

"Deserts Shall Blossom Again"

By NICHOLAS ROERICH



FROM time to time, humanity fittingly reminds itself of the need of revitalizing the deserts—those malignant and leprous spots of earth. It is true, that these efforts occur only sporadically—somewhere, something must be done for reforestation! But the native inhabitants of a locality themselves, with the most predatory instincts, try to deforest the land—in other words, they impair their own conditions of existence. In this regard, it is extremely encouraging to see the forestation of Nippon, England and Germany. At times, in our own schools, we celebrate Arbor Day, but the occasion remains a superficial outing, while the serious implication and entire purpose of this celebration is overlooked.

If the rural populations, however, are so indifferent to the questions of forestation and forest reserves which seem so obvious, they are still more indifferent to the subject of drouth-resistant grasses and plants.

A curious episode was related to us by our Expedition botanist, Professor T. P. Gordeyev, in regard to the planting of grass: he once tried to explain to a peasant the importance of methods of sowing grass so as to insure fertilization and strengthening of the soil. The peasant listened to him very morosely. Finally, the botanist asked him, "Why do you not begin this practical work on your own land?"

"You mean me?" the peasant asked sternly.

"Yes, you", the botanist said.

The answer was even more austere, "God creates the grass!"

The botanist again tried to find additional obvious proofs. And again came the same exchange of conversation—"You mean me?"... "Yes, you."

And still louder came the reply, " God creates the grass !"

And for the third time the botanist tried to explain the benefits of sowing grass. But by this time, the result was a threatening outcry from the peasant, " *God creates the grass !*" After which it was evident that it was safer to stop the conversation.

This phrase, " God creates the grass ", synthesizes the rural psychology—one might even say the universal psychology. In spite of due instruction and information, the great mass of the population still holds to the idea that trees as well as grass grow by themselves. And, having cut away his forests and destroyed the grass without restraint, man is astonished at the ominous manner in which the dead sands begin to overtake him and personal disaster becomes the anguish of the entire earth.

During our excavations in the completely dead sands of Asia, it was enlightening to unearth the roots of age-old forests. Strangely enough, precisely on these sites one may find excellent dwelling-sites and bits of woven grasses indicating that life once flourished here. The ancient Chinese Chronicles, with their meticulous notes of early Chinese travellers, describe these now-eroded sites as picturesque cities and villages which flourished amidst plenty. We cannot attribute these changes entirely to cosmic actions. The hand of man has been especially reprehensible. For instance, the picturesque Kangra Valley in the Punjab, during the comparatively recent times of Emperor Akbar, was regarded as one of the most thickly-forested localities ; at present this locality is beginning to suffer from lack of trees. Although the local government is doing everything possible to fight this evident misfortune, the initial misstep was taken long ago and the successive tasks become increasingly burdensome. The man who cuts away a tree is generally quite indifferent to the need of planting another immediately, to take its place, or at least of taking some care that the ugly remaining stump should not impede the young seed trees. As for regulating the crowded seedlings—this is out of question !

In the dead deserts of Asia, one may often hear the murmur of underground streams, which at times give rise to the beliefs in subterranean life. Not seldom, these streams have been driven under stones and pebbles by human hands which have rapaciously destroyed the vegetation.

The expanses of sand in Central Asia, Lithuania, America are limitless—thus in the most diverse parts of the earth, one finds these same soil-maladies which worry husbandmen. It is therefore readily understood why President Roosevelt and Secretary of Agriculture, Wallace also worry over the rescue and revivification of the desert, not only through reforestation but also through the discovery of the best

drouth-resistant grasses. In this sense, the steppes and gobis of Asia provide wonderful material for study. Upon these sand dunes, upon these endless mounds is still preserved the original vegetation which has withstood all types of catastrophes. The dunes of Barga—a part of Mongolia where "God still creates the grass"—provides opportunity for the most diverse practical observations. There one still finds remnants of the great forests; there still are found great quantities of feathergrass, and other steppe grasses at once strongly resistant and useful for forage. It is especially fitting that the study of these grasses which withstand drouth and other climatic catastrophes is now being carried on along broad channels. Because such experiments require years of work and the sooner attention is paid to this imperative need of earth, the sooner and more effectively will the panacea be found.

People who in the simplicity of their souls still think that "God creates the grass" should also remember the other proverb, "Trust God and do your own share."

Whenever I see the irrigation of the Egyptian desert, I always realize how comparatively little is needed in order to transform the seemingly dead surface to new blossoming. And in this regard, everyone—whether specialist or well-intentioned citizen should cooperate equally in aiding the entire country. This will provide one of those anonymous benevolent movements by which human existence is carried on.

Crossing the endless desert spaces, I always realize the countless possibilities still preserved in these virgin steppes, these rich vistas, these expanses where the best breeds of cattle could again be raised for universal benefit. I do not even venture to speak here of the vast store of medical plants scattered throughout these regions, verily by a divine grace, and still utilized so little by men, since science has only now begun to pay attention to these treasures which have been known for centuries but which have been forgotten in the bustle of life. Only now also are people beginning to study with utmost exactness the local languages in order to avoid the errors which so often arose through lack of precise translations. In many conventional and symbolic expressions of the Tibetan and Aryavedic pharmacopoea emerges the profound significance of the ancient experiments. From the medical point of view, Barga and the slopes of Hingen offer excellent materia medica. Together with the discoveries one's path here is enlivened by the peaceful Mongols whom one encounters and to whom the entire sympathy of one's soul goes out. Of course, only a knowledge of their language will draw from them the secrets of their souls. On the way we visited one of the greatest Mongolian monasteries—Ganjur. The name of the Monastery has itself been preserved from the Eighteenth Century when the Chinese Emperor

donated to it the complete Collection of the Sacred Books of Ganjur. We saw these volumes and admired the excellent edition made in Peking; unfortunately, the wood-bindings were destroyed in one of the recent catastrophes!

In Ganjur, George found in the possession of one of the old lamas, a Tibetan medical manuscript and succeeded in copying it—it is most fortunate that he possesses a complete familiarity with Mongolian and Tibetan, because for this work it is invaluable. In the monastery there are numerous Images, and the lamas speak of the coming "War of Shambhala", adding, "But a man of great heart is needed for it." We were present in the monastery during the discourses of the pupils when the little ones, clapping hands, ask each other the most extraordinary question. How illuminating are these ancient traditions.

During our trip, we realized again and again how necessary it is to preserve these irreplaceable treasures. And how often, today with all our relative civilization, the most dreadful barbarities occur. Yes, we must learn to safeguard not only the treasures of man's handiwork, but to extend this caution to all the true sources of light. For this reason, the revivification of the deserts, literally as well as in its sublimated spiritual implication, becomes one of the most noble responsibilities of humanity.

May all the deserts blossom again!