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## CLARENCE KING - A Tale of Two Lives



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In 1887 or 1888 a man named James Todd met and fell in love with an African-American nursemaid named Ada Copeland. He was fair-haired, blue-eyed and claimed to be a Pullman porter, a job usually reserved for

men of black ancestry. They married and set up a household in Brooklyn, New York, where they bore five children—two boys, two girls, and a toddler who died at an early age. This story would be unremarkable except that nothing James told Ada was true.

James Todd was not actually black. He was not a Pullman porter, and he was not James Todd. In reality he was Clarence King, an eminent geologist, explorer, mountain climber, and author. Over a period of 13 years until his death in 1901, he alternated between two lives, explaining to Ada that his lengthy absences were due to the travel requirements of his job as a Pullman porter.

Meanwhile, Clarence King, in his alternate role, continued with his high level scientific and society contacts,

keeping his marriage and family a complete secret from his associates and friends. Indeed, it was during this period that he was elected to professional membership in the Boone and Crockett Club.

Clarence King was born into a prosperous New England family in 1842. His early interest in scientific matters led him to the Sheffield Scientific School of Yale University, where he graduated with a degree in chemistry in 1862. After graduation he traveled across the continent by horseback to California, accompanied by his classmate and friend, James Gardiner. There they both joined the California Geological Survey. King loved his work, particularly among the mountains of the Sierra Nevada. He became an avid mountaineer, making first ascents of several of its high peaks. His book, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, was widely acclaimed and is still an international classic.

In 1867 King was named U.S. Geologist of the Fortieth Parallel Survey and he spent six years in the field exploring areas from Wyoming to the borders of California. It was during this time that he exposed a

### BOOK BY CLARENCE KING

*Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1871)

### BIOGRAPHY OF CLARENCE KING

*The Explorer King* by Robert Wilson (2006)

diamond field fraud scheme that helped build his heroic national reputation. In 1879 the U.S. Congress consolidated the various geological surveys exploring the American West and created the United States Geological Survey with Clarence King as its first director.

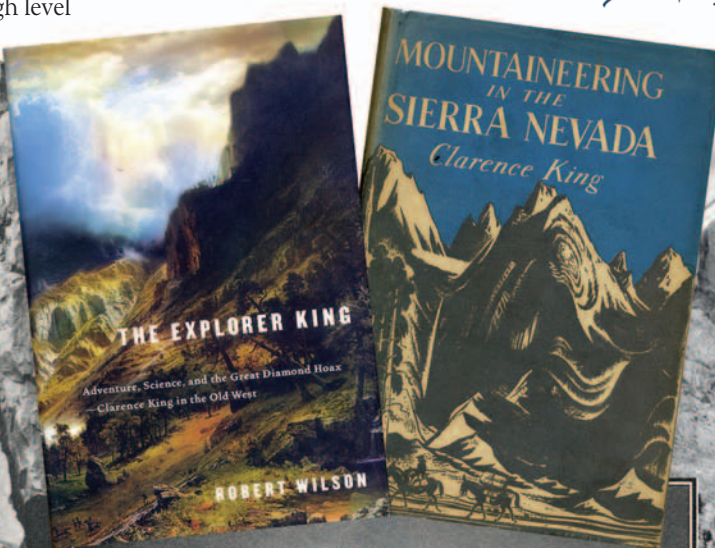
King died of tuberculosis in Phoenix, Arizona in 1901. It was only on his deathbed that he wrote to his wife, Ada, a letter confessing his true identity. Their two daughters went on to marry white men and considered themselves Caucasian. Their two sons served in World War I classified as blacks. Interestingly, the relationship of King and Ada and their children only became known publicly, when, more than 30 years after his death, in a sensational 1933 trial, she tried to recover a trust fund that King had promised her. ■

*Theodore J. Holsten*



ABOVE: Clarence King

RIGHT: The 1864 field party of the California Geological Survey. From left: James T. Gardner, Richard D. Cotter, William H. Brewer, and Clarence King



ABOVE: Mount Clarence King, photographed by Ansel Adams