

56 Alaska Days with John Muir

only—abides in my heart as I think back upon that golden day with John Muir. He could, and did, go back to Glenora on the return trip of the *Cassiar*, ascend the mountain again, see the sunset from its top, make charming sketches, stay all night and see the sunrise, filling his cup of joy so full that he could pour out entrancing descriptions for days. While I—well, with entreating arms about one's neck and pleading, tearful eyes looking into one's own, what could one do but promise to climb no more? But my lifelong lamentation over a treasure forever lost, is this: "I never saw the sunset from that peak."

THE VOYAGE

### TOW-A-ATT

You are a child, old Friend—a child!  
As light of heart, as free, as wild;  
As credulous of fairy tale;  
As simple in your faith, as frail  
In reason; jealous, petulant;  
As crude in manner; ignorant,  
Yet wise in love; as rough, as mild—  
You are a child!

You are a man, old Friend—a man!  
Ah, sure in richer tide ne'er ran  
The blood of earth's nobility,  
Than through your veins; intrepid, free;  
In counsel, prudent; proud and tall;  
Of passions full, yet ruling all;  
No stauncher friend since time began;  
You are a MAN!

### III

### THE VOYAGE

**T**HE summer and fall of 1879 Muir always referred to as the most interesting period of his adventurous life. From about the tenth of July to the twentieth of November he was in southeastern Alaska. Very little of this time did he spend indoors. Until steamboat navigation of the Stickeen River was closed by the forming ice, he made frequent trips to the Great Glacier—thirty miles up the river, to the Hot Springs, the Mud Glacier and the interior lakes, ranges, forests and flower pastures. Always upon his return (for my house was his home the most of that time) he would be full to intoxication of what he had seen,

and dinners would grow cold and lamps burn out while he held us entranced with his impassioned stories. Although his books are all masterpieces of lucid and glowing English, Muir was one of those rare souls who talk better than they write; and he made the trees, the animals, and especially the glaciers, live before us. Somehow a glacier never seemed cold when John Muir was talking about it.

On September nineteenth a little stranger whose expected advent was keeping me at home arrived in the person of our first-born daughter. For two or three weeks preceding and following this event Muir was busy writing his summer notes and finishing his pencil sketches, and also studying the flora of the islands. It was a season of constant rains when the *saanah*, the southeast rain-wind, blew a gale. But these stormy days

and nights, which kept ordinary people indoors, always lured him out into the woods or up the mountains.

One wild night, dark as Erebus, the rain dashing in sheets and the wind blowing a hurricane, Muir came from his room into ours about ten o'clock with his long, gray overcoat and his Scotch cap on.

"Where now?" I asked.

"Oh, to the top of the mountain," he replied. "It is a rare chance to study this fine storm."

My expostulations were in vain. He rejected with scorn the proffered lantern: "It would spoil the effect." I retired at my usual time, for I had long since learned not to worry about Muir. At two o'clock in the morning there came a hammering at the front door. I opened it and there stood a group of our Indians, rain-soaked and trembling—Chief Tow-a-att, Moses, Aaron, Matthew, Thomas.

"Why, men," I cried, "what's wrong? What brings you here?"

"We want you play (pray)," answered Matthew.

I brought them into the house, and, putting on my clothes and lighting the lamp, I set about to find out the trouble. It was not easy. They were greatly excited and frightened.

"We scare. All Stickeen scare; plenty cly. We want you play God; plenty play."

By dint of much questioning I gathered at last that the whole tribe were frightened by a mysterious light waving and flickering from the top of the little mountain that overlooked Wrangell; and they wished me to pray to the white man's God and avert dire calamity.

"Some miner has camped there," I ventured.

An eager chorus protested; it was not like the light of a camp-fire in

the least; it waved in the air like the wings of a spirit. Besides, there was no gold on the top of a hill like that; and no human being would be so foolish as to camp up there on such a night, when there were plenty of comfortable houses at the foot of the hill. It was a spirit, a malignant spirit.

Suddenly the true explanation flashed into my brain, and I shocked my Indians by bursting into a roar of laughter. In imagination I could see him so plainly—John Muir, wet but happy, feeding his fire with spruce sticks, studying and enjoying the storm! But I explained to my natives, who ever afterwards eyed Muir askance, as a mysterious being whose ways and motives were beyond all conjecture.

"Why does this strange man go into the wet woods and up the mountains on stormy nights?" they asked.

"Why does he wander alone on barren peaks or on dangerous ice-mountains? There is no gold up there and he never takes a gun with him or a pick. *Icta mamook*—what make? Why—why?"

The first week in October saw the culmination of plans long and eagerly discussed. Almost the whole of the Alexandrian Archipelago, that great group of eleven hundred wooded islands that forms the southeastern cup-handle of Alaska, was at that time a *terra incognita*. The only seaman's chart of the region in existence was that made by the great English navigator, Vancouver, in 1807. It was a wonderful chart, considering what an absurd little sailing vessel he had in which to explore those intricate waters with their treacherous winds and tides.

But Vancouver's chart was hastily made, after all, in a land of fog and

rain and snow. He had not the modern surveyor's instruments, boats or other helps. And, besides, this region was changing more rapidly than, perhaps, any other part of the globe. Volcanic islands were being born out of the depths of the ocean; landslides were filling up channels between the islands; tides and rivers were opening new passages and closing old ones; and, more than all, those mightiest tools of the great Engineer, the glaciers, were furrowing valleys, dumping millions of tons of silt into the sea, forming islands, promontories and isthmuses, and by their recession letting the sea into deep and long fiords, forming great bays, inlets and passages, many of which did not exist in Vancouver's time. In certain localities the living glacier stream was breaking off bergs so fast that the resultant bays were lengthening a mile or more

each year. Where Vancouver saw only a great crystal wall across the sea, we were to paddle for days up a long and sinuous fiord; and where he saw one glacier, we were to find a dozen.

My mission in the proposed voyage of discovery was to locate and visit the tribes and villages of Thlingets to the north and west of Wrangell, to take their census, confer with their chiefs and report upon their condition, with a view to establishing schools and churches among them. The most of these tribes had never had a visit from a missionary, and I felt the eager zeal of an Eliot or a Martin at the prospect of telling them for the first time the Good News. Muir's mission was to find and study the forests, mountains and glaciers. I also was eager to see these and learn about them, and Muir was glad to study the natives

with me—so our plans fitted into each other well.

“We are going to write some history, my boy,” Muir would say to me. “Think of the honor! We have been chosen to put some interesting people and some of Nature's grandest scenes on the page of human record and on the map. Hurry! We are daily losing the most important news of all the world.”

In many respects we were most congenial companions. We both loved the same poets and could repeat, verse about, many poems of Tennyson, Keats, Shelley and Burns. He took with him a volume of Thoreau, and I one of Emerson, and we enjoyed them together. I had my printed Bible with me, and he had his in his head—the result of a Scotch father's discipline. Our studies supplemented each other and our tastes were similar. We had both

lived clean lives and our conversation together was sweet and high, while we both had a sense of humor and a large fund of stories.

But Muir's knowledge of Nature and his insight into her plans and methods were so far beyond mine that, while I was organizer and commander of the expedition, he was my teacher and guide into the inner recesses and meanings of the islands, bays and mountains we explored together.

Our ship for this voyage of discovery, while not so large as Vancouver's, was much more shapely and manageable—a *kladushu etlan* (six fathom) red-cedar canoe. It belonged to our captain, old Chief Tow-a-att, a chief who had lately embraced Christianity with his whole heart—one of the simplest, most faithful, dignified and brave souls I ever knew. He fully expected to

meet a martyr's death among his heathen enemies of the northern islands; yet he did not shrink from the voyage on that account.

His crew numbered three. First in importance was Kadishan, also a chief of the Stickeens, chosen because of his powers of oratory, his kinship with Chief Shathitch of the Chilcat tribe, and his friendly relations with other chiefs. He was a born courtier, learned in Indian lore, songs and customs, and able to instruct me in the proper Thlinget etiquette to suit all occasions. The other two were sturdy young men—Stickeen John, our interpreter, and Sitka Charley. They were to act as cooks, camp-makers, oarsmen, hunters and general utility men.

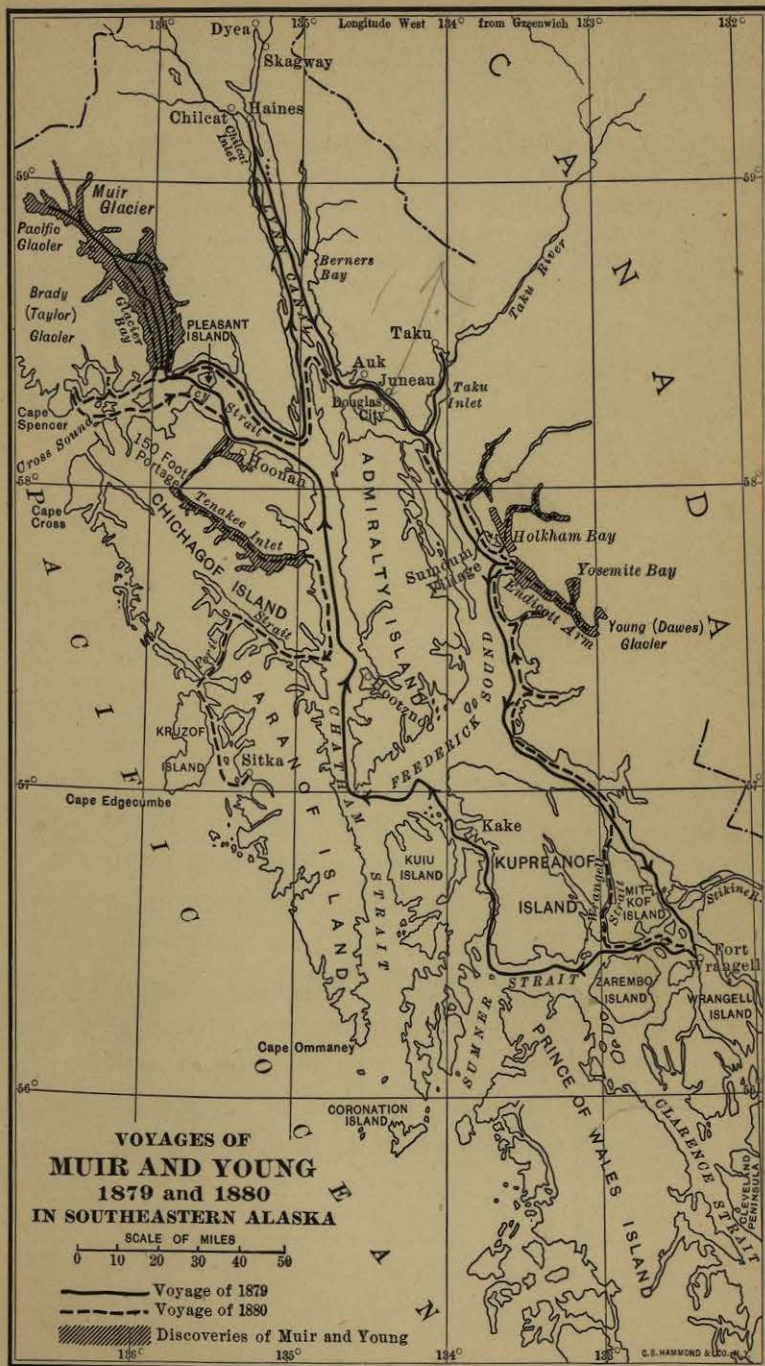
We stowed our baggage, which was not burdensome, in one end of the canoe, taking a simple store of provisions—flour, beans, bacon, su-

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gar, salt and a little dried fruit. We were to depend upon our guns, fish-hooks, spears and clamsticks for other diet. As a preliminary to our palaver with the natives we followed the old Hudson Bay custom, then firmly established in the North. We took materials for a *potlatch*,—leaf-tobacco, rice and sugar. Our Indian crew laid in their own stock of provisions, chiefly dried salmon and seal-grease, while our table was to be separate, set out with the white man's viands.

We did not get off without trouble. Kadishan's mother, who looked but little older than himself, strongly objected to my taking her son on so perilous a voyage and so late in the fall, and when her scoldings and entreaties did not avail she said: "If anything happens to my son, I will take your baby as mine in payment."

One sunny October day we set our





prow to the unknown northwest. Our hearts beat high with anticipation. Every passage between the islands was a corridor leading into a new and more enchanting room of Nature's great gallery. The lapping waves whispered enticing secrets, while the seabirds screaming overhead and the eagles shrilling from the sky promised wonderful adventures.

The voyage naturally divides itself into the human interest and the study of nature; yet the two constantly blended throughout the whole voyage. I can only select a few instances from that trip of six weeks whose every hour was new and strange.

Our captain, taciturn and self-reliant, commanded Muir's admiration from the first. His paddle was sure in the stern, his knowledge of the wind and tide unfailing. When-

ever we landed the crew would begin to dispute concerning the best place to make camp. But old Tow-a-att, with the mast in his hand, would march straight as an arrow to the likeliest spot of all, stick down his mast as a tent-pole and begin to set up the tent, the others invariably acquiescing in his decision as the best possible choice.

At our first meal Muir's sense of humor cost us one-third of a roll of butter. We invited our captain to take dinner with us. I got out the bread and other viands, and set the two-pound roll of butter beside the bread and placed both by Tow-a-att. He glanced at the roll of butter and at the three who were to eat, measured with his eye one-third of the roll, cut it off with his hunting knife and began to cut it into squares and eat it with great gusto. I was about to interfere and show

him the use we made of butter, but Muir stopped me with a wink. The old chief calmly devoured his third of the roll, and rubbing his stomach with great satisfaction pronounced it "*hyas klosk* (very good) glease."

Of necessity we had chosen the rainiest season of the year in that dampest climate of North America, where there are two hundred and twenty-five rainy days out of the three hundred and sixty-five. During our voyage it did not rain every day, but the periods of sunshine were so rare as to make us hail them with joyous acclamation.

We steered our course due westward for forty miles, then through a sinuous, island-studded passage called Rocky Strait, stopping one day to lay in a supply of venison before sailing on to the village of the Kake Indians. My habit throughout the voyage, when com-