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DAYBREAK IN THE GRAND CANYON OF ARIZONA*

By Henry van Dyke

WHAT makes the lingering Night so cling to thee?
Thou vast, profound, primeval hiding-place
Of ancient secrets,—gray and ghostly gulf
Cleft in the green of this high forest land,
And crowded in the dark with giant forms!
Art thou a grave, a prison, or a shrine?

A stillness deeper than the dearth of sound
Broods over thee: a living silence breathes
Perpetual incense from thy dim abyss.
The Morning-stars that sang above the bower
Of Eden, passing over thee, are dumb
With trembling bright amazement; and the Dawn
Steals through the glimmering pines with naked feet,
Her hand upon her lips, to look on thee.
She peers into thy depths with silent prayer
For light, more light, to part thy purple veil.
O Earth, swift-rolling Earth, reveal, reveal!
Turn to the East, and show upon thy breast
The mightiest marvel in the realm of Time!

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Daybreak in the Grand Canyon of Arizona

'Tis done,—the morning miracle of light,—
 The resurrection of the world of hues
 That die with dark, and daily rise again
 With every rising of the splendid Sun!

Be still, my heart! Now Nature holds her breath
 To see the vital flood of radiance leap
 Across the chasm; and crest the farthest rim
 Of alabaster with a glistening white
 Rampart of pearl; and flowing down by walls
 Of changeful opal, deepen into gold
 Of topaz, rosy gold of tourmaline,
 Crimson of garnet, green and gray of jade,
 Purple of amethyst, and ruby red,
 Beryl, and sard, and royal porphyry;
 Until the cataract of color breaks
 Upon the blackness of the granite floor.

How far below! And all between is cleft
 And carved into a hundred curving miles
 Of unimagined architecture! Tombs,
 Temples, and colonnades are neighbored there
 By fortresses that Titans might defend,
 And amphitheatres where Gods might strive.
 Cathedrals, buttressed with unnumbered tiers
 Of ruddy rock, lift to the sapphire sky
 A single spire of marble pure as snow;
 And huge aërial palaces arise
 Like mountains built of unconsuming flame.
 Along the weathered walls, or standing far
 In riven valleys where no foot may tread,
 Are lonely pillars, and tall monuments
 Of perished æons and forgotten things.

My sight is baffled by the close array
 Of countless forms: my vision reels and swims
 Above them, like a bird in whirling winds.
 Yet no confusion fills yon awful chasm;
 But spacious order and a sense of peace
 Are wide diffused. For every shape that looms
 Majestic in the throng, is set apart
 From all the others by its far-flung shade,—
 Blue, blue, as if a mountain-lake were there.

How still it is! Dear God, I hardly dare
 To breathe, for fear the fathomless abyss
 Will draw me down into eternal sleep.

What force has formed this masterpiece of awe?
 What hands have wrought these wonders in the waste?
 O river, gleaming in the narrow rift
 Of gloom that cleaves the valley's nether deep,—
 Fierce Colorado, prisoned by thy toil,
 And blindly toiling still to reach the sea,—
 Thy waters, gathered from the snows and springs
 Amid the Utah hills, have carved this road
 Of glory to the Californian Gulf.
 But now, O sunken stream, thy splendor lost,
 'Twixt iron walls thou rollest turbid waves,
 Too far away to make their fury heard!

At sight of thee, thou sullen laboring slave
 Of gravitation,—yellow torrent poured
 From distant mountains by no will of thine,
 Through thrice a hundred centuries of slow
 Fallings and liftings of the crust of Earth,—
 At sight of thee my spirit sinks and fails.
 Art thou alone the Maker? Is the blind
 And thoughtless power that drew thee dumbly down
 To cut this gash across the layered globe,
 The sole creative cause of all I see?
 Are force and matter all? The rest a dream?

Then is thy gorge a canyon of despair,
 A prison for the soul of man, a grave
 Of all his dearest daring hopes! The world
 Wherein we live and move is meaningless,
 No spirit here to answer to our own!
 The stars without a guide! The chance-born Earth
 Adrift in space, no Captain on the ship!
 Nothing in all the universe to prove
 Eternal wisdom and eternal love!
 And man, the latest accident of Time,—
 Who thinks he loves, and longs to understand,
 Who vainly suffers, and in vain is brave,
 Who dupes his heart with immortality,—
 Man is a living lie,—a bitter jest
 Upon himself,—a conscious grain of sand
 Lost in a desert of unconsciousness,
 Thirsting for God and mocked by his own thirst.

Spirit of Beauty, mother of delight,
 Thou fairest offspring of Omnipotence,
 Inhabiting this lofty lone abode!
 Speak to my heart again and set me free
 From all these doubts that darken earth and heaven!

Daybreak in the Grand Canyon of Arizona

Who sent thee forth into the wilderness
 To bless and comfort all who see thy face?
 Who clad thee in this more than royal robe
 Of rainbows? Who designed these jewelled thrones
 For thee, and wrought these glittering palaces?
 Who gave thee power upon the soul of man
 To lift him up through wonder into joy?
 God! let the radiant cliffs bear witness! God,
 Let all the shining pillars signal—God!
 He only, on the mystic loom of light,
 Hath woven webs of loveliness to clothe
 His most majestic works: and He alone
 Hath delicately wrought the cactus-flower
 To star the desert floor with rosy bloom.
 O Beauty, handiwork of the Most High,
 Where'er thou art He tells his Love to man,
 And lo, the day breaks, and the shadows flee!

How far beyond all language and all art
 In thy wild splendor, Canyon Marvellous,
 The secret of thy stillness lies unveiled
 In wordless worship! This is holy ground,—
 No grave, no prison, but a shrine thou art.
 Garden of Temples filled with Silent Praise,
 If God were blind thy Beauty could not be!

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