

Silence and Desolation

THE DESERT

FURTHER STUDIES IN NATURAL APPEARANCES

BY

JOHN C. VAN DYKE

AUTHOR OF "NATURE FOR ITS OWN SAKE," "ART FOR ART'S SAKE," ETC., ETC.

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1925

Destruction of natural beauty.

To speak about sparing anything because it is beautiful is to waste one's breath and incur ridicule in the bargain. The æsthetic sense—the power to enjoy through the eye, the ear, and the imagination—is just as important a factor in the scheme of human happiness as the corporeal sense of eating and drinking; but there has never been a time when the world would admit it. The "practical men," who seem forever on the throne, know very well that beauty is only meant for lovers and young persons—stuff to suckle fools withal. The main affair of life is to get the dollar, and if there is any money in cutting the throat of Beauty, why, by all means, cut her throat. That is what the "practical men" have been doing ever since the world began. It is not necessary to dig up ancient history; for have we not seen, here in California and Oregon, in our own time, the destruction of the fairest valleys the sun ever shone upon by placer and hydraulic mining? Have we not seen in Minnesota and Wisconsin the mightiest forests that ever raised head to the sky slashed to pieces by the axe and turned into a waste of tree-stumps and fallen timber? Have we not seen the Upper Mississippi, by the destruction of

62-16
61-797

Effects of mining, lumbering, agriculture.

the forests, changed from a broad, majest river into a shallow, muddy stream; and t beautiful prairies of Dakota turned under the plough and then allowed to run to weeds Men must have coal though they ruin the va leys and blacken the streams of Pennsylvani they must have oil though they disfigure ha of Ohio and Indiana, they must have copp if they wreck all the mountains of Monta and Arizona, and they must have gold thou they blow Alaska into the Behring Sea. It more than possible that the "practical men have gained much practice and many do lars by flaying the fair face of these Unit States. They have stripped the land of i robes of beauty, and what have they given its place? Weeds, wire fences, oil-derrick board shanties and board towns—things th not even a "practical man" can do less tha curse at.

And at last they have turned to the deser It remains to be seen what they will do with Reclaiming a waste may not be so easy as brea ing a prairie or cutting down a forest. A Nature will not always be driven from h purpose. Wind, sand, and heat on Saha have proven hard forces to fight against; th

may prove no less potent on the Colorado. And sooner or later Nature will surely come to her own again. Nothing human is of long duration. Men and their deeds are obliterated, the race itself fades; but Nature goes calmly on with her projects. She works not for man's enjoyment, but for her own satisfaction and her own glory. She made the fat lands of the earth with all their fruits and flowers and foliage; and with no less care she made the desert with its sands and cacti. She intended that each should remain as she made it. When the locust swarm has passed, the flowers and grasses will return to the valley; when man is gone, the sand and the heat will come back to the desert. The desolation of the kingdom will live again, and down in the Bottom of the Bowl the opalescent mirage will waver skyward on wings of light, serene in its solitude, though no human eye sees nor human tongue speaks its loveliness.

Nature eternal.

Return of desolation.

interesting view of man and nature, but doubt if the flavor is appropriate for Glen

CHAPTER IV

THE SILENT RIVER

THE career of the Colorado, from its ri
the Wind River Mountains in Wyoming t
final disappearance in the Gulf of Califo
seems almost tragic in its swift transitions.
starts out so cheerily upon its course; it i
clear and pure, so sparkling with sunshine
spirit. It dashes down mountain valleys,
gles under bowlders, swirls over waterf
flashes through ravines and gorges. With
sweep and glide and its silvery laugh it seem
lead a merry life. But too soon it plunges
precipitous canyons and enters upon its fi
struggle with the encompassing rock. No
boils and foams, leaps and strikes, thunders
shatters. For hundreds of miles it wears
worries and undermines the rock to its destr
tion. During the long centuries it has
down into the crust of the earth five thous
feet. But ever the stout walls keep castin
back, keep churning it into bubbles, beatin

The forsaken.

with no cry, human beings with no voice. And so forsaken! The largest river west of the mountains and yet the least known. There are miles upon miles of mesas stretching upward from the stream that no feet have ever trodden, and that possess not a vestige of life of any kind. And along its banks the same tale is told. You float for days and meet with no traces of humanity. When they do appear it is but to emphasize the solitude. An Indian wickiup on the bank, an Indian town; yes, a white man's town, what impression do they make upon the desert and its river? You drift by Yuma and wonder what it is doing there. Had it been built in the middle of the Pacific on a barren rock it could not be more isolated, more hopelessly "at sea."

Solitude.

After the river crosses the border-line of Mexico it grows broader and flatter than ever. And still the color seems to deepen. For all its suggestion of blood it is not an unlovely color. On the contrary, that deep red contrasted with the green of the banks and the blue of the sky, makes a very beautiful color harmony. They are hues of depth and substance—hues that comport excellently well with the character of the river itself. And never a river had more

Beauty of the river.

character than the Colorado. You may n fancy the solitude of the stream nor its sugge tive coloring, but you cannot deny its majest and its nobility. It has not now the babble o the brook nor the swift rush of the canyo water; rather the quiet dignity that is abov conflict, beyond gayety. It has grown old, i is nearing its end; but nothing could be calmer simpler, more sublime, than the drift of it down into the delta basin.

The mountains are receding on every side, the desert is flattening to meet the sea, and the ocean tides are rising to meet the river. Half human in its dissolution, the river begins to break joint by joint. The change has been gradually taking place for miles and now manifests itself positively. The bottom lands widen, many channels or side-sloughs open upon the stream, and the water is distributed into the mouths of the delta. There is a break in the volume and mass—a disintegration of forces. And by divers ways, devious and slow, the crippled streams well out to the Gulf and never come together again.

It is not so when the river is at its height with spring freshets. Then the stream is swollen beyond its banks. All the bottom lands for

uman beings with no voice. And
The largest river west of the
yet the least known. There are
iles of mesas stretching upward
n that no feet have ever trodden,
ss not a vestige of life of any
ong its banks the same tale is
at for days and meet with no
nity. When they do appear it is
size the solitude. An Indian
e bank, an Indian town; yes, a
own, what impression do they
desert and its river? You drift
wonder what it is doing there.
ilt in the middle of the Pacific
k it could not be more isolated,
y "at sea."
iver crosses the border-line of
vs broader and flatter than ever.
olor seems to deepen. For all its
lood it is not an unlovely color.
y, that deep red contrasted with
e banks and the blue of the sky,
beautiful color harmony. They
epth and substance—hues that
ently well with the character of
. And never a river had more

character than the Colorado. You may not fancy the solitude of the stream nor its suggestive coloring, but you cannot deny its majesty and its nobility. It has not now the babble of the brook nor the swift rush of the canyon water; rather the quiet dignity that is above conflict, beyond gayety. It has grown old, it is nearing its end; but nothing could be calmer, simpler, more sublime, than the drift of it down into the delta basin.

Its majesty.

The mountains are receding on every side, the desert is flattening to meet the sea, and the ocean tides are rising to meet the river. Half human in its dissolution, the river begins to break joint by joint. The change has been gradually taking place for miles and now manifests itself positively. The bottom lands widen, many channels or side-sloughs open upon the stream, and the water is distributed into the mouths of the delta. There is a break in the volume and mass—a disintegration of forces. And by divers ways, devious and slow, the crippled streams well out to the Gulf and never come together again.

Disintegration.

The delta.

It is not so when the river is at its height with spring freshets. Then the stream is swollen beyond its banks. All the bottom lands for

here are clouds stretched
ding is usually one of ex-
The reds are all scarlet,
rnished brass, the oranges

louds of the desert are of
r that they call for a

CHAPTER VI

DESERT SKY AND CLOUDS

How silently, even swiftly, the days glide by out in the desert, in the waste, in the wilderness! How "the morning and the evening make up the day" and the purple shadow slips in between with a midnight all stars! And how day by day the interest grows in the long overlooked commonplace things of nature! In a few weeks we are studying bushes, bowlders, stones, sand-drifts—things we never thought of looking at in any other country. And after a time we begin to make mental notes on the changes of light, air, clouds, and blue sky. At first we are perhaps bothered about the intensity of the sky, for we have always heard of the "deep blue" that overhangs the desert; and we expect to see it at any and all times. But we discover that it shows itself in its greatest depth only in the morning before sunrise. Then it is a dark blue, bordering upon purple; and for some time after the sun comes up it holds a

Commonplace things of nature.

t noon it has passed through
tones and is pale blue, yel-
or rosy; in the late after-
d again to pink or gold or
wilight and under the moon,
ch across the whole reach of
horizon to horizon.

in the blue during the day
to a change. There is no
ut them. The caprices of
st control the appearances.
at dawn is as pallid as a snow-
rays just emerging from the
may be flushed with saffron,
hen there are clouds and great
s often very brilliant. The
in chrome-yellows, golds, car-
malachite-greens—a body of
held by enormous side wings
encircle the horizon to the
and send waves of color far up
zenith. Such dawns are sel-
t countries, nor are they usual
xcept during the hot summer

note of the sky, the one of-
course, blue—a color we may

not perhaps linger over because it is so common. And yet how seldom it is appreciated! Our attention is called to it in art—in a hawthorn jar as large as a sugar-bowl, made in a certain period, in a certain Oriental school. The æsthetic world is perhaps set agog by this ceramic blue. But what are its depth and purity compared to the ethereal blue! Yet the color is beautiful in the jar and infinitely more beautiful in the sky—that is beautiful in itself and merely as color. It is not necessary that it should mean anything. Line and tint do not always require significance to be beautiful. There is no tale or text or testimony to be tortured out of the blue sky. It is a splendid body of color; no more.

Blue as a color.

You cannot always see the wonderful quality of this sky-blue from the desert valley, because it is disturbed by reflections, by sand-storms, by lower air-strata. The report it makes of itself when you begin to gain altitude on a mountain's side is quite different. At four thousand feet the blue is certainly more positive, more intense, than at sea-level; at six thousand feet it begins to darken and deepen, and it seems to fit in the saddles and notches of the mountains like a block of lapis lazuli; at eight thousand feet it

Sky from mountain heights.

t, with a saddle for your pil-
s staring upward at the stars,
sible it all seems! The im-
mystery are appalling; and
features attract the thought
osity of man. In the pres-
inable and the insurmount-
ing a hope, a doubt, a query,
realms of air to Saturn's
have we wherewith to un-
Ve cannot comprehend a tiny
invention called electricity,
the meaning of the blazing
urus. Around us stretches
pped desert whose mystery
not even the Sphinx could
it, above it, upward still
he mysteries of Orion and

raws us to the boundless and
Thy should the lovely things
es, the trees, the lakes, the
r trivial and insignificant
to face with the sea or the
ss of the midnight sky? Is
e tale of things known and
int, a suggestion of the un-

known? Or have immensity, space, magnitude a peculiar beauty of their own? Is it not true that bulk and breadth are primary and essential qualities of the sublime in landscape? And is it not the sublime that we feel in immensity and mystery? If so, perhaps we have a partial explanation of our love for sky and sea and desert waste. They are the great elements. We do not see, we hardly know if their boundaries are limited; we only feel their immensity, their mystery, and their beauty.

Space and immensity.

And quite as impressive as the mysteries are the silences. Was there ever such a stillness as that which rests upon the desert at night! Was there ever such a hush as that which steals from star to star across the firmament! You perhaps think to break the spell by raising your voice in a cry; but you will not do so again. The sound goes but a little way and then seems to come back to your ear with a suggestion of insanity about it.

The silences.

A cry in the night! Overhead the planets in their courses make no sound, the earth is still, the very animals are mute. Why then the cry of the human? How it jars the harmonies! How it breaks in discord upon the unities of earth and air and sky! Century after

The cry of the human.

the yellow rattlesnake. And they have no more character and perhaps less fitness for the desert life than the sneaking coyote or the flattened lizard which you do not admire. But why are not the coyote and the lizard beautiful too? Why not the beauty of the horned toad and the serpent? Are we never to love or to admire save where form and color tickle the eye? Are these forever to monopolize the name of beauty and gather to themselves the world's applause?

Beauty also of reptiles.

If we could but rid ourselves of the false ideas, which, taken *en masse*, are called education, we should know that there is nothing ugly under the sun, save that which comes from human distortion. Nature's work is all of it good, all of it purposeful, all of it wonderful, all of it beautiful. We like or dislike certain things which may be a way of expressing our prejudice or our limitation; but the work is always perfect of its kind irrespective of human appreciation. We may prefer the sunlight to the starlight, the evening primrose to the bisnaga, the antelope to the mountain lion, the mocking-bird to the lizard; but to say that one is good and the other bad, that one is beautiful and the other ugly, is to accuse Nature herself of preference—something which she never knew. She designs for the cactus of the desert as skilfully and as faithfully as for the lily of the garden. Each in its way is suited to its place, and each in its way has its unique beauty of character. And so, more truly perhaps than Shakespeare himself knew, the toad called ugly and venomous, still holds a precious jewel in its head.

Nature's work all purposeful.

61-797

for the cactus of the desert as skilfully and as faithfully as for the lily of the garden. Each in its way is suited to its place, and each in its way has its unique beauty of character. And so, more truly perhaps than Shakespeare himself knew, the toad called ugly and venomous, still holds a precious jewel in its head.

Precious jewel of the toad.

aniards had found it that and
na for cause.*
is a land of heavy cloud-bursts
In the summer months it fre-
the mesas in torrents. The
he country drains this water al-
of of a house because there are
ashes of consequence to check
low it to soak into the ground.
m the Divide to the Colorado
ep. The flood of waters rushes
of the mesas and over the baro
rific force. It quickly cuts
low places down which are
vel, and bowlders. The cutting
during the heavy rains is some-
ary, partly because the stream
he and fall, and partly because
is usually of soft rock and easily
ozen years the arroyo of a mesa
the water from the mountain-
river-bed many feet deep; in a

lliot Coues and others reject the obvi-
the Spanish in favor of some strained
he Indian dialects, about which no two
Why should the name not have come
and why should it not mean just sim-
lt?

few hundred years the valley-bed changes into a gorge with five hundred feet of sheer rock-wall; in a few thousand years perhaps the restless wearing water of the great river has sunk its bed five thousand feet below the surface and made the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

Gorge cutting.

The Canyon country is well named, for it has plenty of wash-outs and gorges. Almost anywhere among the mountain-ranges you can find them—not Grand Canyons, to be sure, but ones of size sufficient to be impressive without being stupendous. Walls of upright rock several hundred feet in height have enough bulk and body about them to impress anyone. The mass is really overpowering. It is but the crust of the earth exposed to view; but the gorge at Niagara and the looming shaft of the Matterhorn are not more. The imagination strains at such magnitude. And all the accessories of the gorge and canyon have a might to them that adds to the general effect. The sheer precipices, the leaning towers, the pinnacles and shafts, the recesses and caves, the huge basins rounded out of rock by the waterfalls are all touched by the majesty of the sublime.

In the canyons.

Upright walls of rock.

And what could be more beautiful than the deep shadow of the canyon! You may have

Color in shadows

61-561

62-36

Color in canyon shadows.

had doubts about those colored shadows which painters of the *plein-air* school talked so much about a few years ago. You may have thought that it was all talk and no reality; but now that you are in the canyon, and in a shadow, look about you and see if there is not plenty of color there, too. The walls are dyed with it, the stones are stained with it—all sorts of colors from strata of rock, from clays and slates, from minerals, from lichens, from mosses. The stones under your feet have not turned black or brown because out of the sunlight. If you were on the upper rim of the canyon looking down, the whole body of air in shadow would look blue. And that strange light coming from above! You may have had doubts, too, about the intense luminosity of the blue sky; but look up at it along the walls of rock to where it spreads in a thin strip above the jaws of the canyon. Did you ever see such light coming out of the blue before! See how it flashes from the long line of tumbling water that pitches over the rocks! White as an avalanche, the water slips through the air down to its basin of stone; and white, again, as the snow are the foam and froth of the pool.

The blue sky seen from the canyon depths.

Stones and water in a gorge, wastes of rock

thrust upward into mountains, long v
plain and mesa glaring in the sunlight
things are these for a human being to
love with? Doctor Johnson, who occa
went into the country to see his frie
never to see the country, who thought
demented who enjoyed living out of tow
who cared for a tree only as firewood
ber, what would he have had to say ab
desert and its confines? In his class
and in all the long time before him, t
and the beauty thereof remained compa
unnoticed and unknown. Scott, Byron
—not one of the old romanticists ev
Nature except as in some strained way
of human happiness or misery. Even
naturalists of the last half of the ni
century took up the study they were i
at first only with the large and more
beauties of the world—the Alps, the
the Grand Canyons, the panoramic vi
mountain-tops. They never would
erated the desert for a moment.

But the Nature-lover of the present,
taken so kindly to the minor beauti
world, has perhaps a little wider hori
his predecessors. Not that his positi

edge is so much greater, but rather where he lacks in knowledge he declines to condemn.

The Nature-lover of the present.

He knows now that Nature did not give all her energy to the large things and all her weakness to the small things; he knows now that she works by law and labors alike for all; he knows now that back of everything is a purpose, and if he can discover the purpose he cannot choose but admire the product.

That is something of an advance no doubt—a grasp at human limitations at least—but there is no reason to think that it will lead to any lofty heights. Nature never intended that we should fully understand. That we have stumbled upon some knowledge of her laws was more accident than design. We have by some strange chance groped our way to the Gate of the Garden, and there we stand, staring through the closed bars, with the wonder of little children. Alas! we shall always grope! And shall we ever cease to wonder?

Human limitations.

62-18

CHAPTER XII

MOUNTAIN-BARRIERS

THE character of the land lying
western boundaries of the deserts is v
ent from that of the Arizona canyo
Moving toward the Pacific you mee
mesas of consequence, nor do you trav
plateaus or foot-hills. The sands ex
the bases of the Coast Range and
short. The mountains rise abruptly
desert like a barrier or wall. Some
lift vertically for several thousand
more often they present only a st
grade. There are cracks in the
passes, through which railways lead
Pacific; and there are high divides
—dips in the top of the wall—throug
the old days the Indians trailed fro
sea, and which are to-day known
inquisitive few.

From the saddles—and better stil
topmost peaks—there are wonderfu