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The Great Southwest

II. The Desert

TO science there is no poison; to botany no weed; to chemistry no dirt.

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AFTER all, there is no desert. Within the memory of comparatively young men a third of the territory of the United States beyond the Mississippi bore the name of the "Great American Desert." It was a region vast beyond accurate human conception, in extent as great as half of Europe, mid-ribbed with the stupendous, shaggy bulk of the Rocky Mountains, from which it descended in both directions in illimitable rolling plains and rugged mesas, rising here to the height of snow-crowned mountains, and falling there to the ancient salty beds of lost seas, lower than the level of the ocean. It was ruttied by chasms and washes, the channels of rivers that thundered with a passion of water for a single month in the year, and were ash-dry for the other eleven. Some stretched eastward toward the Mississippi, some southward toward the Gulf, and some westward toward the Pacific. It was an empire of wild grandeur, of majestic heights and appalling depths, of silent waste places, of barbaric beauty of coloring, of volcanoes and the titanic work of volcanoes, of fierce wild beasts and wilder men; but it was a desert. Here, for months at a time, no rain came to moisten the parched earth, and there were few clouds to obscure the heat of a blazing sun. The earth became dust and ashes, all but uninhabited and impassable, here grown up to cactus and greasewood and sage, here to gray grass, here to nothing—a place where animals dropped in their tracks from heat and thirst, and shriveled there, undecaying, until their ragged hides crumpled like parchment over their gaunt skeletons. Many a pioneer bound for the El Dorado of California felt the tooth of the desert, and left his bones to whiten on the trail as a dreadful evidence of the rigor of these waste places. This was the Great American Desert, the irreclaimable waste of forty years ago, the dread spot of the continent. Today you may seek it in vain.

When reduced to its essence, the work of every great explorer and pioneer in the West has consisted in showing that the desert was no desert. It was a cramped and mendicant imagination and a weak faith in humanity that first called it a desert, and it has required the life of many a bold man to dispel that error. The pioneer cowman came in and saw the dry bunchgrass of the plains. "This is no desert," he said; "this is pastureland," and straightway thirty million cattle were feeding on the ranges. A colony of Mormons, driven to the wilderness by persecution, saw, with the faith of a Moses, green fields blooming where the cactus grew, and in a few years a great city had risen in the midst of a fertile valley, and a new commonwealth had been born. A Powell came and disclosed the possibilities of the desert when watered from rivers that had long run to waste, and a hundred valleys began to bloom, and millions of acres of barren

desert to grow the richest crops on the continent. Miners came, found gold and silver and copper in the hills, and built a thousand camps; the railroads divided the great desert with a maze of steel trails until it was a veritable patchwork of civilization; and timid tourists came and camped, and went away better and braver. Today several million Americans are living in the desert, not temporarily, while they rob it of riches, but for all time, and they love their homes as passionately as any dwellers in the green hills of New England.

A traveler in the West must go far indeed before he find a place where he can say, "This is a worthless and irreclaimable waste, the true desert." There is no faith left in him who speaks of waste places. I stand in the gray sand: nothing but sand in every direction as far as the eye can reach--sand, a few sentinel yuccas, a sprawling mesquite-bush, with a gopher darting underneath, and a cholla cactus, gray with dust. Here, I say, is the waste place of all the ages; no man ever has set foot here before, and it is likely that no man ever will again. But what is that sound—*click, click, click* that comes from the distance? It is no kin to the noises of the desert. Climb the ridge there, the one that trembles with heat; take it slowly, for the sun is blinding hot, and the dry air cracks one's lips. Have a care of that tall sahuaro; it has been growing there undisturbed for two centuries, and it is not less prickly for its age. And in all its years it never has seen a vision such as it now beholds; for here are men come to the desert, painfully dragging water with them in carts and barrels. They have put up machinery in this silent place, having faith that there is oil a thousand feet below in the rock; and so they come in the heat and dust to prove their faith. You hear the click, click of their machinery; it is the triumphant song of an indomitable, conquering humanity.

Go over the next ridge, or perhaps the one beyond that, and you will see a still stranger sight—a great, black, angular dredge, a one-armed iron giant scooping up the sand, tons at a time, in his huge palm, weighing it in the air, and then, with out-crooking elbow, majestically dropping it upon the desert. There is a little black engine behind burning mesquite wood, and a silent, grimy man chewing tobacco and grumbling at the heat. They entered the desert forty miles away at the bank of a great river, and they have burrowed their way through the sand, with the water following in a broad brown band.

"Yes, sir," says the man, in a matter-of-fact voice; "this canal will irrigate half a million acres of land in this desert. In ten years there will be a hundred thousand people settled here. You see that mesquite tree over there? Well, that's where we're going to locate the city. The railroad will come in along that ridge and cross over near those chollas."

Try another ridge; there is yet a possibility of finding a waste that will be forever useless and irreclaimable. The huge dredge sinks out of site, blurred by the vibrating heat of the plain, upon which the prophet in the grimy peacoat saw blooming orchards and heard the throb of human life. The mesquite disappears, then the yuccas; the ridges have flattened themselves out in a low, level, endless plain: where were yellows and browns and smudgy reds, now all is a sodden gray. Even the cactus cannot here find food for life; there is not a spear of grass, not a gopher, not a bird, not a snake even—absolutely nothing. There are even no bones scattered here to bleach, for no animal could have come so far from water and lived. The earth is not only bare and flat and dry, but in places it is full of cracks, and the edges of each patchwork bit of soil are curled up like the lips of a man dying of fever. One's foot crushes through at every step, raising an impalpable dust which hangs in the hot sunlight like the smoke of a new fire. In the distance a shadow rises on the desert, sweeping faster and faster as it approaches; it is huge, flaring, and thin at the top, and small and dense at the bottom. It appears to whirl; it is as graceful as a tree in the wind. It is a dust storm at play. Be thankful that its path leads it aside. More than one traveler

who has seen the wind blow thus in the desert has not returned to tell the story of torturing heat, of blinding and stinging sand, of thirst, of slow suffocation.

This is also the place of evil illusions. Here totters a man, his flannel-coated canteen empty and open, his eyes red-rimmed, bloodshot, and glaring, his lips swollen and cracked, his tongue thick, black, protruding; he tries in vain to moisten the roof of his mouth with viscid saliva. His whole being cries out for water, water, anything for a few drops of water—and there, as if God himself sent it, lies a sweet blue lake, fringed with trees. Cattle are wading knee-deep in the shallows. It seems only a mile away, a half-mile, two hundred yards. He gasps inarticulately with joy, he waves his arms, he totters into a run. How he will drink and drink, how he will wallow there! Nothing shall keep him from it. It will be sweet and cool. He stops and gazes; his eyes deceive him; he runs again. No lake? No water? He dashes his benumbed hands into his eyes; he claws at his lips until the slow blood runs. No! No water, only illimitable burning sand. The mirage! He drops there, broken at last, and grovels and moans until unconsciousness blesses his spirit. This is the spot where he fell; it is as white as if struck with leprosy—all a glistening, blinding white, perhaps lying flat and hard, perhaps heaped in long, billowy ridges that the first wind will utterly change. Afar off one's lips have been aware of a salty taste, which grows sharper and sharper until one sets foot on the leprous sand. For this is the salt flat, the waste of all wastes, where nothing grows and nothing lives. The soil is dry and hot, the sky overhead brazen with heat, the wind promises storms, the mirage offers evil illusions: here, surely, is the true desert; surely man cannot come here.

Raise your eyes, O ye of little faith, and see the men plowing! There are four horses to each plow, and the furrows that they turn are as white as flour to the very core. The men themselves are white with dust; so are their horses, the plows, and the carts. This is nothing short of madness, nothing but illusion. Watch! Across the flat land stretches a trail of steel almost buried in the shifting sand: the men are loading the white soil of their furrows on cars; an engine is lying idle at one side breathing sonorously in the palpitating air; the engineer is lolling out of his window. They are waiting to carry a load of pure salt from the desert to the people of distant cities. A pioneer came here and learned that this spot was the bottom of an ancient sea, and that this was the salt of the waves which once dashed on these silent beaches, here precipitated; and he came in with men and plows to make the desert fruitful.

So you may go from ridge to ridge through all the great desert, and may find miners delving in the dry earth for gold; see herders setting up windmills; see farmers boring holes for artesian wells; see miners of wood digging in the sand for the fat roots of the mesquite; see irrigation engineers making canal levels, and railroad contractors spinning their threads of steel where no man dreamed of living. And you will feel as you never have felt before, and your heart will throb with the pride of it—this splendid human energy and patience and determination. Here men separate themselves from their homes, from the society of women; they suffer thirst and hardship; they die here in the desert, but they bring in civilization. And the crying wonder of it all is that these are ordinary men, good and evil, weak and strong, who have no idea that they are heroic; who would laugh at the suggestion that they are more than earning a living, making a little money for themselves, and hoping to make more in the future. Yes, the time has come when humanity will not tolerate deserts.

Yet, judging by the limited vision of the individual man, there are still desert places in the West. A man is so small and weak, and his physical wants, his need of water and food and a resting place, are so incessant and commanding, that he can see only a little way around him and

creep only a few miles in a day. If he know not the desert, he may be lost within half a dozen miles of a ranch or within a hundred yards of a spring, and die there of thirst.

To him, in such cases, it is all as much of a desert, and quite as dangerous as if there were not a human habitation within a thousand miles. But to the man who is reasonably schooled in the wisdom of trails and the signs of water, the desert has been robbed of nearly all its terrors. With proper care and preparation he may go anywhere without fear, although frequently not without acute discomfort and even suffering.

The term "desert" is applied rather indiscriminately in the arid West to all uncultivated land. The want of water, the extreme dryness of the air, and the hot sunshine, have come to signify desert, even though the soil may be capable, when moistened, of producing crops of unparalleled richness. Even the tree-clad uplands, many of which have all the beauty of parks groomed by human hands, and the meadow-like cattle-ranges with their rich brown grasses, are classed as desert, though they have few of the characteristics of the desert, as it is ordinarily conceived. Indeed, a traveler who goes West to see the desert will be astonished at the great diversity of deserts from which he has to choose, the bewildering variety of desert life, both of plants and animals, the strange and diverse geological and topographical features, possessing their own claims to beauty and grandeur, and the all but infinite variations of altitude and climate. We who have lived in the rich Eastern valleys, where spring signifies green fields and blooming trees, and summer is tempered with rain, are astonished to find that much of this land called desert is as full of flowers and plants as the country we have known; not so flauntingly luxuriant, it is true, but in their way equally beautiful.

The desert still maintains its fastnesses in the West. There are some spots better entitled to the name than others, but each year these fastnesses are shrinking before the advance of human enterprise, as the water might rise over the land, leaving the high and difficult places to the last. So these islands are scattered through several states and territories, mostly in Arizona, New Mexico, California, Nevada, Utah, and Oregon, in the great valley lying between the main ridge of the Rocky Mountains, on the east, and the Cascades, Sierra Nevada, and the Coast Range, on the west. Chief among them are the Mohave Desert, in southeastern California, a territory as large as Switzerland; the Colorado and Gila deserts of southwestern Arizona and southern California; the marvelous Painted Desert of northeastern Arizona; and the Great Salt Lake Desert of Utah. Opening northward from the Mohave Desert lies Death Valley, perhaps the most desolate and forbidding spot in America, though comparatively small in extent. Yet there are few places even in these desert strongholds that are wholly without life of one sort or another, and a large proportion of them could be reclaimed, if water were available. Even as it is, not one can bar human activity: railroads have been built directly across three of the worst of them; mines are being opened, and oil wells driven; land is being reclaimed by irrigation; and even in the fastnesses of Death Valley there are many mining camps and an extensive borax industry. In all the West, look as you will, you will find no desert more pitifully forlorn, more deserted, more irreclaimable, and more worthless than the manmade deserts of northern Wisconsin and Michigan, where fire has followed the heedless lumberman and spread a black and littered waste thousands of square miles in extent, where once grew a splendid green forest of pine. One is beautiful with the perfected grandeur into which nature molds even the most unpromising material; the other is hideous, grotesque, pitiful, a reminder of the reckless wastefulness of man.

The natural desert, indeed, abounds in a strange and beguiling beauty of its own that lays hold upon a man's spirit, perhaps rudely at first, yet with a growing fascination that, once deeply felt, forever calls and calls the wanderer home again. In the spell that it weaves over a man, it is

like the sea: the love of the sailor for his life is not more faithful than that of those bronzed, silent riders of the desert for the long hot stretches of their open land. The desert unfolds itself slowly, never forcing human admiration, choosing its own with rare discrimination, and to them opening all its secrets. From a car window the desert seems an endless monotone in gray or red-brown, without character, without passion or purpose; and it suggests an endless continuation of this monotony, with dust forever blowing and glaring white sunshine, its scant vegetation curious and repellent, rather than beautiful, its animal life fierce or repulsive. A green and hilly country forever lures a man onward, beguiling him with promises. "Just over that knoll," it whispers, "you will see new wonders: just a little farther, friend." But the desert never promises, never invites. Here is endless sand and cactus. Climb that ridge, if you will, but you will see nothing more. The desert has neither coyness nor artifice; it flings all its treasures before you, boldly and freely. If you see only with the outward eye, you will pass on, having received only an impression of unending dreariness and desolation; but if you see with the heart, a whole new world will open to you, the desert will take you to itself and teach you great, calm, wonderful things, and you will never again be free from its thrall.

The desert somehow gives one the impression of a strong man beset by a terrible weakness, but who is going forward with set jaws and straining muscles to conquer in spite of it. You, too, know that weakness; you feel how terrible it is, and your heart rises when you behold with what splendid cheerfulness, with what a long, long purpose, what patience and stanchness, the great spirit of the desert is going forward. In withholding rain from the desert, nature has deprived it of more than half the opportunities, the sweetness and ease, which have fallen to the rest of the world. Therefore it has none of the broad geniality, the wealth of beauty, and the comfort of the green land; but it has, nevertheless, a magnificent character and power of its own—a power born, as it often is in human life, of struggle and stress. Those who seek for the perfection of sensuous beauty, for softness of detail and coloring, for the soothing of the spirit, should not go to the desert; but those who love rude strength and power, picturesqueness, passion, will find it there. Underneath what seems a monotone in gray or brown lies splendid coloring and action; what at first suggests poverty proves a wealth of life, which is forever disclosing new wonders.

One who comes to the desert from the green land is awed, perhaps depressed, by what seems an immense vacancy. The land is flat or gently rolling; all the trees and shrubs cling close to the earth; the houses are low and flat-roofed; there is a sharp sense of unprotectedness from space. All limits to life seem to have been removed. This is the first acquaintance with distance, the first communion with things afar off. I knew of a little girl who came to Arizona from the snug hills of New England. When she first stood in the midst of the desert, she dropped on her knees. "I am afraid," she said; "there isn't any place to go to." That blue hill rising at the edge of the desert promises refuge: you will walk there of an afternoon, you say to yourself, and then you learn that your hill is a great mountain, and that it is sixty miles away, a long two days' journey for a horse. At night the stars seem large and near, and by day there are no hills or trees to interrupt the long reign of the sun. A man feels crowded close to the great simple things of nature. Everything throws him back upon himself. That is the spirit of solitude; if he has no mental resources he is afraid. Here are great and everlasting silences. There is no silence like that of the desert—no rustling of wind in trees, none of the voices of the woods, or the sounds peculiar to man-life. One holds his breath lest he break the hush, and he understands now why the desert-dweller withholds speech, and rides or sits for long stretches without a word, seeming to be listening. Camp some night with a shepherd of these plains. He will be glad to see you,

and will make you more than welcome; he will give you the best from his kit-box, and sit with you until the last coal of his mesquite fire is gray with ashes and the night air is keen: but he will not talk with you except in the barest monosyllables.

Strong men who have risen from low estate sometimes give one the impression of prickly independence, a certain armed suspicion, acquired when the whole world was leagued against them and they were ready to strikeout instantly in any direction. One feels sharply the same aloofness in the desert, a sort of prickly exterior which hides a great nature. In the green hills one loves to lie on the grass, to brush against the trees, to pick a twig here and there and taste the tart sap; but the desert allows no such familiarity. Everything that lives within its confines is either armed or armored. Every cactus stalk is covered with a myriad of spines and hooks as sharp as needles, that warn one to keep his distance. Tread not on the cactus with your heavy shoes even, for the barbed spines will often pierce thick leather; every rider of the plains has had the experience of picking cactus spines from his bare flesh. The mesquite tree, which is a near relative of the honey-locust, is covered with thorns, so that you trespass at your peril; the cat's claw strikes at you as you pass, tearing your clothing and lacerating your skin. Even the agaves and the yuccas, the green foliage of which looks soft enough in the distance, are armed with leaves each of which is a double-edged sword with a spear-point. The leaves of the spreading bunches of beargrass, which covers a thousand desert hills, often the only vegetation to be seen for miles, are so stiff, needle-pointed, and rasp-edged that no animal ever ventures to touch them. Even the greasewood and the strange palo verde tree, the "greenpole" of the Mexicans, a tree with branches, but with almost invisible leaves, — while having no spines, yet know well-how to protect themselves. Break off a twig of leaves, — while having no spines, yet know well either, and the smell of it that clings to your fingers will cure you well of further desire to meddle.

So the desert life goes well protected: it has had a long, hard struggle to acquire what it has, to reach maturity in this waterless waste, therefore it protects itself with grim determination. If it did not do so, hungry animals, storms, heat, and thirst would soon wipe it from the face of the desert. Even as it is, starving cattle will eat the cholla or even the prickly pear, spines and all, though their mouths become a festering mass of sores. Nothing but the poverty and the struggle has produced this universal arming of nature. Grow the prickly pear in rich soil, and water it well, and in a few generations of proper selection it will lose all its spines, each section becoming as smooth as an apple, and growing larger and larger, until it bears only a faint resemblance to its squat, creeping, spiny brother of the desert.

Nor shall you cast yourself with impunity on the sand, for here are often dead, dried cactus joints waiting to impale you, or tarantulas or scorpions lying in the sand, so like little loose sticks or bits of stone that you are bitten before you are aware. Indeed, all the animals of the desert are either armed with sharp teeth, spines, or poison to make their enemies keep aloof, or else they are splendid runners or skulkers, so that by their own effort they can keep aloof. You hear of the horribly spined and repulsive Gila monster, of the horned toad, of the rattlesnake all bidding you keep your distance. In most of the deserts there are also many lizards, big and little, not harmful, but so quick to dart from your path, tails oddly thrown in air, that your eye can hardly follow them. Even the cattle of the desert grow long horns and become as wild as deer, and there is no sting as sharp as that of the desert bee. Then there are prowling wolves, mountain lions, lynxes, and skunks. Perhaps the animal dreaded more than any other by cowboys, miners, and travelers who know the desert is the so-called hydrophobia skunk, the bite of which is sometimes followed by the terrible throes of hydrophobia and subsequent death. Among campers on the desert the talk often turns to this terror by night. No cowboy ever makes camp without

thinking either of rattlesnakes or of hydrophobia skunks. Camps and campfires seem to attract the skunk, and any cowboy will tell you how his friend Jim once awakened in the dark to hear the steps of an animal pattering about the camp, or, indeed, to feel it climbing over the blanket in which he was rolled. Jim instantly covers his head, for he believes firmly that the skunk will jump to bite him in the face, preferably seizing his nose.

Among the common animals of the desert that run and skulk are the fleetest of all the wild tribes, the antelope; the bounding black-tailed deer and other deer; the howling coyote, which is sometimes all too bold when hunger or thirst compels him to become an aggressor; the long-legged jackrabbit, the cottontail, an odd fat gray squirrel, the badger, the gopher, the kangaroo rat, and the prairie dog. Of all these the prairie dog is the commonest, a lively little sentinel of the desert, sitting with front paws up on the top of his mound, near the front door. He will watch you long and intently, turning his small brown head and blinking his beady eyes; but the moment you stir, there is a blur of brown, and he has gone into his hole. The gophers love to dig about the roots of a cactus or mesquite bush, and they often raise up large mounds of dirt, which your desert pony, with sure instinct, sees afar off and shies to avoid, for he knows the danger of putting one of his slim legs into a gopher hole.

In its enumeration the animal life of the desert seems somewhat extensive, but it is, in reality, scarce and very shy. A man may travel for days in the desert and see hardly a living thing, except possibly a huge hawk sailing slowly in the clear air above, or a gopher, or a prairie dog. In some regions jackrabbits are plentiful; you see them running afar off in long, graceful leaps that would put even a pursuing greyhound to his mettle. Once in a while you may also see a spot of yellow brown and white in the distance, long legs below, and a trim head poised at the scent of danger. For a moment it is motionless, and then the antelope is away like the wind, the signal spot on its rump blazing white as the animal disappears behind a ridge. As for the poisonous creatures, they are rarely seen. The Gila monster, the tarantula, and the scorpion are so seldom found that they have a money value in the market as curiosities, and one rarely hears of any one being bitten. The rattlesnake is the commonest of the dreaded creatures, but it always rings its alarm before it strikes. Many a traveler has been in the desert for months without seeing any of these poisonous animals. You will see that the prickly vegetation is friendly enough when once you come to know it. The wild birds build most beautiful nests of yucca fiber in the cholla, and the cactus protects them from all harm of hawks or snakes. Of a night quail roost safely in the cholla or hide in a bunch of prickly pear, and a rabbit will here run to cover. The mesquite furnishes a bean-pod that makes a rich food, and the bisnaga, that great, odd, pumpkin-shaped cactus, sometimes called the "niggerhead," with its spines and fishhooks, has been hailed with joy by more than one desperate wanderer on the desert, whose lips are parched with thirst, and who, until that moment, has expected no mercy from the burning sand. His knife lays open the cactus, and there within is the silvery white pulp glistening with water: no melon ever looked more luscious. He buries his face in it, pressing the water from the rubbery pulp and moistening his burning tongue. Then there are the pears of the tuna and the fruit of the sahuaro, or giant cactus, for food; the cat's claw, mesquite, and cholla for fuel; the dry strips of the sahuaro, the beargrass, and the yuccas for campbuilding. But a man must know the desert's secrets before he can take advantage of them.

I have spoken of the aloofness of the desert from men; the life of the desert is aloof in another way. The desert has no love for crowding, for jungles and thickets; it sets each tree and plant by itself. It demands individuality; it hates herding. I have seen great stretches of greasewood flat in which each bush was set by itself almost in rows and squares like an orchard,

all of the same size, and as rounded and symmetrical as if trimmed by human hands. The mesquite, the cactus, the yuccas, grow in the same way, far apart, independent, each in its own space. The explanation of this strange condition is simple enough: there is so little water, and each plant is compelled to send its roots so deep down and spread them so far out in every direction beneath the surface, that there is no chance for any other plant to get a foothold near by. It gives the desert in many places a veritable parklike appearance, and one can hardly believe that men have not had the care of these wild denizens of the dry soil.

Water is the key to the desert. All the life of the desert rests upon its power of resistance to thirst. One marvels at the consummate ingenuity with which nature has improved her scant opportunities, turning every capability to the conservation of such little water as there is. Everything in the desert has its own story of economy, patience, and stubborn persistency in the face of adversity. Therefore the individuality of desert life is strong; it is different from all other life. Its necessities have wrought peculiar forms both of plants and of animals, and in time the desert also leaves its indelible marks upon the men who dwell in its wastes. The cactus, for instance, is so constructed with thick, succulent stems and branches that when there is water it drinks greedily, gluts itself, and stores its supplies against a dry season. The leaves of all desert trees are small and thick, so that they will expose as little surface as possible for evaporation in the dry air; they also have a smooth, glossy surface, which reflects the sunshine instead of absorbing it, just as many of the reptiles are covered with scale armor.

Everywhere there are evidences of the terrible struggle for water—a struggle in which men who come to the desert must instantly engage: every wagon that crosses the desert carries its barrel of water; every man who sets out takes with him a canteen; every ranch has its windmill and its water barrel. Water is the only thing that is not free. Stop at a desert well, and a sign offers water at ten cents or five cents a head for your horses.

The desert is an opportunist in every tendency. It is patient to wait its chance, but when given its chance it makes good use of it. “Nature,” says Emerson, “is immortal and can wait.” Nothing can exceed the glory of the desert when the rain finally comes. For months, even years, the plain may lie scorched and dry, not a sprig of green anywhere in the gray dust. Apparently there never has been any life here—no seeds, no hope of blossom, no spring. A rain comes, and in a few days the whole land is gorgeous with color, a very passion of bloom. Never, in any other country, is there such a profusion of flowers or such a glory of coloring. Reds and yellows prevail, the desert seeming to delight in the strong contrast that this momentary flash of bright color presents to its usual sodden grays. Whole hillsides will be gorgeous with poppies; there will be acres on acres of short-stemmed wild sunflowers, daisies, both white and yellow, red-bells, Indian pinks, wild verbenas, blue lupins, and many other gorgeous flowers that have no common names. Then there are pale primroses that come out like moons in the evening, shine for a night, and are gone. The whole air is sweet with the scent of blossoms; nothing can exceed the fragrance of the mesquite bloom.

As you ride in the early morning, when the coolness of the night is changing to the sudden heat of the day, the warm sand seems to exhale a faint, sweet odor, which clings about you until the desert sun is high and all the hills begin to quiver with heat. “This,” you say, “is no desert. This is spring and June.” The desert, indeed, always seems on the brink of June, and always yields August. In a day the floral glories have faded, the blossoms fall, the plants themselves shrivel up; the wind comes and whips them from their places, bowls them in tatters across the sand, and heaps them in some distant arroyo. The land is bare again, dry and desolate, but the seeds of its passion are there waiting, and when the time comes, it flames forth.

Color, indeed, is one of the great joys of the desert, and one who has learned to love these silent places finds unending pleasure in the changing lights and shades, many of them marvelously delicate and beautiful. It is a place friendly to color effects—a negative gray or brown background, often with pale blue hills in the distance, from which the eye is diverted by no detail of tree or stream or building. Upon so vast and simple a background the rising sun paints all the varying shades of gold, tinging each ridge, working color mysteries in pale blue in each valley, and finally merging all in the hot white heat of high noon. Clouds come to the desert as well as to the rain country; often they seem to promise imminent rain, but rarely fulfill their promises. Usually they are thin, fleecy, and high, and their shadows flit back and forth over the plains, bringing new shades to the prevailing red-browns and grays. Here rises a sandstorm, floating along the horizon in the distance and leaving behind an impalpable mist, like a fog, which gives the familiar desert other strange new coloring, and paints a sunset of rare beauty. Nor should the endless and mysterious mirages be forgotten, with their glories in blue and pale, cool greens, when blues and greens are the rarest of all the colors in this thirsty land.

Who can convey the feeling of the mysterious night on the desert, suddenly and sweetly cool after the burning heat of the day, the sky a deep, clear blue above,—nowhere so blue as in this dry, pure air,—the stars almost crowding down to earth in their nearness and brilliancy, a deep and profound silence round about, broken occasionally by the far-off echoing scream of some prowling coyote or the hoot of an owl? The horses loom big and dark where they feed in the near distance; here and there on the top of a dry yucca stalk an owl or a hawk sits outlined in black against the sky; otherwise there is nothing anywhere to break the long, smooth line of the horizon.

You feel your smallness here, your utter helplessness in the face of the great, impassive, elemental things of nature; but it calms you like music. Crowded cities and the fever of men seem unreal, far distant, improbable to you; you feel God, and you never forget.

There are times of water even in the desert, but, like the time of the flowers, they are short and intense. Not much rain falls in the desert itself, but the mountains round about are lashed with storms, and the water pours down resistlessly and sweeps out over the plain below. It is bone-dry and dusty today; tomorrow water may swirl over everything knee-deep, waist-deep, chin-deep; the next day it is bone-dry again. The water wears for itself deep arroyos, or washes, in the sand, changing their course with every flood, bringing down boulders, piling up embankments and tearing them down again, heaping the rubbish of the hills against the firm-rooted yuccas and mesquites that lie in its path.

And while the flood is on, how greedily the desert drinks! Every living thing takes its fill. Even the sand itself has an inappeasable thirst. Beginning a clear stream in the hills, the water soon becomes loaded with silt and sand; it wears thick like mud, rolling over the ground a red, warm, viscid mass, like molten lava. Finally it stops, and the hot air bakes out all the moisture that remains. In other cases the sand seems to swallow the river at one gulp. Here is a wide river; two miles below you cross the dry, dusty bed of the stream, every drop of water having been absorbed. There are wayward streams; they submit to no restriction; they choose their own way without reference to the desires of men. Several years ago the people of Florence, in central Arizona, built an iron bridge across the Gila River, where it flowed near the town. Costly approaches led up to it; it was on the main traveled road. But the river would have none of it. It came in flood one spring and made a new channel for itself, so that the bridge today stands unapproachably high, spanning a bit of desert a quarter of a mile from the river it was built to cross.

You hear often from car window observers of the “dreary” desert, the “hopeless,” the “cheerless” desert. But the desert deserves none of these adjectives. It is dreadful, if you wish, in the way in which it punishes the ignorance and presumption of those who know not the signs of thirst; it is sometimes awful in its passions of dust, torrents, heat; it is even monotonous to those who love only the life of crowded cities: but it is never dreary or cheerless. Hopelessness may well apply to the deserts of Mulberry Street and Smoky Hollow, with their choked and heated tenements, their foul odors, their swarms of crowded and hideous human life; but the desert of the arid land is eternally hopeful, smiling, strong, rejoicing in itself. The desert is never morbid in its adversity; on the other hand, it is calm and sweet and clean—the cleanest of all land. Not till man comes, bringing his ugly mining towns and his destructive herds, does it bear even the vestige of the unclean, the dreary, the un-picturesque.

It is good to feel that, in spite of human enterprise, there is plenty of desert left for many years to come, a place where men can go and have it out with themselves, where they can breathe clean air and get down close to the great, quiet, simple life of the earth. “Few in these hot, dim, frictiony times,” says John Muir, “are quite sane or free; choked with care like clocks full of dust, laboriously doing so much good and making so much money,—or so little,—they are no longer good themselves.” But here in the desert there yet remain places of wildness and solitude and quiet; there is room here to turn without rubbing elbows, places where one may yet find refreshment.