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The Desert Year



Decorations by Rudolf Freund

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dicted, Beauty is neither measurable nor predictable and for that reason can neither be talked about to any purpose nor reasonably be supposed to exist. Yet the three of us—myself, the color which I saw, and the Beauty of which I was aware—were all there together. If one has already granted the first two, it is too late to deny the third. If the light was not beautiful, the light was not there; and if the light was not there, then neither was I. Perhaps when I departed, God, as the Idealists would say, took over. But whether He did or did not, we three were inseparable as long as I was there. For that period at least the light waves revealed a color and they possessed a value.

Only after I had come down could I spare the time to wonder either how anyone could doubt these facts or, more important, why anyone should want to. Is it only, I wondered, that the novelty of Science and its recent successes have temporarily prejudiced us in its favor? Or can it be that mankind is really moved—as sometimes it seems to be—by some will to self-destruction? Has man deliberately turned away from himself and the universe in which he once flourished? Did he first turn from Nature toward the Machine; then turn from Sight and Hearing toward the Formula and the Instrument; did he, finally, turn away from Will and Value toward Determinism and Ethical Relativity, because he willed his own will-lessness and

irresponsibility; because he wanted to destroy ultimately the consciousness in which all the things from which he turned have their being? Does he wish thus, once and for all, to extinguish along with himself everything which, it may be, came into being only with him?

One thing is certain. While the three of us were on the mountaintop I had no impulse to do what the scientist would call "probe deeper" into the realities of which I was aware. I felt no desire to realize that purple "really is" vibrations in the ether or that my awareness of it "really was" a chemical, or perhaps electrical, phenomenon of the brain cells. Whether such probings really are into depths I neither know nor much care; for if it was on the surface that I was, then on the surface is where I, and most human beings, are most truly at home. Beauty, they say, is skin-deep and the saying may be true in a sense rather different from that originally meant. "Last week," wrote Swift, "I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse." Yesterday I, on the contrary, saw the bones and flesh of the world clothed in a beautiful skin. I am content to leave to others both the X-ray and the scalpel.

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The Individu



sumption that endless progress implies the endless multiplication of goods and gadgets, even that "real wages" and "production per man hour" are necessarily an approximate index of welfare. I am not saying that a reduction in the standard of material living automatically brings with it an increase in happiness or nobility, but I do doubt that the converse is true, and I do find it astonishing that this doubt seems so seldom shared.

If what I find in the desert is no example to be imitated, it suggests a metaphor which to me is meaningful. What I learn by way of this metaphor is not the kind of thing I learn from a treatise on economics or even on morals. But it is very much the kind of thing I learn from an essay by Emerson or a poem by Emily Dickinson. And a world which seems to have passed long ago the point where treatises on economics or on morals begin to pay a sadly diminished return in wisdom might do well to pay more attention to what poets—and deserts—have striven to communicate in their own way.

When I go back, as I must, to live in a world almost wholly man-made and almost wholly absorbed in problems which man himself has created, I shall often return in memory to things seen and done during my desert interlude. There will be, first of all, encounters with birds and beasts to be remembered. Then, as on a screen, I shall see my mental

kodachromes projected—sometimes of vast vistas of mountain or plain, sometimes little close-ups of an improbable blossom bursting out of a cactus, or of a lizard poised for a moment in the sun. All too often, I am afraid, I shall be reminded how whole acres of New York City in which nothing grows have been turned into a desert far more absolute than any I have ever seen in the Southwest, and I shall wonder whether man himself can live well in a place where nothing else can live at all. But I doubt whether anything else will be so continuously in the back of my mind as the consciousness of that metaphor which two thousand miles of countryside set forth, and I shall not forget its lesson: much can be lacking in the midst of plenty; on the other hand, where some things are scarce others, no less desirable, may abound.

on the contrary, that this particular world has become increasingly too little, not too much, "with us." And to believe as I do, one does not need to believe that nature embodies any ideal rightness. It is equally true if one believes, instead, that she illustrates the fundamental contingencies of things-as-they-are and that those who forget to observe her are pretty sure to act with disastrous disregard of the contingencies which she illustrates.

Since she is joyous, it is a great mistake to forget how to share in her joy. Since she also accepts much that is unacceptable to men who have pushed too far in their efforts to imagine a universe they think they would like better, it is also a great mistake to forget completely how to reconcile ourselves, as she does, to things unreconcilable with purely human attitudes. In any man-made world one still meets them pretty frequently, most frequently of all, perhaps, in the most crowded, most "civilized" communities. If the scheme of things is a "sorry scheme," man's attempts have not brought it very close to the heart's desire.

What I learned from my desert year was, first and most generally, to be "more sure of all I thought was true." Specifically, I re-learned many platitudes, including some I have mentioned—such as, for instance, that courage is admirable even in a cactus;