

Water Boarders

By Mary Austin

I LIKE that name the Indians give to the mountain of Lone Pine, and find it pertinent to my subject—Oppapago, The Weeper. It sits eastward and solitary from the lordliest ranks of the Sierra, and above a range of little, old, blunt hills, and has a bowed, grave aspect as of some woman you might have known, looking out across the grassy barrows of her dead. From twin gray lakes under its noble brow stream down incessant white and tumbling waters. "Mahala all time cry," said Winnenap', drawing furrows in his rugged, wrinkled cheeks.

The origin of mountain streams is like the origin of tears, patent to the understanding but mysterious to the sense. They are always at it, but one so seldom catches them in the act. Here in the valley there is no cessation of waters even in the season when the niggard frost gives them scant leave to run. They make the most of their midday hour, and tinkle all night thinly under the ice. An ear laid to the snow catches a muffled hint of their eternal busyness fifteen or twenty feet under the canyon drifts, and long before any appreciable spring thaw, the sagging edges of the snow bridges mark out the place of their running. One who ventures to look for it finds the immediate source of the spring freshets—all the hill fronts furrowed with the reek of melting drifts, all the gravelly flats in a swirl of waters. But later, in June or July, when the camping season begins, there runs the stream away full and singing, with no visible reinforcement other than an icy trickle from some high, belated clot of snow. Oftenest the stream drops bodily from the bleak bowl of some alpine lake; sometimes breaks out of a hillside as a spring where the ear can trace it under the rubble of loose stones to the neighborhood of some blind pool. But that leaves the lakes to be accounted for.

The lake is the eye of the mountain, jade green, placid, unwinking, also unfathomable. Whatever goes on under the high and stony brows is guessed at. It is always a favorite local tradition that one or another of the blind lakes is bottomless. Often they lie in such deep cairns of broken boulders that one never gets quite to them, or gets away unhurt. One such drops below the plunging slope that the Kearsarge trail winds over, perilously, nearing the pass. It lies still and wickedly green in its sharp-lipped cup, and the guides of that region love to tell of the packs and pack animals it has swallowed up.

But the lakes of Oppapago are perhaps not so deep, less green than gray, and better befriended. The ouzel haunts them, while still hang about their coasts the thin undercut drifts that never quite leave the high altitudes. In and out of the bluish ice caves he flits and sings, and his singing heard from above is sweet and uncanny like the Nixie's chord. One finds butterflies, too, about these high sharp regions which might be called desolate, but will not by me who love them. This is above timber-line but not too high for comforting by succulent small herbs and golden tufted grass. A granite mountain does not crumble with alacrity, but once resolved to soil makes the best of it. Every handful of loose gravel not wholly water leached affords a plant footing, and even in such unpromising surroundings there is a choice of locations. There is never going to be any communism of mountain herbage, their affinities are too sure. Full in the runners of snow water on gravelly, open spaces in the shadow of a drift, one looks to find butter cups, frozen knee deep by night, and owning no desire but to ripen their fruit above the icy bath. Sappy little plants of the portulaca and small, fine ferns shiver under the drip of falls and in dribbling crevices. The bleaker the situation, so it is near a stream border, the better the cassiope loves it. Yet I have not found it on the polished glacier slips, but where the country rock cleaves and splinters in the high windy headlands that the wild sheep frequents, hordes and hordes of the white bells swing over matted, mossy foliage. On Oppapago, which is also called Sheep Mountain, one finds not far from the beds of cassiope

the ice-worn, stony hollows where the bighorns cradle their young. These are above the wolf's quest and the eagle's wont, and though the heather beds are softer, they are neither so dry nor so warm, and here only the stars go by. No other animal of any pretensions makes a habitat of the alpine regions. Now and then one gets a hint of some small, brown creature, rat or mouse kind, that slips secretly among the rocks; no others adapt themselves to desertness of aridity or altitude so readily as these ground inhabiting, graminivorous species. If there is an open stream the trout go up the lake as far as the water breeds food for them, but the ouzel goes farthest, for pure love of it.

Since no lake- can be at the highest point, it is possible to find plant life higher than the water borders; grasses perhaps the highest, gillias, royal blue trusses of polymonium, rosy plats of Sierra primroses. What one has to get used to in flowers at high altitudes is the bleaching of the sun. Hardly do they hold their virgin color for a day, and this early fading before their function is performed gives them a pitiful appearance not according with their hardihood. The color scheme runs along the high ridges from blue to rosy purple, carmine and coral red; along the water borders it is chiefly white and yellow where the mimulus makes a vivid note, running into red when the two schemes meet and mix about the borders of the meadows, at the upper limit of the columbine.

Here is the fashion in which a mountain stream gets down from the perennial pastures of the snow to its proper level and identity as an irrigating ditch. It slips stilly by the glacier scoured rim of an ice bordered pool, drops over sheer, broken ledges to another pool, gathers itself, plunges headlong on a rocky ripple slope, finds a lake again, reinforced, roars downward to a pothole, foams and bridles, glides a tranquil reach in some still meadow, tumbles into a sharp groove between hill flanks, curdles under the stream tangles, and so arrives at the open country and steadier going. Meadows, little strips of alpine freshness, begin before the timber-line is reached. Here one treads on a carpet of dwarf willows, downy catkins of creditable size and the greatest economy of foliage and stems. No other plant of high altitudes knows its business so well. It hugs the ground, grows roots from stem joints where no roots should be, grows a slender leaf or two and twice as many erect full catkins that rarely, even in that short growing season, fail of fruit. Dipping over banks in the inlets of the creeks, the fortunate find the rosy apples of the miniature manzanita, barely, but always quite sufficiently, borne above the spongy sod. It does not do to be anything but humble in the alpine regions, but not fearful. I have pawed about for hours in the chill sward of meadows where one might properly expect to get one's death, and got no harm from it, except it might be Oliver Twist's complaint. One comes soon after this to shrubby willows, and where willows are trout may be confidently looked for in most Sierra streams. There is no accounting for their distribution; though provident anglers have assisted nature of late, one still comes upon roaring brown waters where trout might very well be, but are not.

The highest limit of conifers—in the middle Sierra, the white bark pine—is not along the water border. They come to it about the level of the heather, but they have no such affinity for dampness as the tamarack pines. Scarcely any bird-note breaks the stillness of the timber-line, but chipmunks inhabit here, as may be guessed by the gnawed ruddy cones of the pines, and lowering hours the woodchucks come down to the water. On a little spit of land running into Windy Lake we found one summer the evidence of a tragedy; a pair of sheep's horns not fully grown caught in the crotch of a pine where the living sheep must have lodged them. The trunk of the tree had quite closed over them, and the skull bones crumbled away from the weathered horn cases. We hoped it was not too far out of the running of night prowlers to have put a speedy end to the long agony, but we could not be sure. I never liked the spit of Windy Lake again.

It seems that all snow nourished plants count nothing so excellent in their kind as to be forehanded with their bloom, working secretly to that end under the high piled winters. The heathers begin by the lake borders, while little sodden drifts still shelter under their branches. I have seen the tiniest of them (*Kalmia glauca*) blooming, and with well-formed fruit, a foot away from a snowbank from which it could hardly have emerged

within a week. Somehow the soul of the heather has entered into the blood of the Englishspeaking. "And oh! is that heather?" they say; and the most indifferent ends by picking a sprig of it in a hushed, wondering way. One must suppose that the root of their respective races issued from the glacial borders at about the same epoch, and remember their origin.

Among the pines where the slope of the land allows it, the streams run into smooth, brown, trout-abounding rills across open flats that are in reality filled lake basins. These are the displaying grounds of gentians—blue—blue—eye-blue, perhaps, virtuous and likable flowers. One is not surprised to learn that they have tonic properties. But if your meadow should be outside the forest reserve, and the sheep have been there, you will find little but the shorter, paler *G. Newberryi*, and in the matted sods of the little tongues of greenness that lick up among the pines along the watercourses, white, scentless, nearly stemless, alpine violets.

At about the nine thousand foot level and in the summer there will be hosts of rosy-winged dodecatheon, called shooting-stars, outlining the crystal runners in the sod. Single flowers have often a two-inch spread of petal, and the full, twelve blossomed heads above the slender pedicels have the airy effect of wings.

It is about this level one looks to find the largest lakes with thick ranks of pines bearing down on them, often swamped in the summer floods and paying the inevitable penalty for such encroachment. Here in wet coves of the hills harbors that crowd of bloom that makes the wonder of the Sierra canyons.

They drift under the alternate flicker and gloom of the windy rooms of pines, in gray rock shelters, and by the ooze of blind springs, and their juxtapositions are the best imaginable. Lilies come up out of fern beds, columbine swings over meadow-sweet, white rein-orchids quake in the leaning grass. Open swales, where in wet years may be running water, are plantations of false hellebore (*Veratrum californicum*), tall, branched candelabra of greenish bloom above the sessile, sheathing, boat-shaped leaves, semi-translucent in the sun. A stately plant of the lily family, but why "false"? It is frankly offensive in its character, and its young juices deadly as any hellebore that ever grew.

Like most mountain herbs it has an uncanny haste to bloom. One hears by night, when all the wood is still, the crepitatious rustle of the unfolding leaves and the pushing flower-stalk within, that has open blossoms before it has fairly uncramped from the sheath. It commends itself by a certain exclusiveness of growth, taking enough room and never elbowing; for if the flora of the lake region has a fault it is that there is too much of it. We have more than three hundred species from Kearsarge Canyon alone, and if that does not include them all it is because they were already collected elsewhere.

One expects to find lakes down to about nine thousand feet, leading into each other by comparatively open ripple slopes and white cascades. Below the lakes are filled basins that are still spongy swamps, or substantial meadows, as they get down and down.

Here begin the stream tangles. On the east slopes of the middle Sierra the pines, all but an occasional yellow variety, desert the stream borders about the level of the lowest lakes, and the birches and tree-willows begin. The firs hold on almost to the mesa levels—there are no foothills on this eastern slope—and whoever has firs misses nothing else. It goes without saying that a tree that can afford to take fifty years to its first fruiting will repay acquaintance. It keeps, too, all that half century, a virginal grace of outline, but having once flowered, begins quietly to put away the things of its youth. Year by year the lower rounds of boughs are shed, leaving no scar; year by year the star-branched minarets approach the sky. A fir-tree loves a water border, loves a long wind in a draughty canyon, loves to spend itself secretly on the inner finishings of its burnished, shapely cones. Broken open in mid-season the petal-shaped scales show a crimson satin surface, perfect as a rose.

The birch—the brown-bark western birch characteristic of lower stream tangles—is a spoil-sport. It grows thickly to choke the stream that feeds it; grudges it the sky and space for angler's rod and fly. The willows do better; painted-cup, cypripedium, and the hollow stalks of span-broad white umbels, find a footing among their stems. But in general the steep plunges, the white swirls, green and tawny pools, the gliding hush of waters between the meadows and the mesas afford little fishing and few flowers.

One looks for these to begin again when once free of the rifted canyon walls; the high note of babble and laughter falls off to the steadier mellow tone of a stream that knows its purpose and reflects the sky.

Excerpt taken from the *The Land of Little Rain* by Mary Austin (©1903)