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## “On Foot in the Yosemite,” by Bradford Torrey

*Atlantic Monthly* 106 (New York: 1910), pp. 228-237.

When flocks of wild geese light in the Yosemite, Mr. Muir tells us, they have hard work to find their way out again. Whatever direction they take, they are soon stopped by the wall, the height of which they seem to have an insuperable difficulty in gauging. There is something mysterious about it, they must think. The rock looks to be only about so high, but when they should be flying far over its top, northward or southward as the season may be, here they are once more beating against its stony face; and only when, in their bewilderment, they happen to follow the downward course of the river, do they hit upon an exit.

Their case is not peculiar. Dr. Bunnell, in his interesting account of the discovery of the Valley, describes the ludicrous guesses of his companions and himself as to the height of the rock known since that day as El Capitan. One ‘official’ estimated it at four hundred feet. A bolder spirit guessed eight hundred, while Dr. Bunnell, waxing very courageous, raised the figure to fifteen hundred. The real height is thirty-three hundred feet. The fact seems to be that the eyes of men and geese alike are unaccustomed to such perpendicular altitudes. A mountain three thousand feet high is a thing to which they are more or less used, but a vertical surface of anything like the same elevation stands quite outside of all ordinary experience. El Capitan is nothing but a cliff, and a cliff—well, any goose knows what a cliff is like. Rise about so far, and you are over it.

For myself, I sympathize with the geese. The rock was in sight from my tent-door for eight weeks, and grand as it was at first, and grander still as it became, I could never make it look half a mile high. It was especially alluring to me in the evening twilight. At that hour, the day’s tramp over, I loved to lie back in my camp-chair and look and look at its noble outline against the bright western sky. Professor Whitney says that it can be seen from the San Joaquin Valley, fifty or sixty miles away; but I am now farther away than that several times over, and I can see it at this minute with all distinctness—not only the rock itself, but the loose fringe of low trees along its top, with the after-glow shining through them. There would be comparatively little profit in traveling if we could see things only so long as we remain within sight of them.

Comparatively little profit, I say; but in absolute terms a great profit, nevertheless, for any man who is an adept in the art of living, wise enough to value not only his life, but the days of his life. It is something to spend a happy hour, a happy week or month, though that were to be the end of it. And such a two months as I spent in the Yosemite! Let what will happen to me henceforth, so much at least I have enjoyed. Even if I should never think of the place again, though memory should fail me altogether, those eight weeks were mine. While they lasted I lived and was happy. Six o’clock every morning saw me at the breakfast-table, and half an hour later, with bread in my pocket, I was on the road, head in air, stepping briskly for warmth, and singing with myself over the anticipation of new adventures. I might be heading for Eagle Peak or Nevada Fall, for Glacier Point, or where not. What matter? Here was another day of Sierra sunlight and Sierra air, in which to look and look, and listen and listen, and play with my thoughts and dreams. Who was it that said, ‘Take care of the days, and life will take care of itself’? Others, men and women, old and young, were setting forth on the same holiday errand; as we met or passed each other we exchanged cheerful greetings; but for my part I was always alone, and, let it sound how it will, I liked my company.

Such a feast of walking as the two months gave me! I shall never have another to compare with it. The Valley itself is four thousand feet above sea-level, and many of my jaunts took me nearly or quite as much higher. If the trails were steep, the exhilaration was so much the greater. At the worst I had only to stop a minute or two now and then to breathe and look about me, upward or downward, or across the way. There might be a bird near by, a solitaire by good luck, or a mountain quail; or two or three fox sparrows might be singing gayly from the chaparral; or as many pigeons might go by me along the mountain-side, speeding like the wind; or, not improbably, a flock of big black swifts would be doubling and turning in crazy, lightning-like zigzags over my head. Who would not pause a minute to confer with strangers of such quality? And if attractions of this more animated kind failed, there would likely enough be broad acres of densely-growing manzanita bushes on either side of the way, every one of the million branches hanging full of tiny bells, graceful in shape as Grecian urns, tinted like the pinkest and loveliest of seashells, and fragrant with a reminiscence of the sweetest of all blossoms, our darling Plymouth mayflower. Yes indeed, there was always plenty of excuse for a breathing spell.

I began with reasonable moderation, remembering my years. For two or three days I confined my steps to the valley-level; walking to Mirror Lake, whither every one goes, though mostly not on foot, to see the famous reflections in its unruffled surface just before the sunrise; to the foot of Yosemite Fall, or as near it as might be without a drenching; and down the dusty road to Capitan bridgossoms, our darling Plymouth mayflower. Yes indeed, there was always plenty of excuse for a breathing spell.

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For the time I was contented to *look* up, pitching my walk low but my prospect high, as some old poet said. For that, the cliffs, the falls, and the wonderful pines, cedars, and firs, many of them approaching two hundred feet in height, afforded continual inducement. Sentinel Rock loomed immediately behind my tent, a flat, thin, upright slab,—so it looks at a front view,—for all the world like some ancient giant’s gravestone, three thousand feet in height. It was the first thing I saw every morning as I glanced up through the ventilator in the gable at the head of my bed, and the first thing that I thought of one night when an earthquake rocked me out of my sleep.

Eagle Peak, nearly four thousand feet above the Valley, peeping over the heads of its two younger brothers, was directly opposite as I stood in my door; while I had only to move out of the range of a group of pine trees to see the greatest (at that season) of the four principal falls: the Yosemite, that is to say, with its first stupendous free plunge of fifteen or sixteen hundred feet, a height equal (so my Yankee-bred imagination dealt with the matter) to that of six or seven Bunker Hill monuments standing end on end. It was grandeur itself to look at,—grandeur and beauty combined; and to my unaccustomed ears what a noise it made! As I started out for my first stroll,

on the noon of my arrival (May 11), a black cloud overspread the sky in that quarter, from which came at intervals a heavy rumbling as of not very distant thunder. A passer-by, however, when I questioned him about it, said,—

‘No, it is the fall.’

And so it proved, some momentary shifting of the wind seeming now and then to lift the enormous column of water from the cliff, and anon let it down again with a resounding crash. This peculiar thundering sound, I was told, would be less frequent later in the season, when the warmer days would melt the mountain snow more rapidly, and the bulk of the water would be so increased that no ordinary wind could lift it. This, also, was shown to be correct, paradoxical as it had sounded,—the more water, the less noise. And after all, when I came to consider the subject, it was only giving a new twist to an old proverb, ‘Still waters run deep.’

My first considerable climb was an unpremeditated trip to the top of Nevada Fall. I took the trail at the head of the Valley, close by the Happy Isles, some three miles from camp, with no intention of doing more than try what it might be like; but an upward-leading path is of itself an eloquent persuasion, and, one turn after another, I kept on, the ravishing wildness of the Merced Canyon, and the sight and sound of the Merced River raging among the rocks, getting more and more hold upon me, till all at once the winding path made a short descent, and behold, I was on a bridge over the river; and yonder, all unexpected, only a little distance up the foaming rapids, through the loveliest vista of sombre evergreens and bright, newly leaved, yellow-green maples, was a fall, far less high than the Yosemite, to be sure, but even more graceful in its proportions (breadth and height being better related), and so wondrously set or framed that no words could begin to intimate its beauty. I looked and looked (but half the time must be attending to the mad rush of the river under my feet), and then started on. If this was Vernal Fall, as to which, in my happy ignorance, I was uncertain, then I must go far enough to see the Nevada.

The trail carried me about and about, past big snow banks and along the edge of flowery slopes, with ever-changing views of the mighty canyon and the lofty cliffs beyond, till after what may have been an hour’s work it brought me out upon a mountain shoulder whence I looked straight away to another fall, higher and wilder by much than the one I had lately seen. Here, then, was the Nevada, to many minds the grandest of the great four, as in truth it must be, taking the months together.

Now there was nothing for it, after a few minutes of hesitation (still considering my years), but I must keep on, down to the river-level again, after all this labor in getting above it, and over another bridge, till a final breathless, sharper and sharper-angled zigzag brought me to the top, where I stood gazing from above at an indescribable, unimaginable sight,—the plunge of the swollen river over a sheer precipice the Happy Isles, some three miles from camp, with no intention of doing more than try what it might be like; but an upward-leading path is of itself an eloquent persuasion, and, one turn after another, I kept on, the ravishing wildness of the Merced Canyon, and the sight and sound of the Merced River raging among the rocks, getting more and more hold upon me, till all at once the winding path made a short descent, and behold, I was on a bridge over the river; and yonder, all unexpected, only a little distance up the foaming rapids, through the loveliest vista of sombre evergreens and bright, newly leaved, yellow-green maples, was a fall, far less high than the Yosemite, to be sure, but even more graceful in its proportions (breadth and height being better related), and so wondrously set or framed that no words could begin to intimate its beauty. I looked and looked (but half the time must be attending to the mad rush of the river under my feet), and then started on. If this was Vernal Fall, as to which, in my happy ignorance, I was uncertain, then I must go far enough to see the Nevada.

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me to the top, where I stood gazing from above at an indescribable, unimaginable sight,—the plunge of the swollen river over a sheer precipice to a huddle of broken rocks six hundred feet below.

I happened to be fresh from a few days at Niagara, and moreover, I was a man who had all his life taken blame to himself as being unwarrantably, almost disgracefully, insensible to the charm of falling water. Nobody would ever stand longer than I to muse upon a brook idling through meadows or gurgling over pebbles down a gentle slope; and the narrower it was, the better it was, almost, given only some fair measure of clearness, movement enough to lend it here and there an eddying dimple, and, most of all, a look of being perennial. I hold in loving recollection two or three such streamlets, and at this very minute can seem to see and hear them, dipping smoothly over certain well-remembered flat boulders, and bearing down a few tufts of wavering sweet-flag leaves. Yes, I see them with all plainness, though the breadth of a continent stretches between them and this present dwelling-place of mine, where near mountains half circle me about and the Pacific surf dashes almost against my doorstep, but where there is never a sound of running water all the long summer through. Often and often I say to myself,—

‘If there were only one dear Massachusetts brook, to make the charm complete!’

But with all this, as I say, I had always, to my own surprise, made strangely small account of our boasted New England cataracts; pleasant to look upon they might be, no doubt, but hardly worth much running after. And now these falls of the Merced and its larger tributaries had taken me by storm. Indeed they are altogether another story; as little to be compared with anything in New Hampshire as Flagstaff Hill on Boston Common is to be set beside Mount Washington. Merely a difference in degree? Yes, if you choose to put it so, but such a difference in degree as amounts fairly to a difference in kind. Imagine the Merrimac tumbling over the face of a ledge five hundred, six hundred, fifteen hundred feet high! And the Yosemite Fall, be it remembered, after its first plunge of fifteen or sixteen hundred feet, makes at once two others of four hundred and six hundred feet respectively. In other words, it drops almost plumb from an altitude nearly as great (as great within six hundred feet) as that of the summit of Mount Lafayette above the level of Profile Notch. And furthermore, it is to be considered that the water does not slip over the edge of the awful cliff, but comes to it at headlong speed, foaming white, having been crowded together and rounded up between the rocky walls of its steep and narrow bed, exactly as the Niagara River is in the rapids above the whirlpool,—which rapids are to my apprehension, as I suppose they are to most men’s, hardly a whit less astounding than the Horseshoe Fall itself.

This wild outward leap it was that most of all impressed me when more than once I stood at the top of the Yosemite Fall, amazed and silent. But that was some time later than the day now spoken of, and must be left for mention in its turn.

I had heard before coming to the Valley, and many times since, that the one place excelling all others—of those, that is to say, immediately above the Valley wall, and so falling within the range of ordinary pedestrians—was Glacier Point; and now, having given my legs and wind a moderate preliminary test, I inquired of the camp-manager how difficult the trail to that point might be, as compared with the one I had just gone over.

‘I should call it twice as difficult,’ he said, ‘though not so long.’

The answer surprised, and for the moment almost discouraged me. Age was never so inopportune, I thought.

‘But anyhow,’ said I, ‘there is no law against my having a look at the beginning of the way and judging of its possibilities for myself.’

And the very next morning, being apparently in good bodily trim, and certainly in good spirits, I made an early start. The trail offered at least one advantage: it began at my door, with no six miles of superfluous valley road such as the previous day’s jaunt had burdened me with. As for its unbroken steepness, that, I reasoned with myself, was to be overcome by the simple expedient of taking it in short steps at a slow pace.

Well, not to boast of what is not at all boastworthy (Mr. Galen Clark, ninety-five years old,—may God bless him, he was always showing me kindness,—had made the descent unaccompanied the season before, though you would never hear him tell of it), I reached the Point in slow time, but without fatigue, the hours having been enlivened by the frequent presence of some jovial members of the California Press Club, trailing one behind another, who by turns overtook and were overtaken by me (the tortoise having sometimes the better of it), till every fresh encounter became matter for a jest. We arrived in company, cutting across lots over the hard snow near the top, and then there was no taking of no for an answer. Three of the men were set upon going out upon the celebrated overhanging rock—three thousand feet, more or less, over empty space—to be photographed, and, would he or wouldn’t he, the old ‘Professor,’ as with friendly impudence, meaning no disrespect, they had dubbed him, must go along and have his picture taken with the rest. And go along the old professor did, keeping, to be sure, at a prudent remove from the dizzy edge, though he flattered himself, of course, that only for not choosing to play the fool, he *could* stand as near it as the next man. This pleasing ceremony done with, I was left to go my own gait, and then my enjoyment of the marvelous place began.

A good-natured and conversable young driver, who had picked me up one day on the road, quizzed me as to what I thought about the origin of the Valley; and after I had tried to set forth in outline the two principal opinions of geologists upon the subject, not suspecting what a philosopher I had to do with, he informed me that he took no stock in either of them. He cared nothing for Whitney or Le Conte or Muir. No subsidence theory or glacial theory for him. *He* believed that the place was made so to start with, on purpose that people might come from all parts of the world and enjoy it. And to-day, as I moved about the rim of Glacier Point for the first time, I was ready to say with equal positiveness, if with something less of serious intention,—This place was made for prospects.

If I doubted, I had only to look at the level green valley, with the green river meandering through it; at the wall opposite, so variously grand and beautiful, from El Capitan to the Half Dome; and, best of all, at the Merced Canyon, as seen from the neighborhood of the hotel, with my two falls of the day before in full sight across it, and beyond them a world of snowy peaks, a good half of the horizon studded with them, lonely-looking though so many, and stretching away and away and away, till they faded into the invisible; a magnificent panorama of the high Sierras, minarets and domes, obelisks and battlemented walls; such a spectacle as I had never thought to look upon. It was too bad I could not spend the night with it, to see it in other moods; but when I was informed that the hotel would be open before many days were past, I consoled myself with the promise of another and a longer visit.

I was better than my word. Four times afterward I climbed to the Point, once by the 'long trail,' *via* Nevada Fall (which, with the afternoon descent over the short trail added, really made some approximation to a day's work), and altogether I passed six nights there, taking in the splendors of the dawn and the sunset, and, for the rest, ranging more or less about the snowy woods. One afternoon (May 23) we were favored with a lively snowstorm of several hours' duration, with a single tremendous thunder-clap in the midst, which drove three young fellows into the hotel-office breathless with a tale of how the lightning had played right about their heads till almost they gave themselves up for dead men; and when the clouds broke away little by little shortly before sunset, the shifting views of the canyon, the falls, and the mountain summits near and far, were such as put one or two amateur photographers fairly beside themselves, and drove the rest of us to silence or to rapturous exclamation according as the powers had made us of the quiet or the noisy kind. Whatever we poor mortals made of it, it was a wondrous show.

Thrice I went to the top of Sentinel Dome (eighty-one hundred feet), an easy jaunt from the hotel, though just at this time, while attempting it in treacherous weather, with the trail, if there be one, buried under the winter snow, a young tourist became bewildered and lost his life—vanished utterly, as if the earth had swallowed him. The prospect from the summit is magnificent, if inferior, as I think it is, to that from the hotel piazza; and the place itself is good to stand on: one of those symmetrical, broadly rounded, naked granite domes, so highly characteristic of the Sierras, and of which so many are to be seen from any point upon the Valley rim. Some agency or other, once having the pattern, seems to have turned them out by the score.

One day I looked down into the Fissures, so called, giddy, suicide-provoking rents; and more than once, on the Wawona road, I skirted two of those beautiful Sierra Nevada meadows, so feelingly celebrated by Mr. Muir, and so surprising and grateful to all new-comers in these parts. At this moment one of them was starred with thousands of greenish-white marsh marigolds—*Caltha leptosepala*, as I learned afterward to call them, when good Mr. Clark produced, out of his treasures new and old, for my enlightenment, a much-desired copy of Brewer and Watson's *Botany of California*.

After the two trails thus 'negotiated,' to speak a little in the Western manner, there remained one that by all accounts was steeper and harder still, the trail to Yosemite Point, or, if the walker should elect to travel its full length, to Eagle Peak. As to the Peak, I doubted. The tale of miles sounded long, and as the elevation was only seventy-eight hundred feet, substantially the same as that of Glacier Point, it appeared questionable whether the distance would pay for itself.

'Oh, the trail isn't difficult,' a neighborly-minded, middle-aged tourist had assured me (he spoke of the trail to Yosemite Point only); 'we made it between breakfast and luncheon.'

But they had made it on horseback, as came out a minute later, which somewhat damaged the argument. Difficult or easy, however (and if there had been forty, or even twenty, less years in my pack, all this debate concerning distances and grades would have been ridiculous), to Yosemite Point I was determined to go. Once, at least, I must stand upon the rocks at the top of that stupendous fall, at which I had spent so many half-hours in gazing. And stand there I did, not once, but thrice; and except for the Glacier Point outlook, which must always rank first, I enjoyed no other Yosemite experience quite so much. So I speak; yet sometimes, while loitering downward in the late afternoon, I sang another song. 'After all,' I thought, 'these are the best hours. And really there is no reaching any final verdict in matters of this nature, so much depending upon mood and circumstance.'

I was walking in the shade of a vertical cliff so near, so high, so overpowering in its enormous proportions, that I often felt it to be more impressive than El Capitan itself; and, walking thus in deep shadow, I looked out upon a world of bright sunlight: the fall at my side ('Oh, I say,' an enthusiastic, much-traveled man had exclaimed in my hearing, 'it beats Niagara. Yes, sir, it beats Niagara!'), every turn of the path bringing it into view at a new angle, and, as it seemed to increased advantage; the shining green valley, with its jewel of a river; and yonder, up in the sky, all those illuminated snowy Sierra peaks. Well, I could only stop and look, and stop and look again, rejoicing to be alive.

As for Eagle Peak, with its two or three extra miles, before the business was over (after the way thither became dry enough to be passable without wading) I had paid it four visits. The Peak itself offered no transcendent attraction, but the trail proved to be at once so comfortable and so very much to my mind, that, once at the end of the sharp zigzags, and on the level of the river above the fall, it seemed impossible not to keep on,—just this once more, as I always said; such pleasure I took in the forest of stately pines and firs, the multitude of wild flowers by the way, and in another and more extensive of those fair mountain meadows (natural grassy meads, green as emerald, shining in the sun amidst the dark evergreen forest), along the border of which the winding trail carried me. In this were no marsh marigolds, but instead a generous sprinkling of sun-bright buttercups, while a pool in the midst was covered with lily-pads and yellow spatter-dock lilies,—old New England friends whose homely faces were trebly welcome in these far-off California altitudes.

I never approached the meadow—which melting snowbanks all about still rendered impossible of dry-shod exploration—without pleasing anticipations of deer. They must frequent it, I thought; but I looked for them in vain. The curiously distinctive slow drum-taps of an invisible Williamson sapsucker, a true Sierran, handsomest of the handsome, were always to be counted upon; swallows and swifts went skimming over the grass; robins and snowbirds flitted about; but if deer ever came this way, it was not down for me to find them.

At the end of the trail, after a tedious gravelly slope, where I remember a close bed of the pretty mountain phlox, with thin remnants of a snowdrift no more than a rod or two above it, there remained a brief clamber over huge boulders, with tufts of gorgeous pink pentstemon growing in such scanty deposits of coarse soil as the desolate, unpromising situation afforded; the scantier the better, as it seemed; for this clever economist is a lover of rocks, if there ever was one. It was to be found in all directions, in the valley and on the heights, but never anywhere except in the most inhospitable-looking, impossible-looking of stony places. And out of a few grains of powdered granite it manages somehow to extract the wherewithal not merely upon which to subsist, but for the putting forth of as bright a profusion of exquisite bloom as the sun ever shone upon.

The outlook from the topmost boulder of this Titans' cairn, for it looked like nothing else, was commanding,—valley, river, and mountain,—but to me, as I have said, the Peak was mainly of use as the conclusion of a walk through an enchanting Sierra forest; for I, no less than my fellows, have yet to outgrow the primitive need of 'a place to go to,' even when I go mostly for what is to be enjoyed by the way.

So much for what might be more strictly accounted as climbs to the valley rim. More wearisome, perhaps, because quite as long, while without the counterbalancing stimulation which a mountain trail seems always, out of its own virtue, to communicate, were an indefinite number of jaunts to Inspiration Point (hateful name!) and into the forest a mile or two beyond. Precisely why I expended so much labor upon the long miles of this dusty uphill road, it might be troublesome to determine; but here, also, there were so many things to be looked at, and so many others to be hoped for, that the going thither about once in so many days grew little by little into something like a habit. Between the moist riverbanks and the dry hillside, what a procession of beautiful and interesting wild flowers the progress of the season led before me! And if many of them seemed to be the same as I had known in the East, they were certain to be the same with a difference: dogwood and azalea (azalea hedges by the mile); tall columbines and lilies; yellow violets and blue larkspurs; salmonberry and mariposa tulips; an odd-looking dwarf convolvulus, not observed elsewhere; the famous blood-red snow-plant, which there was reported to be a heavy fine for picking; and whole gardens of tiny, high-colored, fairy-like blossoms, kind after kind and color after color, growing mostly in separate parterres, ground-flowers in flocks, and veritable gems for brightness, over which, in my ignorance, I could only stand and wonder.

Of birds, as compared with plants, the walk might offer little in the line of novelty, but such as it did offer, taking old and new together, they were always enough to keep a man alive: a pair of golden eagles, for instance, soaring in the blue,—a display of aviation, as we say in these progressive days, fitted to provoke the most earthbound spirit to envy; a pair of violet-green swallows, loveliest of the swallow tribe, never so busy, hastening in and out of an old woodpecker's hole in a stunted wayside oak; tiny hummingbirds, of course, by name Calliope, wearing the daintiest of fan-shaped, cherry colored gorgets, true mountaineers, every soul of them, fearless of frost and snow, if only the manzanita bells would hold out; and, in particular, a sooty grouse, who nearly put my neck out of joint before—after a good half-hour, at least—I finally caught sight of him as he hitched about in his leafy hiding-place near the top of a tall pine tree, complaining by the hour. *Boom, boom, boom, boo-boom, boom, boom*, so the measure ran, with that odd grace note invariably preceding the fourth syllable, as if it were a point of conscience with the performer that it should stand just there and nowhere else. A forlorn, moping kind of amorous ditty, it sounded to me; most unmusical, most melancholy, though perhaps I had no call to criticize.

Hark, from the pines a doleful sound,  
My ears attend the cry,

my old-fashioned, orthodox memory fell to repeating, while the hollow, sepulchral notes grew fainter and fainter with distance as I walked away. Yet I might appropriately enough have envied the fellow his altitudinous position, if nothing else, remembering how grand and almost grown-up a certain small Massachusetts boy used to feel as he surveyed the world from a perch not half so exalted, in what to his eyes was about the tallest pine tree in the world, up in his father's pasture.

The most curiously unique of Yosemite plants, to my thinking, is the California nutmeg tree, *Torreya Californica*. I ignore, for good reason, the different generic designation adopted in some books more recent than the work of Brewer and Watson. So far as my word goes, my distinguished ——th cousin shall not be deprived of his one genus. Mr. Clark, who remembered Dr. Torrey's and Dr. Gray's visits to the tree, and whose sympathetic account of the affectionate relations subsisting between these two scholars was deeply interesting, instructed me where to look for the nearest examples, at a point below the Cascades,—some eight miles down the El Portal road,—and I devoted a long day to the making of their acquaintance.

It was the twentieth of June, the weather had turned summerish, and the road, which had been as dusty as possible—a disgrace to the nation that owns it—five or six weeks before, when I entered the Valley, was by this time very much dustier. But the river, hastening from the mountains to the sea, was close at my side, garrulous of thoughts and fancies, histories and dreams, and between it and the birds, the trees, and the innumerable wild flowers, I must have been a dull stick not to be abundantly entertained. An ouzel, fishing for something on the flat, inclined surface of a broad boulder in midstream, just where the rapids were wildest, was compelled to spring into the air every minute or so as a sudden big wave threatened to carry it away. It seemed to be playing with death; once fairly caught in that mad whirl, nothing could save it. Again and again I looked to see it go, as the angry waters clutched at it; but it was always a shaving too quick for them. *Syringa* and *calycanthus* ('sweet-shrub'—faintly ill-scented!) were in blossom, and the brilliant pink *godetia*—a name which may suggest nothing to the Eastern reader, but which to an old Californian like myself stands for all that is brightest and showiest in parched wayside gardens—never made a more effective display; and all in all, though I had walked over the longer part of the same road within twenty-four hours, the day was a pure delight. If it gains a little something in the retrospect, it is all the more like a picture,—which must be framed and hung at a suitable distance before we truly see it.

The trees of which I had come in search were recognizable at a glance: the leave, of a remarkably vivid green, bearing a strong resemblance to those of the hemlock, but sharp as needles, as if to cry 'Hands off!' the flaky gray bark, most incongruously like that of some kind of white oak; while the green fruits, prettily spaced ornamental pendants, were really for shape and size not a little like nutmegs: a surprising crop, surely, to be hanging amid such foliage. The largest of the few examples that I saw (they grow plentifully along the road a little farther down, and may be picked out readily from a carriage-seat, as I discovered later) might have been, I thought, about fifty feet in height.

This tree (the species, I mean), whose only congeners are found in Florida, China, and Japan, may be considered as one of four that lend a notable distinction to the Californian silva, the others being the Torrey pine, the Monterey pine, and the Monterey cypress. No one of them occurs anywhere in the world outside of California, and the nutmeg is the only member of the quartette that ventures more than a few miles inland. Stranded species we may assume them to be, formerly of wider range, but now—how or why there is none to inform us—surviving only within these extraordinarily narrow limits.

I alluded to myself just now as an old Californian, and so far as my standing in the Yosemite is concerned I might have said, without jesting, that by the time I had been there three weeks I had come to be regarded as one of the oldest inhabitants; the ordinary stay of visitors being so niggardly brief,—two or three days, perhaps, upon an average.

One man, it is true, gave me what I had to confess might be, in his case, a valid reason for brevity. A Southern gentleman he was, as I should have divined at once from the engaging, softly musical quality of his voice. He began with some question about a squirrel,—which had surprised him by running into a hole in the ground,—and after a word or two more called my attention to two or three wild roses which he carried in his hand. They were fragrant, he said; had I ever noticed it? And when I remarked that I should have expected

them to be common in Tennessee, he explained that at home he never went to places where such things were to be looked for. He had discovered the perfume of wild roses as Thoreau discovered the sweetness of white-oak acorns, I thought to myself, and so far was in good company. Then he told me that he had arrived in the Valley on the noon of the day before, had found it grand and beautiful beyond all his dreams,—‘ravishing’ was one of his words,—and was going out again, not of necessity but from choice, that very afternoon. I manifested a natural surprise, and he explained that he ‘didn’t wish to lose the thrill.’ He had seen the picture once and, consciously or unconsciously, was following Emerson’s advice never to look at it again. So this time, too, he was in excellent company.

For my part, I cannot afford to be so sparing in my use of good things. My aesthetic faculty, it would appear, is less prompt than other men’s. Its method is not so much an act as a process. In the appreciation of natural scenery, at all events, as I have before now confessed, I am not apt to get very far, comparatively speaking, on the first day. I must have time,—time and a liberal chance for repetition. And in the Yosemite, which is as rich in modest loveliness as in spectacular grandeur, a fact of which too little is made, I know perfectly well that there are countless beauties which I have never seen (more and more of them were coming to light up to my very last day), as well as countless others that I should rejoice to see again, or, better still, to live with. Give me the opportunity, say I, and I will cheerfully risk all danger of disillusion, or, as my Southern friend of the wild roses more feelingly expressed it, the ‘loss of the thrill.’

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### About the Author

Bradford Torrey was born October 9, 1843 in Weymouth, Massachusetts. He taught school for several years. In 1886 he became Assistant Editor of *Youth’s Companion*. Torrey wrote several books, essays, and poems, mainly about nature and birds. His speciality was in birds; he wrote *Birds in the Bush* (Boston: 1885) and several entertaining articles on birds. He contributed much to the knowledge of birds despite having no formal scientific training. He was Henry David Thoreau’s editor in the early 1900s. He never married. In his final years he lived near Santa Barbara, California for his health. He died October 7, 1912 in Santa Barbara.

### Bibliographical Information

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