

AN EXCERPT FROM "SIGHTSEEING BY WIRELESS"

from "The Romance of Geology"

by Enos A. Mills

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Desert mirages are ever on exhibition in the land of little rain. I was riding an Indian Pony along the margin of the Black Rock Desert in Nevada. The afternoon had been filled with a series of tantalizing mirages. A lake, a grove, and green fields had again and again been shown to the right of us and to the left of us. Canteens were empty. All concentration for a spring, I ceased to notice the mocking pictures of the mirage. We were seriously wondering if we had made a mistake in failing to turn off to search for water in the mouth of that desolate canyon. The map placed a spring here, but finding a spring where not a tree stood and in a locality without distinguishing landmarks would be a case mostly of luck.

My pony with a sudden stop gave welcoming neigh. His eager ears pointed to two loose horses less than a quarter of a mile off. A bay and a pinto were standing in alkaline sand near the mouth of a canyon. They suggested camp and a spring. All concentration, my pony started gingerly for them. Head to head the horses stood; possibly looking at each other, possibly staring sleepily at the hot dull sand. I looked through my glass farther into the gorge beyond them. My pony made another sudden stop. The horses vanished.

"Well, Piute," I said, "I am a tenderfoot in the Great Basin, but you—born on the desert—have let a mirage deceive you."

He looked this way and that. He did not act foolish; he still had faith in his eyes and those horses. They simply had dodged while he was hustling over the high sand dunes. He wanted to look behind a rock ledge and I let him; then he clambered over the dunes. Unwillingly, he turned back into our course along the dim trail. After going a quarter of a mile, he turned, looked, neighed wildly, listened, then—puzzled—went slowly forward.

The wireless transfers sounds and music through uncharted space. On a desert, light becomes wireless—transfers or transplants scenes. These may be

brought from beyond the horizon and placed in the foreground in the vision of the beholder. It often is impossible to tell how much of the scenic desert is real and how much is mirage—scenes transferred by wireless.

We were on the edge of an old lake bottom as level as a floor, an extensive plain, or basin, surrounded by detached mountain ranges. A range on our left rose several thousand feet. It was so narrow and so abrupt, there was a suggestion that its foothills were buried. Earlier, we had passed the end of a similar mountain, and dimly off in the southwest stood two others. Each separately pierced the desert floor. The mountain slopes rose barren for two thousand feet, then had a broad belt of cedars, pines, and spruces. All day we had not passed a single tree, and the total number of stunted sages and bunches of grass was less than a score.

Stretches of the level lake bottom were yellow pavement of sun-baked, sun-cracked sediment. But most of it was covered with soda dust, sand borax, and salt.

On, Piute and I traveled, looking for a spring. By a barren water-worn rock we spent the night, without water in the dusty sediment of an ancient lake. Piute stood near me all night, watching my every move and depending on me to get him out of this predicament. Far off through the night we saw a light; probably the campfire of a prospector with burros high up on a mountainside, in the woods with grass and water. A red volcano in the eastern horizon and dawn was on the desert! Green fields and cool lakes lay just ahead—false promises of the mirage. By seven o'clock the alkaline dust was sizzling.

We aimed straight across the level desert for a spring twenty-eight miles distant. All day I saw what I had come to the desert to see—deserted shorelines and the dry bottom of a fossil lake.

Piute and I were tortured with thirst. A hot wind, fortunately behind us, showered us with powdery alkaline dust and filled the air with salty sand for hours. The storm ended, and I walked to save Piute, who had been staggering along. He stumbled, went down, and for minutes lay groaning. After two desperate trials he rose and slowly followed me.

I was half blinded; the stinging alkaline dust burned my eyes. We were

forcing ourselves along when Piute pricked up ears and turned gingerly off to the right. He headed straight for a mirage waterfall that seemed so close that one should hear its waters roar. But he was in home territory and brought up at a spring. The water was like Epsom salts, and we dared use but little.

Piute was restless, and long before morning I obeyed his urging, and we moved on. Evidently, he knew where there should be real water. He was hurrying forward when we met a prospector. Still maddened with heat and thirst, I called to him, "Where are we?"

"You are in the northwest corner of Nevada, with Oregon a few miles norther and California several miles to the west," he said.

"But how far to water?" I asked, while Piute was pulling and stepping about trying to go on.

"About a mile—your pony knows the way," was the answer.

After an afternoon and night at the spring, we started across a less barren desert for Malheur Lake, Oregon, where I was to see thousands of waterfowl. Mid-afternoon, Piute turned aside and stopped by a spring. I had planned to camp five miles farther along, but, rather than disappoint the pony, I camped here.

While stopping at this spring, a mirage placed a lake, teeming with waterfowl, just beyond camp. Geese and ducks were swimming in the water, feeding and sunning themselves along the shore. We traveled on to the real lake.

After two weeks with Piute and the desert, I gave him up at the lake and hurried away by speedier transport: a dry-as-dust vacation, but one decorated with mirages and many things for the imagination. As is common for those who know the desert for a week or longer, I went away planning to return.

During my next desert visit, light—the desert magician—showed another lake picture. Early one morning, a mirage lake appeared in the scene before my camp in western Utah. As I looked, a bighorn ram raised his head like a periscope through the silvery surface of the lake. The remainder of his body appeared to be submerged in the water. For a few seconds, his head also went out of sight, then reappeared.

There was a blur, and the next scene showed a ram, three lambs, and two

ewes, all knee-deep in the shallow water of the lake. Shallow, short-lived lakes are common in the Great Basin. But how, a moment before, had the ram shown only his head, and where had been the others of the flock which now stood by him?

The ram walked forward a few steps, stopped, and turned his head. Others of the flock were starting to follow when the picture faded. After a few minutes, the lake vanished—but not the sheep. There on the desert, correct for distance and direction, stood the six sheep—a ram, three lambs, and two ewes—that had been in the mirage scene.

Evidently, the air was made up of layers of different density or of different humidity. The top of this obscuring layer must for a time have been just beneath the ram's head. Later, it dropped to knee level, or the sheep walked to slightly higher level. Here was a mirage stage-setting with real and undistorted figures in it.

From this camp, the following afternoon, a scene of different type was staged. It was intensely hot, and the sun seemed like molten metal in the hazy, coppery sky. Round me were level, seared, desert distances without a butte or a cloud.

A bit of seashore suddenly had a place in the hot dry landscape. A wave rolled easily in and flattened on the shore. Swell after swell, then breaker after breaker, rolled in upon the shore before me. Far out, I saw a heavy breaker coming in. It rose higher as it approached the shore, curled and broke almost at my feet. But there was no sound. It was uncanny. A transformation came so quickly that I could not follow. In apparently the same scene, without a breeze, a heavy fog bank came drifting in. The sun touched its edges to glass as it came on. For a moment, it obscured the sun. I said to myself, "This is exactly like real fog. If so, it will be moist and cool, wind or no wind." For a moment, there was gray obscurity; then, again, the soda-dusted sand dunes lay shimmering in the furnace air before me.

A mirage is the reflection of something; sometimes the mixed reflection of several things. It appears that an object or a landscape is lifted, perhaps by reflection, projected afar, and then set down in another place as a mirage. It may

be of something near or of something miles off. It may be right side up or upside down. It may be photographically clear, or vague and cloudy, or of a confused mixture. This confusion may be due to several reflections mingling in the same picture, like several images being taken on the same negative.

Few mirage river pictures are a realistic and artistic success. The best one I have seen appeared to be a loaned section of the Platte River out on the plains—low banks and a thin flow that covered part of a wide sand channel. The remainder of the channel was of dunes, drift, and ripple-marked sand. The short squatty shadow of a long-armed cottonwood said high noon. I expected a cowboy or coyote to come into the scene, but none did.

Most of the striking and distinct mirages made for me their momentary place, their brief pause, in a western or southwestern desert. Museums are installing splendid natural history and other groups, and I hope that some time a grandly reproduced mirage will have a place of distinction in every large museum.

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