

Among the Cliffs of the Northwest Spur

Mount Tacoma [Mt. Rainier], Washington Territory 1882

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The rainy season of Puget Sound, the big bear of the new corner, the native element of the old settler, is a snowy one in the Cascade Range. Even on the lower passes, three thousand feet above the sea, the snow falls heavily as trees, chopped off twenty feet from the ground by frosties, making the winter passage of the mountains, bear witness.

What must be the thickness of the crystal coat on the culminating summits, on Mt. Tacoma [Mt. Rainier] peak, eight thousand feet above the highest crest of the main range. From November to May the flakes settle silently on the Dome, the Liberty Cap and the South Peak; the last arrivals dancing wildly in the winds, drifting into crevasse and corner, or streaming out in clouds to fall wildly scattered over the lower slopes. These snow clouds in winter and the mists formed under the brilliant summer sun are the barriers, well known to all, who have watched the mountain from the [Puget] Sound. Just touching the extreme summit the flying sand reaches out horizontally to the leeward for a mile or more; apparently a web of vast strength firmly anchored in the hurricane, in reality a film, ever dissipated, ever renewed. In the intervals between the storms the noonday sun and the night frost hinder the wind carved surface into gleaming ice crust. Storm after storm add its contribution and the snow covering deepens through the winter months, to be again demolished with the advent of spring's warm winds and summer's rains. It is however, but a small frost of the wind driven

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flakes that escape from captivity with the change of one season; closely packed the masses linger balanced on the high slopes above black jutting crags, toward which they are inevitably forced.

How long may it be since their atoms danced merrily in the sunlight, that now form yonder snow cliff, two hundred feet high, hanging on the brink of that rock precipice. They have been buried in darkness, till the crevasse opened, dividing those that should go from these that might remain a little longer, and their brothers took that tremendous leap, a thousand feet over buttress and cliff, torn by jagged pinnacles, tossed in whirling eddies by the rush of their own fall, plunging down, down with the war repose the glacier below.

It is but an instant of intense energy, the transition from years of quiet in the great snowcap to hundred of years of resistless march in the ice mass of the glacier.

The downward path is a rugged one; a fall of six thousand feet in three miles. Breaking into pyramids and wedges, a hundred feet in height, on the edge of a hidden declivity, the crystal ice flows onward, unites again, again to shatter into a thousand pinnacles, now spreading out, now narrowing in, as its banks require.

A plastic mass of rigid material. The ice storms linger a year on the edge of a cliff, the warmth of the valley has loosened their bonds, their fellows slip away in muddy rivelets, and they themselves dash down at last, scattering over the moraine below, to

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join the wild torrent in the rush to the sea. Away through forests, cañon and field to the ocean, to purity and freedom once more. Of all six or eight glaciers that score the sides of Mt. Tacoma [Mt. Rainier] there are three better known than the others and now quite accessible; Carbon River glacier on the north, the North and South glacier of the Puyallup on the northwest; all fed by the snows of Liberty Cap. The knife like combs of rock divide the smooth white mantle, like inevitable fate; allotting to part the slide of the avalanche repose the South, or the lines leap of a thousand feet repose the North glacier; to the rest that awful plunge of six thousand feet into the basin of the Carbon River.

Then spreading into a wide rugged spur of the mountain, the comb forces the ice rivers and their streams farther and farther apart, till far beyond its reach in the lowlands, they unite once more to join the ocean.

The highest point in the northwest spur, not part of the great mountain mass, is Tolmie's Peak, so named because it was ascended as far back as 1833 by Dr. Tolmie of Victoria, B.C.; the summit crag is about 6,300 feet above the sea and its ridge, half a mile east and west, reaches six thousand. From it the eye may sweep the horizon from Mt. Baker, on the north, and westward over the [Puget] Sound country to the Olympic Range and thence southward over the wooded foothills to [Mount] St Helens and Mt Tacoma [Mt. Rainier]; where to the east mountain peaks rise in stupendous cliffs from gloomy cañons, mountain wall on mountain wall in wild confusion.

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A small lake [Eunice Lake] nestles in a depression on the south side of this mountain, at an elevation of 5,700 feet, and sparkling stream bounds from its outlet in many cascades down the steep slope to a valley thirteen hundred feet below, where grassy meadows are sunk deep among the tall evergreens.

With the thought that the brooklet loved these mimic pastures with a memory of its alpine home, where the flowers deck the rock ledges in scarlet and purple and white, we named it Meadow Brook [Creek].

Early in July a party camped one night on the slope by the lake. Its surface was still frozen and snow drifts were deep around the grass plot, on which the camp fire blazed brightly. The moonlight shone at midnight repose three mummy-like figures, each tightly wrapped in a single blanket with feet turned to the scarce glimmering embers.

A sound like the roar of a great city rose from the cañon below, the mangled voices of a hundred waterfalls. Against the dark metallic sky, from which the stars stood out in relief, the black crags were dimly visible; above them rose in distinct gleaming snow slopes, higher still and higher to the mountain summit.

The great shining peak hung like a phantom above the abyss of darkness; the one pure, bright ethereal; the other deep immeasurable, the abode of evil, the gulf of dread. Over powered with a sense of vast space, filled with indifferent power, the watcher slept.

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The moon passed on and paled before the growing light of day. The mountain reached out great ribs of snow and rock, and took its stand in the depth of the chasm. The morning stars shone brilliant in the eastern sky and a blush touched the beautiful summit. It spread and passed down, leaving a golden spire in the heavens. And as the rosy zone descended over the forbidding precipice and icy slope they melted into fairy land. A veil of opalescent mist enveloped the mountains and the sun rose repose an enchanted world.

A mile south of Tolmie's Lake [Eunice Lake] perched on the other slope of the valley of Meadow Brook [Creek] at an elevation of five thousand two hundred feet is another lake, half a mile in diameter with an outlet southward into the Puyallup [North Mowich River]. It too was frozen over early in July and the flowers about it blossomed among snow drifts; but two weeks later not a vestige of ice remained and the banks of snow were melting fast.

These lakes are curious features of the landscape; filling basins of unknown depth on the steepest slopes. They were once a lake of fire, the northern throats of the great volcano. Gaze down into the depths to day; they are dark and cold, the clear water laps repose the rocky bank, on the snow drift dipping in to it, while you lie repose a bed of blooming heather, amid countless white with golden stamens, and rejoice on the warm sunshine. What a change since the fiery floods poured forth, perhaps simultaneously from the three craters, that are here within a square mile, drowning the

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valleys and their streams, the mountains and ridge, out over the luxuriant growth of coal measures of that period, levelling all in the great slope, from which peaks and cañons to day are carved. Crater [Mowich Lake] quickly suggested itself as the appropriate source of the largest and last mentioned of these basins. It is but little worn by erosion, the outlet into the Puyallup being only a hundred feet below the rocky saddle that prevents it from emptying northward into Meadow Brook [Creek]. On the northeast is a bold slope of a thousand feet up to the crags [Castle Peak], that bound the third crater [unnamed lake southeast of Castle Peak], and on the south a single precipitous point stands sharply against the sky about fifteen hundred feet above the lake.

From these cliffs a shout is mockingly passed on around the circle, repeated six or eight times, dying away at the last in the distance like laughter.

The sight of Mt Tacoma's [Mt. Rainier] great cap, but six miles away, rising above the trees near the outlet will inspire the least enthusiastic to an attempt at the nearer acquaintance. Following around the wooded hillside for a mile, he will come out on the brink of a precipice [Eagle Cliff] twelve or thirteen hundred feet high. In the valley below the muddy torrent of the North Branch of the Puyallup [North Mowich River] tumbles over boulders of the great terminal moraine of the North [Mowich] glacier.

A mile away, nearly on a level with your eye, is the dark brown face of the glacier, two thousand feet across and a hundred feet high. Back from it, the ice rises gently for perhaps a mile, a tongue like flow, which shows in the diverging crevasses the lines of

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its movement. Above, where the glacier descends more boldly, the ice blocks flash back the sun-light, glowing as they glowed a thousand years ago on the Liberty Cap, where the shining crystals now hang, that must in time follow down the rocky path.

Pass along the edge of the precipice toward the mountain, cliffs hang out above you and the gulf still yawns below; but there is no danger for an active climber and indeed a secure horse trail may be built for another mile along the mountain side.

The rocks at last give back and form an amphitheater, whose rugged walls are four hundred feet high; above a long slope of loose fragments. Here, hidden precipices till now from human eyes, are two beautiful waterfalls [Spray Falls], the one however, but an accessory to its grand companion. The black skyline of jagged rocks is hidden by the tossing mass of foam, which dashes from ledge to ledge for seventy feet before it separates; then spreads in sheets and filaments; these here leap boldly out to be lost in the mist before they each reach the bottom, those there, clinging to the rock, clothe it with snowy gauze and only leave it at last, where it overhangs, a hundred feet above the pool below. The total height of the fall is something over three hundred feet and the stream at the summit is perhaps thirty feet across; below it is lost among the debris of the cliff and runs in many sparkling brooklets toward the next plunge.

Half a mile beyond there is a second amphitheater, in which there are again two falls [unnamed creek and falls east of Spray Falls], but of less volume and depth of leap than the first.

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Here we paused; the golden gleam on Mt. Tacoma [Mt. Rainier], warned of the approach of night. Though but half a mile from the glacier, on which we had hoped to be the first to set foot. We turned away perforce and hurried back to Crater [Mowich Lake].

The gleam of the moonlight played that night north the glow of the camp fire on the placid surface, and the tall rocks and trees gazed down into its depth, whence their own perfect image was reflected.

Notes about essay:

- This essay was transcribed from a copy of the original handwritten essay, courtesy of the Huntington Library in Los Angeles, California
- Mt Tacoma is officially Mount Rainier as noted in brackets in the text.
- Corrected places where names have changed or are incorrectly identified are in brackets in the text.
- Original word usage and punctuation from the text was kept as written.