, elemental power. . . . Sparks stream off like comets or in round starlike worlds from a sun. They fly into space in milky ways of lavishness, then fall in white flakes feathery and pure as snow.

ⁱ In the 1870s, "Upper Fresno Basin" refers to the watershed above the Lewis fork of the Fresno River. Muir's previous entry was from his camp at, as he called it in his journal, "Wawona Falls." This is interesting, as it may be the earliest usage of "Wawona" in print. Wolfe speculated that Muir was referring to some fall on Big Creek. I suspect it may be an old local for Chilnualna Falls. He does not mention visiting the Big Trees, and his camp the next night puts him en-route to Fresno Dome. This suggests he camped in the Big Creek (Fish Camp) Meadow, rather than Long Meadow. – tb.

ⁱⁱ Chipmunk– tb.

ⁱⁱⁱ The pileated woodpecker– tb.

^{iv} Bent, or bentgrass– tb.

^v I wonder if any crowns of sequoias in the Mariposa Grove could have been seen from the Fish Camp meadow, or perhaps Long Meadow or some other. Muir also spotted sequoias of the Fresno Grove (now Nelder Grove) from Wah Mello (also Wamello; now Fresno Dome) – tb.

^{vi} This is similar to Muir’s description in the Douglas Squirrel essay in *The Mountains Of California* – tb.

^{vii} Muir most likely passed the diversion ditch (construction started in July, 1871) connecting Big Creek and the Upper Fresno (now Lewis Fork) –tb.

^{viii} This likely refers to the Fresno Flats basin, now Oakhurst, or perhaps the entire watershed – tb.

^{ix} A Scots name for unfledged birds. –LMW

^x Western Tanager? –tb.