

# Desert Mountains: Sierra, Inyo, Panamint, Funeral

## *Sage and Tumbleweed*

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by \*Inyokel

Dwellers on the desert know that mountains are never the same in the morning as in the late afternoon, in winter as in spring. It is precisely this incessant change, this kaleidoscopic shifting of hue and shadow that is lost by the casual visitor who asks, "What do men see out here; How monotonous!" Whatever may be said of our sage-strewn valleys and rimming hills, monotony is the least true.

It takes hills to make a dawn, and the more hills the more glory. And the desert, again contrary to accepted notions of those who have not known it, has as many raw and beaten ridges as it has baked and treeless wastes. I have watched the stars grow dim above the Funerals, the Panamints, and the Inyos at the close of uncounted nights, and never has a dawn been just as that of yesterday or yesteryear. The salmon galleons of cloud are never identical, nor headed for the same ethereal haven. The archipelagoes of the sky have never been charted, thank God, so that the voyager of the dawn may gaze forever on new peaks rising from golden lagoons, strain his ear for the thunder of mauve billows bursting on the great atolls of heaven.

The chance riser may miss completely the marvel of the second coming of the sun, its first caress of the mountain tops, across the intervening hollow. He is not accustomed to turning his back upon a sunrise, and hence will not glimpse the glory behind him. First, as on Mrs. Whitney or Corcoran in the Sierra Nevada, a pink fleck sparkles on the now grey summit. Then, the sun itself still invisible behind the Inyos, its swift pencils fill in the outline of the peak in glittering orange and rose. For a minute, it would seem as if the range had begun to burst into bloom, the still dark, encrusting canyons reluctant to release the giant bud peering above the frowning wall. Relentlessly the glow spreads downward, paling as it flows, until, as if a cyclopean stage electrician had shouted, "Full up!" the steel-blue sun leaps over the crest and warmth and life have come to the desert.

Sunset, particularly in the Owens Valley, is in many respects the exact reversal of dawn. As Apollo drops in the western sky, the shadow of the backbone of America creeps across the valley floor, each peak distinctly discernible in its silhouette upon the sand. Stealthily dusk comes to home after home in the town below, then worms its way through the willows by the river. Now the ragged-edged pall is being pulled up the tawny flanks of Cerro Gordo and New York Butte, until at last their very tips become incandescent in the afterglow. Minutes, nay seconds, later, the fire has gone, and timid stars come forth on the very spot where danced the sun 12 hours ago. So sheer is our western wall that we in Owens Valley know but little twilight. Our days as our lives, unvarnished, undiluted, and complete.

I recall a scene on an eastern stage some 25 years past. The name of the play has escaped me. Perhaps it was *Arizona* or *The Girl of the Golden West* In front of the back-drop, a serrated range of mountains had been fashioned out of cardboard, or some similar material, and as the scene progressed an amber light behind this silhouette faded into a silver radiance and the foots were blotted out. The curtain

fell upon a fawn foreground, merging into deep brown foothills that sank into a lavender veil hung from a belt of black velvet. Only by raising your eyes from the torn etching of this Stygian mountain wall to



The Girl of the Golden West  
Starring: Jeanette MacDonald & Nelson Eddy  
(Filmed March 18, 1938. by Robert Z. Leonard)

the zenith could you see any blue in the sky at all, a faint azure border for the argent backing. I never forgot the scene. Never either did I believe it to be more than an artist's triumph until I stood one evening at Swansea and watched, in wordless wonder the repetition of that tableau in exact detail on the western side of the Owens Valley. I have never lost my awe at its beholding, for the black velvet-covered cardboard is a hundred miles long and three miles high. A fool, alone, who says in his heart that there is no God, can look on the Sierra Nevada at sundown and not praise Him whose feet are upon the mountains.

Nor can you walk abroad these moonlit nights and look upon that unending, league-deep valance of snowy lace athwart the night, without a tightening of the chest. There are times in a man's life when it seems as if his heart must burst its bounds. In Inyo we have our moments.

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