



*A. D. Woodruff*

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF  
LIFE ON THE  
PACIFIC COAST

By  
S. D. WOODS



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DEDICATED  
TO  
EDWIN MARKHAM

*My beloved pupil of long ago—he and I can never forget the little  
schoolhouse in the sunny Suisun hills, where we  
together found our lives.*

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## Chapter XVII

### INTO THE DESERT

**I**N 1882 we went into the desert for the first time and spent weeks in its solitudes, in the presence of wonderful creations wrought by the primal forces of the world in which volcano, cataclysm, earthquake and flame were the artists and builders. We were in search for relief from a malarial attack from which we suffered, as the gift of hydraulic mining in Placer County. Our trip led into the desert lying in the triangle, two sides of which are made by Arizona and Nevada, in which is situated Death Valley. Our spirit was tired from the drain of fever. It was a lonely man who left San Francisco one hot summer day, destined, down the San Joaquin Valley, to Caliente. The heat, dust and the parched plains visible from the car windows were not factors to elevate the spirits of one worn and weary, and it is remembered to this day as a desolate ride. At midnight we reached Caliente, a little village lying at the foot of the Tehachapi Mountains, where the railroad begins its wonderful ascent into the Mojave Desert. I was the only passenger leaving the train. This was enough in the darkness and solitude to have chilled the spirit. We saw only one light in the town and to it we wended

our way, hunting for a place to rest. It was a little dirty hotel which, if it had been peaceful, would have been repellent. We found it full of rude sheep-shearers, drunk and turbulent. We were well drest, and as we walked in, we noticed a sudden silence fall upon the group. We found the proprietor and asked him if he could give us a bed. He was sober; looked us over a moment and taking us by the arm walked us to the door and said, "This is no place for you and I advise you to hunt for some other house." He kindly led us out into the night and pointing to a house some distance away said that doubtless we could find entertainment there. It was a kindly act, for we doubt not that we might have been in danger had we remained amid these wild, drunken men.

In the morning a little stage drove up and we were informed that it was the Inyo stage. We were the only passenger, and the prospect for the day's ride was not inspiring to a sick man. We climbed the Tehachapi Mountains, and soon reached what is known as Warm Springs Valley, a high and level desert valley, watered by irrigating ditches and supporting a large population. From this point the country became new to us. We had never seen the desert before, and its features were fascinating. Through this valley we drove for miles. The things that were most attractive were the peculiarly constructed and colored hills which stood round about as its exterior boundary. They were treeless mounds, mere volcanic puffs, with a surface and color as smooth as that of a Jersey cow. We have never seen again this peculiar hill formation and coloring.

As we drove along, the desert features became more pronounced and the ride more desperately lonesome. We were not in the 'mood to appreciate, as we did afterwards in the flush of strength and health, the forces which uplifted the hills and mountains about us and stretched between them the gorges.

Toward night we reached Walker's Pass, a historical transverse valley, which for years had been a part of the trail through which emigrants had come into California. Atmospheric conditions in the desert are always uncertain, and as we drove into the Pass, a high wind storm, set in motion by the heat of the valley, and the cold white snow summits not far distant, blew with terrific force, rocking the stage from side to side. We had heard that these sudden wind storms were often of great violence and we verified this fact at a later date, when we were lost in one of the stand storms which are liable to occur at any moment in the desert. The desolation of the Pass, as it was at this moment, is indescribable, paralleled only by some of the pages in Doré's illustrations of Dante's *Inferno*. The floor of the Pass had been swept by the hoofs of hundreds of thousands of sheep driven through during the summer until it was robbed of every vestige of green and looked as if it had been swept by flame. Thousands of these sheep had died, and the air was heavy with the stench of putrefaction. This added to the gloom which pressed down upon us like a physical weight.

Just as the sun was slanting to the horizon, the sky became cold and blue as a sword-blade. We drove into a little stage station just on the line of Mojave

Desert, known as "Coyote Holes." There were but two or three houses and but two or three people here. We were not to stop longer than to have our supper and to change our horses; we were then to drive into the night across the dreary wastes of the Mojave Desert. The desolation of the desert was intensified at every step, and the coming night had in it no pleasant anticipation. We were, indeed, a lonely traveler, without human association or companionship to wear away the lonely night.

In the splendid sky of that latitude, finest in all the world, clear as crystal, sailed a great white moon, sole solace of the hour. Those who are familiar with the desert sky can verify its clearness, it being the fact that minor stars are magnified until they appear as large and brilliant as the stars of the first magnitude in more obscured atmospheres. The experiments made by Professor Langley of the Alleghany University in 1881, the year before our trip, from the summit of Mt. Whitney, by his records now on file in the office of the War Department at Washington, are the world's verification of the fact that for astronomical observations the sky here excels all others in the world, and it is only within the last year that there has been established on the summit of Mt. Whitney, following the recommendations of Professor Langley, an observatory under the auspices of the Lick Observatory, for the purpose of determining if possible whether or not Mars is a habitable planet.

Under brilliant stars and the great moon, stretched around us into the dim distance volcanic hills, ris-

ing in tortured shapes, the contribution of earthquake and volcano to these wild regions and a silent waste of whitened sand left by the sea when in the ages past it receded from this portion of the world and left its floor. For forty miles through the heart of this sand waste we toiled, unable to move faster than a walk, for the deep sand was too heavy for any greater progress, and it was hard work for the horses even to haul the little stage with its one passenger over this tiresome road. Sleep was an impossibility. The new conditions were too impressive, the environment too fascinating, and we could not still our senses into the repose of sleep. The new presence beat upon the mind with a mighty force, for we were where the primal forces of the world had worked and left in monstrous shapes the debris of its early building.

As the dawn brightened the sky, we escaped from the desert into a line of scorched hills lying between Pannamint Valley and Mojave Desert. This dawn was unlike those we had been familiar with all our life. There was no song of birds, no lowing of cattle, no nodding flowers, no association that makes in favored regions this the sweetest hour of the day. It was a silent, stern hour, and as we looked forth upon the awful hills and into the distance before us, and realized that we were yet upon the rim of the desert, we wondered what would be the next exhibition of the tremendous forces that built the world. As we drove into the day, we seemed to have lost our relation to the usual things of life, and we wondered where we would find sustenance for the day. As the sun lifted into the higher heavens over the Pannamint Moun-

tains, in the distance along the slope of a range of distorted hills, we saw what seemed human habitations, rude, unpainted shacks. We could not at first realize that it was possible that human beings could establish a habitation in a place so desolate, so far removed from all things that make real living possible. We asked the driver what that group of things was and he said, "That is Darwin." We said, "What do you mean by Darwin?" He smiled and said, "Why, that is the mining town Darwin, where we take our breakfast." Notwithstanding this statement of the driver, it seemed as yet impossible that it could be a town where human beings lived. Before long, however, we were in "Darwin," and found that it was a town where human beings did live—no, existed, for there could be no living in the higher sense in a place so devoid of everything that makes life even physically endurable, outside of all moral considerations. And we found conditions existing here, which were a verification of our appreciation of the place. The principal business place of the town was a saloon. No hotel was visible and we were compelled to take our breakfast at a little restaurant maintained mostly by the prospector and the tributor, who found their occupation in the adjacent hills and mountains. It was a rude dining-place, but the miner always demands, if not the most elegant dishes, the substantial ones, and we found an abundance of plain, well cooked food, a satisfaction for the hunger which had grown upon us during the long ride from the Coyote Holes.

A substantial breakfast did much to relieve the tedium of the night's trip and acted as a restorative

to our spirits, and we felt in better mood for our further advance into what we supposed to be more desert. The road toward Lone Pine, the historic village of Inyo, situated at the foot of Mt. Whitney, just north of Owens Lake, was for most of the distance smooth and gravelly, over which we were able to bowl with good speed. About us stood the ranges of hills, bare and drear, and in the intervening levels were grouped great stretches of cacti growing to the size of trees and in their regularity giving one the idea of riding through orchards. We found the atmosphere peculiarly dry and magnetic. As we drove out of Darwin, a short distance, we saw a curious illustration of the preserving dryness of the atmosphere. Some wag had stood the skeleton of a horse, that had died, upon its legs, tied it to a cactus and put before it a bunch of hay. The illusion was perfect, and the driver told us that this skeleton had been there for several years.

Soon we caught a glimpse of the summits of the Sierras, where they lift along the rim of the Owens River Valley, to the general altitude of twelve thousand feet. There are many peaks visible from the individual peaks rising, as in Whitney, to fifteen thousand feet. There are many peaks visible from the Owens River Valley, that are more than twelve thousand feet, and but little less than fourteen thousand feet in height. These are superb creations and stir the mind with their majesty. One of the most wonderful and beautiful phenomena was made visible to us subsequently by this white line of summits standing in the radiance of the sunlight while we in the

valley stood in the gloom of the morning before daylight.

Our kindly driver had recognized, the day before and during the night, that we were quiet, and he asked us if we were ill. We told him not exactly ill, convalescent only, and that the country was so strange to us that it made us quiet. He said, "Cheer up, we'll soon be out of this wilderness and you will see something that is really beautiful." His prophecy was correct, for shortly we drove down through a line of hills and suddenly before us spread out Owens Lake, a sullen mountain sea, lying in its volcanic bed, twenty-five miles in length, with an average width of from four to five miles. Scientists have said that this lake occupies the site of the great volcano that in the creative ages blazed and thundered here, covering the country about with hundreds of square miles of scoriæ, volcanic debris and ashes, leaving the scars of its flame upon the mountains lying eastward and southward, stretching into the dim distances of the Arizona deserts. It was a glorious sight, for the day was perfect and the sheen of the waters was like silver. It was beautiful to us in the distance, altho it is a desperate sheet of water, sustains no animal life except a slimy worm which exists in vast numbers and is the only evidence of life in its waters. The wild fowls avoid it, but sometimes are lured to its bosom only to death. We have seen, after a storm, piled along the shore in great wind-rows, just as the farmer piles his hay in summer, millions of dead birds.

The waters of the lake are valuable for the caustic minerals that enter their composition, and capital has

availed itself of this condition. The lake is now rimmed with great lines of evaporating plants, where commercial soda and other products are prepared for market. This condition is the gift of the ancient volcano.

Over and beyond this body of water there lifted into the blue of serene sky the shape of Whitney, glorifying the western horizon at fifteen thousand feet, and looming over the entire country like a protecting shape. Whitney, while long holding the fame of being the highest mountain in America, has lost its place by reason of the acquisition of Alaska, for Mount Fairweather, Mount St. Elias and Mount McKinley lift higher crests. Whitney is not a distinct mountain, but rises a massive face of granite and opens out into the Owens River Valley through a magnificent canyon whose granite walls rise in shapes of beauty and majesty. The peak which gives Whitney its distinction over the general range rises to only a distance of fifteen hundred feet or two thousand feet above the general range. It is an uplift of granite which faces the east. It was a magnificent vision to us that afternoon, as we put behind us the weariness of the desert and approached nearer and nearer to this splendid range with its group of peaks.

We saw also in the distance the sheen of trees, and we never before knew how beautiful a tree could be, for we had been for the twenty-four hours previous entirely outside of the vision of green things. All had been bare and dead, and these groups of trees were visions inspiring and comforting. We were entirely ignorant of the condition of the country and of its

development, and did not know that along the western rim of the Owens River Valley there were many beautiful homes, to which the high Sierras contributed life by the perpetual streams which flowed from their eternal snows. There is an abundance of these clear sweet waters flowing into the desert, and they have been the means of redeeming from barrenness these habitations of men.

A great contest is now on between the residents of Owens River Valley and the City of Los Angeles over these waters, for Los Angeles, fully one hundred and fifty miles away, has found it necessary to come here and to construct across the desert sands of Mojave and the desert ranges lying to the westward thereof, aqueducts for the purpose of carrying these cold, clear waters for the sustenance and protection of the city.

As the sun was sinking over the mountains we drove into the little town of Lone Pine, a pioneer village of the region, built largely of adobe,—a half Mexican, half American town, important only because it was the fitting-out place for the mines which lay in the mountains to the east and south. Its situation is beautiful, just north of the shore line of the lake, almost at the foot of Whitney, and at the rim of a level extent of valley reaching out to the north, east and south. It was a welcome retreat and a feeling of exhilaration swept over the mind as we entered the main street and drove up to the little hotel, where we were for many months to have a home. It was a comfortable place, owned and conducted by a kindly-hearted widow, who gave out of her heart to

the comfort of her guests. Here was peace, and the weirdness, the uncertainty and the shadow, which had been over us for twenty-four hours, fell from us like a cast-off garment. There was a presentiment in our mind that here we would have experiences, here grow riper, learn of the wonderful world in its physical aspects, and find that in desperate places there are more wonders than there are in the serener places of the world, given over to birds and trees and blossoms.

The population was mixed Mexican and American, all kindly but given to the habits of the frontier, and the saloon and gambling house, after nightfall, was the gathering place of the main portion of the population, outside of its women folks.

Here we first saw the terrible evidences of the awful earthquake of 1872, which had its center here, and which radiated throughout the entire State, finding a collateral center at San Leandro, Alameda County, where the courthouse was wrecked. The country is riven throughout its entire extent, and just north of Lone Pine the whole Owens River Valley dropt away from the Alabama hills, an outlying range of low hills, which skirt the Sierras, for a distance of twenty feet. A perpendicular wall of rock stands to-day at the side of the stage road, by which we traveled to the town of Independence, and twenty feet above could be seen the old stage road of 1872. There are other indications of the terrific force of this masterful quake at Lone Pine itself, where nearby tracts of what had been sterile sagebrush lands had become wet meadows, and in one place a living fence, which had at the time of the earthquake extended in

a straight line, had been split apart and moved so that to fill in the intervening gap required forty feet of new fence.

The little town seemed to be the center of the earthquake. Almost the entire town was shaken down, and out of a population of about two hundred, twenty-seven were killed, and in the rude graveyard nearby is a long grave in which were buried the twenty-seven victims. In after days, as we drove into the outlying territory, we still found evidences of the earthquake in the canyons of the mountains, which were almost filled with rocks that had been shaken from nearby summits, and along the entire Inyo range of mountains which rise about four thousand feet above the valley and along which the track of the Carson and Colorado railroad extends, is a winnow of rocks, some as large as city buildings. Millions of tons of these lie in the valley alongside the railroad, as the mute evidence of the terrific power which held this country in its grip and shook it to pieces in these dreadful convulsions. For sixty days the country swung as in a swing, and some scientists, headed by Professor Whitney, at that time of the University of California, who went down there to study the phenomena, were startled by this swinging motion and did not stand upon the order of their leaving, but departed at once.

The condition of that territory since has sustained the scientific assertion that a great earthquake is followed by years of calm. There has never been since 1872 any disturbance. We were there for three years and the country was as quiet as a sleeping infant.

A curious phenomenon was attendant upon this earthquake, which goes far to sustain the electrical theory of earthquakes. At Cerro Gordo a number of miners were in one of the principal mines, down about five hundred feet. The earthquake occurred about two o'clock in the morning, while the night shift was at work. The men on this shift, on their return to the surface in the morning, were surprised to hear that the country had been shaken by a great earthquake, for they all stated that they had felt no motion whatever at the place where they were in the mine, five hundred feet below the surface. Great crevasses were opened through the country in all directions, and oftentimes when we would leave a well-traveled trail, hoping to save distance by cutting across country, we were compelled to travel for miles before we found a place where the lips of these crevasses were close enough together to allow us to leap our horses across them. We were wise enough after some of these experiences to stick to well defined trails and roads.

Another phenomenon which was peculiar to the earthquake was the fact that all animals seemed to know for hours in advance of its coming. We talked with a number of people, who were present at the time, and they said that about sundown they noticed a great commotion among the cattle and among the dogs and the chickens, the cattle running about in an excited manner and lowing, and the dogs howling, and the chickens refusing to go to their usual roosts and the cocks crowing constantly during the night. It has been frequently asserted that animals have a phenomenal instinct which enables them to presage

the occurrence of great physical phenomena, and this fact was demonstrated at Lone Pine.

We had gone to Inyo, as we said before, for the purpose of recuperating our health, and our objective point was Cerro Gordo, where a friend of ours was residing at the time, as the receiver of one of the mines at that point, then in litigation. Cerro Gordo, then an almost deserted village, having only about fifteen inhabitants, occupied a cup-like hollow at the top of the Inyo Mountains, about four miles above Owens Lake, and was reached by a tedious road from the levels of the valley. The situation of Cerro Gordo is such that the air, on account of the altitude and the great heat, becomes exceedingly rarified, and the road from the lake to the town, a distance of some eight miles, is about the most tedious road in America. It is one long, steady climb, and each mile of advance is into a more rarified atmosphere, until it seems almost impossible for man or beast to make further progress. The hardest real work that we have ever done was to make the ascent from the lake, along this mountain road, and we have in our life done some real manual labor.

The morning after our arrival at Lone Pine we made our arrangements to proceed to Cerro Gordo, and went to the livery stable and asked for animals to carry us. The livery man said that we would need a mule, for it was a very difficult trip for a horse. He said, "When did you come to town?" I said, "On last night's stage from Caliente." He said, "Do you know the way to Cerro Gordo?" I said that I did not, but that I understood that once on the road,

it was almost impossible for one to lose it. He smiled and said, "Well, that is so, but do you know the dangers of the road?" I said, "No, I do not know of any danger." He said, "Well, for a tenderfoot, there are quite a number of dangers, and one of the principal is that you are liable to be tied up by desperadoes who make their living off of just such as you." I said, "Oh, well, if that's the only danger, we'll assume that." So we got our mule, and in the early morning, alone, started off for a twenty-five mile desert and mountain ride. I had traveled many miles through the Sierras, through the Northern California regions, through Oregon and Washington territory, through Indian country, and along roads that had the reputation of being the territory of road agents, and as I had never had any experience with such, I assumed that my usual good luck would attend me, and so it did. Whether or not any road agent ever saw me, I am unable to say, but in the thousands of miles which I have traveled through doubtful territory. I have never feared evil, nor found it.

North of Cerro Gordo lies a lone desert valley, rimmed with gorgeous mountains, painted with all the beauty and bloom of volcanic tints. Some of them we called the Zebra Mountains for in the distance they showed brilliant streaks of color,—red, white, blue and green, ranged like the peculiar stripes of the Zebra skin. This same coloring exists in the volcanic mountains along the eastern rim of Death Valley. Standing upon the summit of the Telescope Mountains, on the western rim, a distance of twenty-five or thirty miles away, on a summer day, when the

sun was beating down upon these mountains, the coloring was so brilliant that the eye could rest upon them only for a brief moment. This exprest and brilliant coloring is one of the splendors of the desert everywhere, and is noticeable to travelers on the Pullman cars through Arizona, New Mexico and portions of Colorado and Utah. It is a heat bloom.

Eastward from Cerro Gordo, over the rim of the hills immediately skirting the town, we drove down into long stretches of cacti lands, which lie between the Cerro Gordo range and the range of mountains which form the western boundary of the Pannamint Valley, which lies westward of Death Valley, and would be a matter of remark for its desolation except that it is in the presence of the greater creation, Death Valley, which overshadows all of the desert creations in the world.

The three years we passed in this country were crowded with interest, excitement and work. The Carson & Colorado Railroad Company was building into the Owens River Valley from Carson City, Nevada, and was interested in becoming familiar with the resources of the country, as the projectors thereof were unfamiliar with its commercial possibilities. It became our office, in association with these railroad men, to make ourselves familiar with all the country and to collect together such data as would be important and educational to the world when it became a factor in the work here. We made our home at various points, but principally at Lone Pine, for we found that to be the most delightful place in the valley. Its people were kindly disposed, a large part

were Mexicans; they were peaceable with that kindness of association which marks the Mexican always, when you have his confidence. There were many things that brought us into close contact with this Mexican population, and we soon by a few kindly services became *persona grata*, and were able to obtain from them at any time all sorts of services, many of them important, as they were familiar with the country and with all its resources.

The Mexican miner is the best miner in the world, and he seems by an instinctive faculty to know where the mineral is. We had an illustration of this in an old Mexican who lived at Cerro Gordo. He was nearly seventy years of age, had no ambitions except to keep himself in food and "medicina," the name he always gave to the storekeeper when he brought his little bottle down and desired to have it filled. He was, I think, the best mineralogist and worker of ores I ever knew. He would take his little sack, wander over the hills for perhaps a month and delve into the old dumps of the abandoned mines. By this search he would, in a month's time, fill up his gunny-sack with a hundred pounds of ore. This ore was rebellious, none of it of free character, and required the most careful and skilful reduction and refining. For this purpose he had built in one of the canyons nearby, out of adobe which he had made himself, a smelter and a refinery. The work accomplished by means of this little adobe smelter and refinery was as complete as could be found in the magnificent systems of Swansea, the world's chief mineral reduction plant, and to which must be sent at times the rebellious ores

which defy the skill of the resident ore-workers. The old Mexican would build a little fire in his smelter, and when the heat was just right, cast in with the necessary fluxes, which he would gather from the hill slopes adjoining, his little handfuls of rebellious ore, and by and by, out of the smelter would run a little stream of minerals, in which were mixed lead, copper, silver and gold. The mass would be, perhaps, out of the hundred pounds he smelted, about half as large as an ordinary football. This mass of unseparated ore he would subject to the processes of his little refinery, and by and by, for the process was slow, out of the refinery would flow the separated streams of gold, the silver, the lead, and thus from his hundred pounds of ore the old Mexican would usually secure from fifty to seventy-five dollars. This was enough to supply his simple wants for quite a while, and it was by this process of the highest scientific character, that this old, uneducated, simple-minded Mexican brought to himself such as he called the necessities and comforts of life.

Our personal touch with the Mexican population sometimes brought us into close relations in their political and patriotic work. Altho most of the men were citizens of the United States, and voters, they still were Mexicans, and on the 16th and 17th days of September celebrated the Mexican "Fourth of July;" the 16th of September being the equivalent day with them, their day of Freedom. At Lone Pine, which was the center of the Mexican population, on these days were always held their celebrations, to which all of the Mexicans contributed and from which

they all seemed to derive satisfaction and pleasure. The first day, that is, the 16th, was devoted to orations and public services, among the latter being a musical program in the hands of the *sigñoritas*, who with guitar and national music made the hours sweet. We were usually the orator, in English, and some well-known Mexican the orator in Spanish. Some of the Mexicans of this place were not very familiar with the English tongue, and while they had been residents of California for a number of years, did not seem inclined to learn our language. We have at many places in the world, interpreted by noted artists, listened to what was called the finest of music, but we have never heard music as sweet as the songs of these *sigñoritas*. They loved the guitar, and it seemed to be a part of them as an expression of that which was within their hearts. The Spanish music for the guitar is tenderly beautiful. Their songs were all in a minor key, and the natural hymns of their native land, given expression by a dozen or more *sigñoritas* touching their guitars with loving fingers, were alluring and sweet.

The second day was given over to the more strenuous amusements in the field, where feats of horsemanship were the leading feature. The Mexican is a natural horseman, and an expert in all things connected with horsemanship. The riding of wild horses was a part of these amusements, and always created much excitement. The last night was devoted to the *fandango*, from which no one was excluded, and to which every one was welcome. All questions of caste, station, business, occupation, faith, were cast

aside and forgotten. The lowliest and the highest mingled together in a place where there was absolute democracy of feeling.

One who becomes acquainted with the domestic life of a Mexican village, if he came from a Puritan town of New England, is at first rudely shocked by the things which he sees and which he thought from preconceived ideas were incompatible with clean life, but in this idea he would be remarkably mistaken. The Mexicans have their own standards,—standards more nearly Christian than the Puritan's, and the noblest lady of the land does not think she will be soiled because she shakes the hand of her sister who differs in life from herself. When one becomes thoroughly familiar with the spirit of this living, and the underlying moral sense which allows an intermingling, without contamination, of the classes that the New England village separates, he is compelled to concede that life and morals are mixed problems, and no man by any local prejudices or standards obtained from any particular faith, is qualified to sit in judgment on his fellows. This is the lesson that came to us in the little Mexican village, which widened and sweetened our life by a larger faith, a finer appreciation of human character, and a liberality more nearly like that of the Master.

