

**THE DESERT; FURTHER
STUDIES IN NATURAL
APPEARANCES**

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The desert; further studies in natural appearances by John C. Van Dyke

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JOHN C. VAN DYKE

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THE DESERT



Silence and Desolation

THE DESERT

*FURTHER STUDIES IN NATURAL
APPEARANCES*

BY ^{cs}
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"ART FOR ART'S SAKE," ETC., ETC.

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PREFACE-DEDICATION

To

A. M. C.

After the making of Eden came a serpent, and after the gorgeous furnishing of the world, a human being. Why the existence of the destroyers? What monstrous folly, think you, ever led Nature to create her one great enemy—man! Before his coming security may have been; but how soon she learned the meaning of fear when this new *Œdipus* of her brood was brought forth! And how instinctively she taught the fear of him to the rest of her children! To-day, after centuries of association, every bird and beast and creeping thing—the wolf in the forest, the antelope on the plain, the wild fowl in the sedge—fly from his approach. They know his civilization means their destruction. Even the grizzly, secure in the chaparral of his mountain home, finches as he crosses the white man's trail. The boot mark

in the dust smells of blood and iron. The great annihilator has come and fear travels with him.

“Familiar facts,” you will say. Yes; and not unfamiliar the knowledge that with the coming of civilization the grasses and the wild flowers perish, the forest falls and its place is taken by brambles, the mountains are blasted in the search for minerals, the plains are broken by the plow and the soil is gradually washed into the rivers. Last of all, when the forests have gone the rains cease falling, the streams dry up, the ground parches and yields no life, and the artificial desert—the desert made by the tramp of human feet—begins to show itself. Yes; everyone must have cast a backward glance and seen Nature’s beauties beaten to ashes under the successive marches of civilization. The older portions of the earth show their desolation plainly enough, and the ascending smoke and dust of the ruin have even tainted the air and dimmed the sunlight.

Indeed, I am not speaking figuratively or extravagantly. We have often heard of “Sunny Italy” or the “clear light” of Egypt, but believe me there is no sunlight there compared with that which falls upon the upper peaks of

the Sierra Madre or the uninhabitable wastes of the Colorado Desert. Pure sunlight requires for its existence pure air, and the Old World has little of it left. When you are in Rome again and stand upon that hill where all good romantics go at sunset, look out and notice how dense is the atmosphere between you and St. Peter's dome. That same thick air is all over Europe, all around the Mediterranean, even over in Mesopotamia and by the banks of the Ganges. It has been breathed and burned and battle-smoked for ten thousand years. Ride up and over the high table-lands of Montana—one can still ride there for days without seeing a trace of humanity—and how clear and scentless, how absolutely intangible that sky-blown sun-shot atmosphere! You breathe it without feeling it, you see through it a hundred miles and the picture is not blurred by it.

It is just so with Nature's color. True enough, there is much rich color at Venice, at Cairo, at Constantinople. Its beauty need not be denied; and yet it is an artificial, a chemical color, caused by the disintegration of matter—the decay of stone, wood, and iron torn from the neighboring mountains. It is Nature after a poor fashion—Nature subordinated to the will