

# Sierra Thunderstorms

By John Muir

**T**he weather of spring and summer in the middle region of the Sierra is usually well flecked with rains and light dustings of snow, most of which are far too obviously joyful and life-giving to be regarded as storms; and in the picturesque beauty and clearness of outlines of their clouds they offer striking contrasts to those boundless, all-embracing cloud-mantles of the storms of winter. The smallest and most perfectly individualized specimens present a richly modeled cumulous cloud rising above the dark woods, about 3.1 A.M., swelling with a visible motion straight up into the calm, sunny sky to a height of 12,000 to 14,000 feet above the sea, its white, pearly bosses relieved by gray and pale purple shadows in the hollows, and showing outlines as keenly defined as those of the glacier-polished domes. In less than an hour it attains full development and stands poised in the blazing sunshine like some colossal mountain, as beautiful in form and finish as if it were to become a permanent addition to the landscape. Presently a thunderbolt crashes through the crisp air, ringing like steel on steel, sharp and clear, its startling detonation breaking into a spray of echoes against the cliffs and canon walls. Then down comes a cataract of rain. The big drops sift through the pine-needles, splash and patter on the granite pavements, and pour down the sides of ridges and domes in a network of gray, bubbling rills. In a few minutes the cloud withers to a mesh of dim filaments and disappears, leaving the sky perfectly clear and bright, every dust-particle wiped and washed out of it. Everything is refreshed and invigorated, a steam of fragrance rises, and the storm is finished—one cloud, one lightning-stroke, and one dash of ram. This is the Sierra midsummer thunder-storm reduced to its lowest terms. But some of them attain much larger proportions, and assume a grandeur and energy of expression hardly surpassed by those bred in the depths of winter, producing those sudden floods called "cloudbursts," which are local, and to a considerable extent periodical, for they appear nearly every day about the same time for weeks, usually about eleven o'clock, and lasting from five minutes to an hour or two. One soon becomes so accustomed to see them that the noon sky seems empty and abandoned without them, as if Nature were forgetting something. When the glorious pearl and alabaster clouds of these noonday storms are being built I never give attention to anything else. No mountain or mountain-range, however divinely clothed with light, has a more enduring charm than those fleeting mountains of the sky-floating fountains bearing water for every well, the angels of the streams and lakes; brooding in the deep azure, or sweeping softly along the ground over ridge and dome, over meadow, over forest, over garden and grove; lingering with cooling shadows, refreshing every flower, and soothing rugged rock-brows with a gentleness of touch and gesture wholly divine.

The most beautiful and imposing of the summer storms rise just above the upper edge of the Silver Fir zone, and all are so beautiful that it is not easy to choose any one for particular description. The one that I remember best fell on the mountains near Yosemite Valley, July 19, 1869, while I was encamped in the Silver Fir woods.

A range of bossy cumuli took possession of the sky, huge domes and peaks rising one beyond another with deep canons between them, bending this way and that in long curves and reaches, interrupted here and there with white upboiling masses that looked like the spray of waterfalls. Zigzag lances of lightning followed each other in quick succession, and the thunder was so gloriously loud and massive it seemed as if surely an entire mountain was being shattered at every stroke. Only the trees were touched, however, so far as I could see,—a few firs 200 feet high, perhaps, and five to six feet in diameter, were split into long rails and slivers from top to bottom and scattered to all points of the compass. Then came the rain in a hearty flood, covering the ground and making it shine with a continuous sheet of water that, like a transparent film or skin, fitted closely down over all the rugged anatomy of the landscape.

It is not long, geologically speaking, since the first raindrop fell on the present landscapes of the Sierra; and in the few tens of thousands of years of stormy cultivation they have been blest with, how beautiful they have

become. The first rains fell on raw, crumbling moraines and rocks without a plant. Now scarcely a drop can fail to find a beautiful mark: on the tops of the peaks, on the smooth glacier pavements, on the curves of the domes, on moraines full of crystals, on the thousand forms of yosemite sculpture with their tender beauty of balmy, flowery vegetation, laving, plashing, glinting, pattering; some falling softly on meadows, creeping out of sight, seeking and finding every thirsty rootlet, some through the spires of the woods, sifting in dust through the needles, and whispering good cheer to each of them; some falling with blunt tapping sounds, drumming on the broad leaves of veratrum, cyripedium, saxifrage; some falling straight into fragrant corollas, kissing the lips of lilies, glinting on the sides of crystals, on shining grains of gold; some falling into the fountains of snow to swell their well-saved stores; some into the lakes and rivers, patting the smooth glassy levels, making dimples and bells and spray, washing the mountain windows, washing the wandering winds; some plashing into the heart of snowy falls and cascades as if eager to join in the dance and the song and beat the foam yet finer. Good work and happy work for the merry mountain raindrops, each one of them a brave fall in itself, rushing from the cliffs and hollows of the clouds into the cliffs and hollows of the mountains; away from the thunder of the sky into the thunder of the roaring rivers. And how far they have to go, and how many cups to fill-cassiope-cups, holding half a drop, and lake basins between the hills, each replenished with equal care-every drop God's messenger sent on its way with glorious pomp and display of power-silvery new-born stars with lake and river, mountain and valley-all that the landscape holds-reflected in their crystal depths.

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