

The High Sierra: The Journey Ends*

By W. A. Chalfant

The glass-smooth waters of Rae Lake mirrored beautiful reflections of the bordering mountains. As the sun sank from sight, and golden lines across the surface changed to silver and then to inkiness, to rest in camp was a joy. The sky turned to rose and gold. Cloudlets that have been white and fleecy during the afternoon run the gaunt of warm hues. Their edges become bright as flame. Each moment the floating curtain took on a new shade. The warmth gave way to pearl, lead and somberness against a steel-gray sky. The plop of leaping trout told of the finny inhabitants of the lake gathering their evening meal of low-flying insects. Shadows crept up the eastern granite wall and changed its gray to bluish purple and to blackness. The last gilding was pushed from the topmost pinnacle. Over the mountain a bright planet peeped, for the moment a beacon fire on the rim of the world, the forerunner of myriad twinkling points as "one by one, in the infinite meadows of heaven, blossomed the lovely stars, the forget-me-nots of the angels."

Near by, the aisles of the forest grew dim and became part of a black wall. Only the massive columns of nearer trees were visible, and our replenished campfire but imperfectly recreated paths into the distance. The blaze died down. A final tongue of flame leaped out, and vanished. An ember, longer lived than its fellows, broke with a tinkling sound. Its end glowed with added brightness for a moment, and faded. Only gray ashes remain of the fire in which, as we sat in meditation, other pictures were shown.

A night breeze swayed the tree tops into soothing, peaceful whisperings. On the air current came the droning of a distant cataract—a sound which varies with the seasons, faint when winter has laid its icy fingers on the rushing waters, thunderous as the summer sun strips the slopes of snow, but never stilled.

In the thickets, from which during the day small feathered life has proclaimed the joy of living, silence reigned except for such faint rustlings as tiny creatures of the wild made as they went about their nocturnal business. In the distance, a scream betrayed the passing of a mountain lion. An owl in a near-by tree voiced his never answered inquiry. We turned in, regretfully conscious that this was to be our last night in such delightful surroundings.

The time comes to bid farewell to the wonderland in which a month has been spent in a memorable journey. A steep route, then one more level, brings us to Baxter Lake. In another mile of travel we reach the foot of Baxter Pass, leading over into Oak Creek canyon. The mountains show varied colors. In one place a collection of dark red and sulphur-yellow stone gives the impression of a wood yard strewn with bark and sawdust.

Baxter, or Oak Creek, pass has an elevation of about 12,000 feet, and the wind was chilling. The gorge at the head of Oak Creek is as rugged as any to be seen on the eastern slope. A cup in the precipice, hundreds of feet from either top or bottom, is filled with a small lake of bright greenness.

The summit crossing was badly located. Descent from it was a slope of small sharp stones which punished our animals; before its bottom was reached every one of them left blood drops on the trail. We lunched at a little meadow where a litter of refuse had been left by earlier visitors. Ere long we were on a fine trail down the canyon, its excellence contrasting with most other trails we had seen. Junction was made with El Camino Sierra above Camp Independence, and we were once more in the heat of Owens Valley.

The round made, estimated at zoo miles of travel, is but one of many that touches part or parts of mountain-girt scenery. Within horseback or tramping distance of valley homes is grandeur which too few Inyoites have seen, and which from accounts of those who know both is not equaled by anything the Alps have to offer. The forks of the Kings and San Joaquin rivers drain areas richer in scenery than can be found elsewhere. Each summit crossing is a gateway to something new and different. Even the comparatively little that we were privileged to enjoy gave a better understanding of the enthusiasm that possesses Sierra Club outing parties, a better appreciation of the sweetness of mountain waters, the rush and life of beautiful streams, the play of sunshine, moonlight and shadow on limpid lakes, the sublimity of mighty heights and depths, the beauty and fragrance of forests and flower-starred mountain gardens.

*From the *Inyo Register* Bishop, California. This was the last article written by its editor—a man who knew the land of little rain extremely well.—ED.

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