7. The First Crossing of the Empty Quarter

The departure of five Bait Kathir leaves me with a party of only four. We are short of food and water. We cross the Uruq al Shaiba and arrive at Khaba well near Liwa Oasis.

The Bait Kathir helped us to load our camels. We said goodbye, picked up our rifles, and set off, passing the bush where bin Kabina and I had sat the day before. The plants he had collected to show me still lay there, withered on the ground. It seemed a long time ago.

The Rashid took the lead, their faded brown clothes harmonizing with the sands: al Auf, a lean, neat figure, very upright; bin Kabina, more loosely built, striding beside him. The two Bait Kathir followed close behind, with the spare camel tied to Musallim's saddle. Their clothes, which had once been white, had become neutral-coloured from long usage. Mabkhaut was the same build as al Auf, whom he resembled in many ways, though he was a less forceful character. In the distance he was distinguishable from him only by the colour of his shirt. Musallim, compactly built, slightly bow-legged, and physically tough, was of a different, coarser breed. The least likeable of my companions, his personality had suffered from too frequent sojourns in Salala and he tended to be ingratiating.

After a short distance al Auf suggested that, as he did not know what we should find to the north, it would be wise to halt near by, with the Bait Imani, to allow our camels a further day's grazing. The Arabs, he added, would give us milk so that we need not touch our food and water. I answered that he was our guide and that from now on such decisions must rest with him.

Two hours later we saw a small boy, dressed in the remnants of a loin-cloth and with long hair falling down his back, herding camels. He led us to the Bait Imani camp, where three men sat round the embers of a fire. They rose as we

approached. 'Salam Alaikum', 'Alaikum as Salam', and then, after we had exchanged the news, they handed us a bowl of milk, its surface crusted with brown sand. These Bait Imani belonged to the same section of the Rashid as al Auf and bin Kabina and were from three different families. Only one of them, a grizzled elderly man called Khuatim, wore a shirt over his loin-cloth, and all were bareheaded. They had no tent; their only possessions were saddles, ropes, bowls, empty goatskins, and their rifles and daggers. The camping ground was churned and furrowed where the camels slept, and littered with camel droppings, hard and clean on the sand like dried dates. These men were cheerful and full of talk. The grazing was good; their camels, several in milk, would soon be fat. Life by their standards would be easy this year, but I thought of other years when the exhausted scouts rode back to the wells to speak through blackened, bleeding lips of desolation in the Sands, of emptiness such as I myself had seen on the way here from Ghanim; when the last withered plants were gone and walking skeletons of men and beasts sank down to die. Even tonight, when they considered themselves well off, these men would sleep naked on the freezing sand, covered only with their flimsy loin-cloths. I thought, too, of the bitter wells in the furnace heat of summer, when, hour by reeling hour, they watered thirty, thrusting camels, until at last the wells ran dry and importunate camels moaned for water which was not there. I thought how desperately hard were the lives of the Bedu in this weary land, and how gallant and how enduring was their spirit. Now, listening to their talk and watching the little acts of courtesy which they instinctively performed, I knew by comparison how sadly I must fail, how selfish I must prove.

The Bait Imani talked of Mahsin and of the accident which had befallen him, asking endless questions. Then Khuatim shouted to the small herdsboy, his son, to fetch the yellow four-year-old and the old grey which was still in milk. When the boy had brought them, Khuatim told him to couch them and loosed the hobbles from our bull's forelegs. Already the bull was excited, threshing itself with its tail, grinding its teeth, or blowing a large pink air sac from its mouth and

sucking it back with a slobbering sound. Clumsily it straddled the yellow camel, a comic figure of ill-directed lust, while Khuatim, kneeling beside it, tried to assist. Bin Kabina observed to me, 'Camels would never manage to mate without human help. They would never get it in the right place.' I was thankful that there were no more than these two camels to be served; there might have been a dozen to exhaust our bull.

The boy brought in the rest of the herd, thirty-five of them, at sunset. Khuatim washed his hands beneath a staling camel and scrubbed out the bowls with sand, for Bedu believe that a camel will go dry if milked with dirty hands or into a bowl which was soiled with food, especially meat or butter. He stroked a camel's udder, talking to her and encouraging her to let down her milk, and then standing on one leg, with his right foot resting on his left knee, he milked her into a bowl which he balanced on his right thigh. She gave about two quarts; several of the others, however, gave less than a quart. There were nine of these camels in milk. Al Auf milked Qamaiqam, bin Kabina's camel. She had given us a quart twice a day at Mughshin, but now from hard work and lack of food she only gave about a pint.

After milking, the Bait Imani couched their camels for the night, tying their knees to prevent them from rising. Al Auf told us to leave ours out to graze, adding that he would keep an eye on them. Our hosts brought us milk. We blew the froth aside and drank deep; they urged us to drink more, saying, 'You will find no milk in the sands ahead of you. Drink – drink. You are our guests. God brought you here – drink.' I drank again, knowing even as I did so that they would go hungry and thirsty that night, for they had nothing else, no other food and no water. Then while we crouched over the fire bin Kabina made coffee. The chill wind whispered among the shadowy dunes, and fingered us through our clothes and through the blankets which we wrapped about us. They talked till long after the moon had set, of camels and grazing, of journeys across the Sands, of raids and blood feuds and of the strange places and people they had seen when they had visited the Hadhramaut and Oman.

In the morning bin Kabina went with one of the Bait Imani

to collect our camels, and when he came back I noticed he was no longer wearing a loin-cloth under his shirt. I asked him where it was and he said that he had given it away. I protested that he could not travel without one through the inhabited country beyond the Sands and in Oman, and that I had no other to give him. I said he must recover it and gave him some money for the man instead. He argued that he could not do this. 'What use will money be to him in the Sands. He wants a loin-cloth,' he grumbled, but at length he went off to do as I had told him.

Meanwhile the other Bait Imani had brought us bowls of milk which al Auf poured into a small goatskin. He said we could mix a little every day with our drinking water and that this would improve its taste, a custom which enables Arabs who live in the Sands to drink from wells which would otherwise be undrinkable. They call this mixture of sour milk and water *shanin*. When we had finished this milk a week later we found in the bottom of the skin a lump of butter, the size of a walnut and colourless as lard. Al Auf also poured a little milk into another skin which was sweating, explaining that this would make it waterproof.

Then, wishing our hosts the safe keeping of God, we turned away across the Sands. As he walked along, al Auf held out his hands, palms upwards, and recited verses from the Koran. The sand was still very cold beneath our feet. Usually, when they are in the Sands during the winter or summer, Arabs wear socks knitted from coarse black hair. None of us owned these socks and our heels were already cracking from the cold. Later these cracks became deeper and very painful. We walked for a couple of hours, and then rode till nearly sunset; encouraging our camels to snatch mouthfuls from any plants they passed. They would hasten towards each one with their lower lips flapping wildly.

At first the dunes were brick-red in colour, separate mountains of sand, rising above ash-white gypsum flats ringed with vivid green salt-bushes; those we passed in the afternoon were even higher – 500 to 550 feet in height and honey-coloured. There was little vegetation here.

Musallim rode the black bull and led his own camel, which

carried the two largest water-skins. Going down a steep slope the female hesitated. The head-rope attached to the back of Musallim's saddle tightened and slowly pulled her over on to her side. I was some way behind and could see what was going to happen but there was no time to do anything. I shouted frantically at Musallim but he could not halt his mount on the slope. I prayed that the rope would break, and as I watched the camel collapse on top of the water-skins I thought, 'Now we will never get across the Sands'. Al Auf was already on the ground slashing at the taut rope with his dagger. As I jumped from my saddle I wondered if we should have even enough water left to get back to Ghanim. The fallen camel kicked out, and as the rope parted heaved herself to her knees. The water-skins which had fallen from her back still seemed to be full. Hardly daring to hope I bent over them, as al Auf said 'Praise be to God. They are all right,' and the others reiterated 'The praise be to God, the praise be to God!' We reloaded them on to the bull, which, bred in the sands, was accustomed to these slithering descents.

Later we came on some grazing and stopped for the night. We chose a hollow sheltered from the wind, unloaded the water-skins and saddle-bags, hobbled the camels, loosened the saddles on their backs and drove them off to graze.

At sunset al Auf doled out a pint of water mixed with milk to each person, our first drink of the day. As always, I had watched the sun getting lower, thinking 'Only one more hour till I can drink', while I tried to find a little saliva to moisten a mouth that felt like leather. Now I took my share of water without the milk and made it into tea, adding crushed cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, and cloves to the brew to disguise the taste.

Firewood could always be found, for there was no place in the Sands where rain had not fallen in the past, even if it was twenty or thirty years before. We could always uncover the long trailing roots of some dead shrub. These Arabs will not burn tribulus if they can find any other fuel, for *zahra*, 'the flower' as they call it, is venerated as the best of all food for their camels and has almost the sanctity of the date palm. I remember how I once threw a date-stone into the fire and old Tamtaim leant forward and picked it out.

Bin Kabina brewed coffee. He had stripped off his shirt and head-cloth, and I said, 'You couldn't take your shirt off if I had not rescued your loin-cloth for you.' He grinned, and said, 'What could I do? He asked for it,' and went over to help Musallim scoop flour out of a goatskin: four level mugfuls measured in a pint mug. This, about three pounds of flour, was our ration for the day and I reflected that there must be very few calories or vitamins in our diet. Yet no scratch festered or turned septic during the years I lived in the desert. Nor did I ever take precautions before drinking what water we found. Indeed, I have drunk unboiled water from wells, ditches, and drains all over the Middle East for twenty-five years without ill-effect. Given a chance, the human body – mine at any rate – seems to create its own resistance to infection.

When Musallim had made bread, he called to al Auf and Mabkhaut, who were herding the camels. It was getting dark. Though a faint memory of the vanished day still lingered in the west, the stars were showing, and the moon cast shadows on the colourless sand. We sat in a circle round a small dish, muttered 'In the name of God', and in turn dipped fragments of bread into the melted butter. When we had fed, bin Kabina took the small brass coffee-pot from the fire and served us with coffee, a few drops each. Then we crouched round the fire and talked.

I was happy in the company of these men who had chosen to come with me. I felt affection for them personally, and sympathy with their way of life. But though the easy equality of our relationship satisfied me, I did not delude myself that I could be one of them. They were Bedu and I was not; they were Muslims and I was a Christian. Nevertheless, I was their companion and an inviolable bond united us, as sacred as the bond between host and guest, transcending tribal and family loyalties. Because I was their companion on the road, they would fight in my defence even against their brothers and they would expect me to do the same.

But I knew that for me the hardest test would be to live with them in harmony and not to let my impatience master me; neither to withdraw into myself, nor to become critical

of standards and ways of life different from my own. I knew from experience that the conditions under which we lived would slowly wear me down, mentally if not physically, and that I should be often provoked and irritated by my companions. I also knew with equal certainty that when this happened the fault would be mine, not theirs.

During the night a fox barked somewhere on the slopes above us. At dawn al Auf untied the camels, which he had brought in for the night, and turned them loose to graze. There would be no food till sunset, but bin Kabina heated what was left of the coffee. After we had travelled for an hour we came upon a patch of grazing freshened by a recent shower. Faced with the choice of pushing on or of feeding the camels al Auf decided to stop, and as we unloaded them he told us to collect bundles of tribulus to carry with us. I watched him scoop a hole in the sand to find out how deeply the rain had penetrated, in this case about three feet; he invariably did this wherever rain had fallen – if no plants had yet come up on which to graze the camels while we waited, we went on, leaving him behind to carry out his investigations. It was difficult to see what practical use this information about future grazing in the heart of the Empty Quarter could possibly be to him or to anyone else, and yet I realized that it was this sort of knowledge which made him such an exceptional guide. Later I lay on the sand and watched an eagle circling overhead. It was hot. I took the temperature in the shade of my body and found it was 84 degrees. It was difficult to believe that it had been down to 43 degrees at dawn. Already the sun had warmed the sand so that it burnt the soft skin round the sides of my feet.

At midday we went on, passing high, pale-coloured dunes, and others that were golden, and in the evening we wasted an hour skirting a great mountain of red sand, probably 650 feet in height. Beyond it we travelled along a salt-flat, which formed a corridor through the Sands. Looking back I fancied the great, red dune was a door which was slowly, silently closing behind us. I watched the narrowing gap between it and the dune on the other side of the corridor, and imagined that once it was shut we could never go back, whatever

happened. The gap vanished and now I could see only a wall of sand. I turned back to the others and they were discussing the price of a coloured loin-cloth which Mabkhaut had bought in Salala before we started. Suddenly al Auf pointed to a camel's track and said, 'Those were made by my camel when I came this way on my way to Ghanim.'

Later Musallim and al Auf argued how far it was from Mughshin to Bai, where Tamtaim and the others were to wait for us. I asked al Auf if he had ever ridden from the Wadi al Amairi to Bai. He answered, 'Yes, six years ago.'

'How many days did it take?'

'I will tell you. We watered at al Ghaba in the Amairi. There were four of us, myself, Salim, Janazil of the Awamir, and Alaiwi of the Afar; it was in the middle of summer. We had been to Ibri to settle the feud between the Rashid and the Mahamid, started by the killing of Fahad's son.'

Musallim interrupted, 'That must have been before the Riqaishi was Governor of Ibri. I had been there myself the year before. Sahail was with me and we went there from. . . .'

But al Auf went on, 'I was riding the three-year-old I had bought from bin Duailan.'

'The one the Manahil raided from the Yam?' Bin Kabina asked.

'Yes. I exchanged it later for the yellow six-year-old I got from bin Ham. Janazil rode a Batina camel. Do you remember her? She was the daughter of the famous grey which belonged to Harahaish of the Wahiba.'

Mabkhaut said, 'Yes, I saw her last year when he was in Salala, a tall animal; she was old when I saw her, past her prime but even then a real beauty.'

Al Auf went on, 'We spent the night with Rai of the Afar.'

Bin Kabina chimed in, 'I met him last year when he came to Habarut; he carried a rifle, "a father of ten shots", which he had taken from the Mahra he had killed in the Ghudun. Bin Mautlauq offered him the grey yearling, the daughter of Farha, and fifty *riyals* for this rifle, but he refused.'

Al Auf continued, 'Rai killed a goat for our dinner and told us . . .', but I interrupted: 'Yes, but how many days did it take

you to get to Bai?' He looked at me in surprise and said, 'Am I not telling you?'

We stopped at sunset for the evening meal, and fed to our camels the tribulus we had brought with us. All the skins were sweating and we were worried about our water. There had been a regular and ominous drip from them throughout the day, a drop falling on to the sand every few yards as we rode along, like blood dripping from a wound that could not be staunched. There was nothing to do but to press on, and yet to push the camels too hard would be to founder them. They were already showing signs of thirst. Al Auf had decided to go on again after we had fed, and while Musallim and bin Kabina baked bread I asked him about his former journeys through these Sands. 'I have crossed them twice,' he said. 'The last time I came this way was two years ago. I was coming from Abu Dhabi.' I asked, 'Who was with you?' and he answered, 'I was alone.' Thinking that I must have misunderstood him, I repeated, 'Who were your companions?' 'God was my companion.' To have ridden alone through this appalling desolation was an incredible achievement. We were travelling through it now, but we carried our own world with us: a small world of five people, which yet provided each of us with companionship, with talk and laughter and the knowledge that others were there to share the hardship and the danger. I knew that if I travelled here alone the weight of this vast solitude would crush me utterly.

I also knew that al Auf had used no figure of speech when he said that God was his companion. To these Bedu, God is a reality, and the conviction of his presence gives them the courage to endure. For them to doubt his existence would be as inconceivable as for them to blaspheme. Most of them pray regularly, and many keep the fast of Ramadhan, which lasts for a whole month, during which time a man may not eat or drink from dawn till sunset. When this fast falls in summer – and the Arab months being lunar it is eleven days earlier each year – they make use of the exemption which allows travellers to observe the fast when they have finished their journey, and keep it in the winter. Several of the Arabs whom we had left at

Mughshin were fasting to compensate for not having done so earlier in the year. I have heard townsmen and villagers in the Hadhramaut and the Hajaz disparage the Bedu, as being without religion. When I have protested, they have said, 'Even if they pray, their prayers are not acceptable to God, since they do not first perform the proper ablutions.'

These Bedu are not fanatical. Once I was travelling with a large party of Rashid, one of whom said to me, 'Why don't you become a Muslim and then you would really be one of us?' I answered, 'God protect me from the Devil!' They laughed. This invocation is one which Arabs invariably use in rejecting something shameful or indecent. I would not have dared to make it if other Arabs had asked me this question, but the man who had spoken would certainly have used it if I had suggested that he should become a Christian.

After the meal we rode for two hours along a salt-flat. The dunes on either side, colourless in the moonlight, seemed higher by night than by day. The lighted slopes looked very smooth, the shadows in their folds inky black. Soon I was shivering uncontrollably from the cold. The others roared out their songs into a silence, broken otherwise only by the crunch of salt beneath the camels' feet. The words were the words of the south, but the rhythm and intonation were the same as in the songs which I had heard other Bedu singing in the Syrian desert. At first sight the Bedu of southern Arabia had appeared to be very different from those of the north, but I now realized that his difference was largely superficial and due to the clothes which they wore. My companions would not have felt out of place in an encampment of the Rualla, whereas a townsman from Aden or Muscat would be conspicuous in Damascus.

Eventually we halted and I dismounted numbly. I would have given much for a hot drink but I knew that I must wait eighteen hours for that. We lit a small fire and warmed ourselves before we slept, though I slept little. I was tired; for days I had ridden long hours on a rough camel, my body racked by its uneven gait. I suppose I was weak from hunger, for the food which we ate was a starvation ration, even by

Bedu standards. But my thirst troubled me most; it was not bad enough really to distress me but I was always conscious of it. Even when I was asleep I dreamt of racing streams of ice-cold water, but it was difficult to get to sleep. Now I lay there trying to estimate the distance we had covered and the distance that still lay ahead. When I had asked al Auf how far it was to the well, he had answered, 'It is not the distance but the great dunes of the Uruq al Shaiba that may destroy us.' I worried about the water which I had watched dripping away on to the sand, and about the state of our camels. They were there, close beside me in the dark. I sat up and looked at them. Mabkhaut stirred and called out, 'What is it, Umbarak?' I mumbled an answer and lay down again. Then I worried whether we had tied the mouth of the skin properly when we had last drawn water and wondered what would happen if one of us was sick or had an accident. It was easy to banish these thoughts in daylight, less easy in the lonely darkness. Then I thought of al Auf travelling here alone and felt ashamed.

The others were awake at the first light, anxious to push on while it was still cold. The camels sniffed at the withered tribulus but were too thirsty to eat it. In a few minutes we were ready. We plodded along in silence. My eyes watered with the cold; the jagged salt-crusts cut and stung my feet. The world was grey and dreary. Then gradually the peaks ahead of us stood out against a paling sky; almost imperceptibly they began to glow, borrowing the colours of the sunrise which touched their crests.

A high unbroken dune-chain stretched across our front. It was not of uniform height, but, like a mountain range, consisted of peaks and connecting passes. Several of the summits appeared to be seven hundred feet above the salt-flat on which we stood. The southern face confronting us was very steep, which meant that this was the lee side to the prevailing winds. I wished we had to climb it from the opposite direction, for it is easy to take a camel down these precipices of sand but always difficult to find a way up them.

Al Auf told us to wait while he went to reconnoitre. I watched him walking away across the glistening salt-flat, his rifle on his shoulder and his head thrown back as he scanned

the slopes above. He looked superbly confident, but as I viewed this wall of sand I despaired that we would ever get the camels up it. Mabkhaut evidently thought the same, for he said to Musallim, 'We will have to find a way round. No camel will ever climb that.' Musallim answered, 'It is al Auf's doing. He brought us here. We should have gone much farther to the west, nearer to Dakaka.' He had caught a cold and was snuffling, and his rather high-pitched voice was hoarse and edged with grievance. I knew that he was jealous of al Auf and always ready to disparage him, so unwisely I gibed, 'We should have got a long way if you had been our guide!' He swung round and answered angrily, 'You don't like the Bait Kathir. I know that you only like the Rashid. I defied my tribe to bring you here and you never recognize what I have done for you.'

For the past few days he had taken every opportunity of reminding me that I could not have come on from Ramlat al Ghafa without him. It was done in the hope of currying favour and of increasing his reward, but it only irritated me. Now I was tempted to seek relief in angry words, to welcome the silly, bitter squabble which would result. I kept silent with an effort and moved apart on the excuse of taking a photograph. I knew how easily, under conditions such as these, I could take a violent dislike to one member of the party and use him as my private scapegoat. I thought, 'I must not let myself dislike him. After all, I do owe him a great deal; but I wish to God he would not go on reminding me of it.'

I went over to a bank and sat down to wait for al Auf's return. The ground was still cold, although the sun was now well up, throwing a hard, clear light on the barrier of sand ahead of us. It seemed fantastic that this great rampart which shut out half the sky could be made of wind-blown sand. Now I could see al Auf, about half a mile away, moving along the salt-flat at the bottom of the dune. While I watched him he started to climb a ridge, like a mountaineer struggling upward through soft snow towards a pass over a high mountain. I even saw the tracks which he left behind him. He was the only moving thing in all that empty, silent landscape.

What were we going to do if we could not get the camels over it? I knew that we could not go any farther to the east,

for al Auf had told me that the quicksands of Umm al Samim were in that direction. To the west the easier sands of Dakaka, where Thomas had crossed, were more than two hundred miles away. We had no margin, and could not afford to lengthen our journey. Our water was already dangerously short, and even more urgent than our own needs were those of the camels, which would collapse unless they were watered soon. We *must* get them over this monstrous dune, if necessary by unloading them and carrying the loads to the top. But what was on the other side? How many more of these dunes were there ahead of us? If we turned back now we might reach Mughshin, but I knew that once we crossed this dune the camels would be too tired and thirsty to get back even to Ghanim. Then I thought of Sultan and the others who had deserted us, and of their triumph if we gave up and returned defeated. Looking again at the dune ahead I noticed that al Auf was coming back. A shadow fell across the sand beside me. I glanced up and bin Kabina stood there. He smiled, said 'Salam Alaikum', and sat down. Urgently I turned to him and asked, 'Will we ever get the camels over that?' He pushed the hair back from his forehead, looked thoughtfully at the slopes above us, and answered, 'It is very steep but al Auf will find a way. He is a Rashid; he is not like these Bait Kathir.' Unconcernedly he then took the bolt out of his rifle and began to clean it with the hem of his shirt, while he asked me if all the English used the same kind of rifle.

When al Auf approached we went over to the others. Mabkhaut's camel had lain down; the rest of them stood where we had left them, which was a bad sign. Ordinarily they would have roamed off at once to look for food. Al Auf smiled at me as he came up but said nothing, and no one questioned him. Noticing that my camel's load was unbalanced he heaved up the saddle-bag from one side, and then picking up with his toes the camel-stick which he had dropped, he went over to his own camel, caught hold of its head-rope, said 'Come on', and led us forward.

It was now that he really showed his skill. He picked his way unerringly, choosing the inclines up which the camels could climb. Here on the lee side of this range a succession of great

faces flowed down in unruffled sheets of sand, from the top to the very bottom of the dune. They were unscalable, for the sand was poised always on the verge of avalanching, but they were flanked by ridges where the sand was firmer and the inclines easier. It was possible to force a circuitous way up these slopes, but not all were practicable for camels, and from below it was difficult to judge their steepness. Very slowly, a foot at a time, we coaxed the unwilling beasts upward. Each time we stopped I looked up at the crests where the rising wind was blowing streamers of sand into the void, and wondered how we should ever reach the top. Suddenly we were there. Before slumping down on the sand I looked anxiously ahead of us. To my relief I saw that we were on the edge of rolling downs, where the going would be easy among shallow valleys and low, rounded hills. 'We have made it. We are on top of Uruq al Shaiba', I thought triumphantly. The fear of this great obstacle had lain like a shadow on my mind ever since al Auf had first warned me of it, the night we spoke together in the sands of Ghanim. Now the shadow had lifted and I was confident of success.

We rested for a while on the sand, not troubling to talk, until al Auf rose to his feet and said 'Come on'. Some small dunes built up by cross-winds ran in curves parallel with the main face across the back of these downs.[1] Their steep faces were to the north and the camels slithered down them without difficulty. These downs were brick-red, splashed with deeper shades of colour; the underlying sand, exposed where it had been churned up by our feet, showing red of a paler shade. But the most curious feature was a number of deep craters resembling giant hoof-prints. These were unlike normal crescent-dunes, since they did not rise above their surroundings, but formed hollows in the floor of hard undulating sand. The salt-flats far below us looked very white.

We mounted our camels. My companions had muffled their faces in their head-cloths and rode in silence, swaying to the camels' stride. The shadows on the sand were very blue, of the same tone as the sky; two ravens flew northward, croaking as they passed. I struggled to keep awake. The only sound was

1. See Plate 3.

made by the slap of the camels' feet, like wavelets lapping on a beach.

To rest the camels we stopped for four hours in the late afternoon on a long gentle slope which stretched down to another salt-flat. There was no vegetation on it and no salt-bushes bordered the plain below us. Al Auf announced that we would go on again at sunset. While we were feeding I said to him cheerfully, 'Anyway, the worst should be over now that we are across the Uruq al Shaiba.' He looked at me for a moment and then answered, 'If we go well tonight we should reach them tomorrow.' I said, 'Reach what?' and he replied, 'The Uruq al Shaiba', adding, 'Did you think what we crossed today was the Uruq al Shaiba? That was only a dune. You will see them tomorrow.' For a moment, I thought he was joking, and then I realized that he was serious, that the worst of the journey which I had thought was behind us was still ahead.

It was midnight when at last al Auf said, 'Let's stop here. We will get some sleep and give the camels a rest. The Uruq al Shaiba are not far away now.' In my dreams that night they towered above us higher than the Himalayas.

Al Auf woke us again while it was still dark. As usual bin Kabina made coffee, and the sharp-tasting drops which he poured out stimulated but did not warm. The morning star had risen above the dunes. Formless things regained their shape in the first dim light of dawn. The grunting camels heaved themselves erect. We lingered for a moment more beside the fire; then al Auf said 'Come', and we moved forward. Beneath my feet the gritty sand was cold as frozen snow.

We were faced by a range as high as, perhaps even higher than, the range we had crossed the day before, but here the peaks were steeper and more pronounced, rising in many cases to great pinnacles, down which the flowing ridges swept like draperies. These sands, paler coloured than those we had crossed, were very soft, cascading round our feet as the camels struggled up the slopes. Remembering how little warning of imminent collapse the dying camels had given me twelve years before in the Danakil country, I wondered how much more these camels would stand, for they were trembling violently

whenever they halted. When one refused to go on we heaved on her head-rope, pushed her from behind, and lifted the loads on either side as we manhandled the roaring animal upward. Sometimes one of them lay down and refused to rise, and then we had to unload her, and carry the water-skins and the saddle-bags ourselves. Not that the loads were heavy. We had only a few gallons of water left and some handfuls of flour.

We led the trembling, hesitating animals upward along great sweeping ridges where the knife-edged crests crumbled beneath our feet. Although it was killing work, my companions were always gentle and infinitely patient. The sun was scorching hot and I felt empty, sick, and dizzy. As I struggled up the slope, knee-deep in shifting sand, my heart thumped wildly and my thirst grew worse. I found it difficult to swallow; even my ears felt blocked, and yet I knew that it would be many intolerable hours before I could drink. I would stop to rest, dropping down on the scorching sand, and immediately it seemed I would hear the others shouting, 'Umbarak, Umbarak'; their voices sounded strained and hoarse.

It took us three hours to cross this range.

On the summit were no gently undulating downs such as we had met the day before. Instead, three smaller dune-chains rode upon its back, and beyond them the sand fell away to a salt-flat in another great empty trough between the mountains. The range on the far side seemed even higher than the one on which we stood, and behind it were others. I looked round, seeking instinctively for some escape. There was no limit to my vision. Somewhere in the ultimate distance the sands merged into the sky, but in that infinity of space I could see no living thing, not even a withered plant to give me hope. 'There is nowhere to go', I thought. 'We cannot go back and our camels will never get up another of these awful dunes. We really are finished.' The silence flowed over me, drowning the voices of my companions and the fidgeting of their camels.

We went down into the valley, and somehow – and I shall never know how the camels did it – we got up the other side. There, utterly exhausted, we collapsed. Al Auf gave us each a little water, enough to wet our mouths. He said, 'We need this if we are to go on.' The midday sun had drained the colour

from the sands. Scattered banks of cumulus cloud threw shadows across the dunes and salt-flats, and added an illusion that we were high among Alpine peaks, with frozen lakes of blue and green in the valley, far below. Half asleep, I turned over, but the sand burnt through my shirt and woke me from my dreams.

Two hours later al Auf roused us. As he helped me load my camel, he said, 'Cheer up, Umbarak. This time we really are across the Uruq al Shaiba', and when I pointed to the ranges ahead of us, he answered, 'I can find a way through those; we need not cross them.' We went on till sunset, but we were going with the grain of the country, following the valleys and no longer trying to climb the dunes. We should not have been able to cross another. There was a little fresh *qassis* on the slope where we halted. I hoped that this lucky find would give us an excuse to stop here for the night, but, after we had fed, al Auf went to fetch the camels, saying, 'We must go on again while it is cool if we are ever to reach Dhafara.'

We stopped long after midnight and started again at dawn, still exhausted from the strain and long hours of yesterday, but al Auf encouraged us by saying that the worst was over. The dunes were certainly lower than they had been, more uniform in height and more rounded, with fewer peaks. Four hours after we had started we came to rolling uplands of gold and silver sand, but still there was nothing for the camels to eat.

A hare jumped out from under a bush, and al Auf knocked it over with his stick. The others shouted 'God has given us meat.' For days we had talked of food; every conversation seemed to lead back to it. Since we had left Ghanim I had been always conscious of the dull ache of hunger, yet in the evening my throat was dry even after my drink, so that I found it difficult to swallow the dry bread Musallim set before us. All day we thought and talked about that hare, and by three o'clock in the afternoon could no longer resist stopping to cook it. Mabkhaut suggesed, 'Let's roast it in its skin in the embers of a fire. That will save our water – we haven't got much left.' Bin Kabina led the chorus of protest. 'No, by God! Don't even suggest such a thing'; and turning to me he said,

'We don't want Mabkhaut's charred meat. Soup. We want soup and extra bread. We will feed well today even if we go hungry and thirsty later. By God, I am hungry!' We agreed to make soup. We were across the Uruq al Shaiba and intended to celebrate our achievement with this gift from God. Unless our camels foundered we were safe; even if our water ran out we should live to reach a well.

Musallim made nearly double our usual quantity of bread while bin Kabina cooked the hare. He looked across at me and said, 'The smell of this meat makes me faint.' When it was ready he divided it into five portions. They were very small, for an Arabian hare is no larger than an English rabbit, and this one was not even fully grown. Al Auf named the lots and Mabkhaut drew them. Each of us took the small pile of meat which had fallen to him. Then bin Kabina said, 'God! I have forgotten to divide the liver', and the others said, 'Give it to Umbarak.' I protested, saying that they should divide it, but they swore by God that they would not eat it and that I was to have it. Eventually I took it, knowing that I ought not, but too greedy for this extra scrap of meat to care.

Our water was nearly finished and there was only enough flour for about another week. The starving camels were so thirsty that they had refused to eat some half-dried herbage which we had passed. We must water them in the next day or two or they would collapse. Al Auf said that it would take us three more days to reach Khaba well in Dhafara, but that there was a very brackish well not far away. He thought that the camels might drink its water.

That night after we had ridden for a little over an hour it grew suddenly dark. Thinking that a cloud must be covering the full moon, I looked over my shoulder and saw that there was an eclipse and that half the moon was already obscured. Bin Kabina noticed it at the same moment and broke into a chant which the others took up.

God endures for ever.
The life of man is short.
The Pleiades are overhead.
The moon's among the stars.'

Otherwise they paid no attention to the eclipse (which was total), but looked around for a place to camp.

We started very early the next morning and rode without a stop for seven hours across easy rolling downs. The colour of these sands was vivid, varied, and unexpected: in places the colour of ground coffee, elsewhere brick-red, or purple, or a curious golden-green. There were small white gypsum-flats, fringed with *shanan*, a grey-green salt-bush, lying in hollows in the downs. We rested for two hours on sands the colour of dried blood and then led our camels on again.

Suddenly we were challenged by an Arab lying behind a bush on the crest of a dune. Our rifles were on our camels, for we had not expected to meet anyone here. Musallim was hidden behind mine. I watched him draw his rifle clear. But al Auf said, 'It is the voice of a Rashid', and walked forward. He spoke to the concealed Arab, who rose and came to meet him. They embraced and stood talking until we joined them. We greeted the man, and al Auf said, 'This is Hamad bin Hanna, a sheikh of the Rashid.' He was a heavily-built bearded man of middle age. His eyes were set close together and he had a long nose with a blunt end. He fetched his camel from behind the dune while we unloaded.

We made coffee for him and listened to his news. He told us that he had been looking for a stray camel when he crossed our tracks and had taken us for a raiding party from the south. Ibn Saud's tax-collectors were in Dhafara and the Rabadh, collecting tribute from the tribes; and there were Rashid, Awamir, Murra, and some Manahil to the north of us.

We had to avoid all contact with Arabs other than the Rashid, and if possible even with them, so that news of my presence would not get about among the tribes, for I had no desire to be arrested by Ibn Saud's tax-collectors and taken off to explain my presence here to Ibn Jalawi, the formidable Governor of the Hasa. Karab from the Hadhramaut had raided these sands the year before, so there was also a serious risk of our being mistaken for raiders, since the tracks of our camels would show that we had come from the southern steppes. This risk would be increased if it appeared that we were avoiding the Arabs, for honest travellers never pass an encampment

without seeking news and food. It was going to be very difficult to escape detection. First we must water our camels and draw water for ourselves. Then we must lie up as close as possible to Liwa and send a party to the villages to buy us enough food for at least another month. Hamad told me that Liwa belonged to the Al bu Falah of Abu Dhabi. He said that they were still fighting Said bin Maktum of Dibai, and that, as there was a lot of raiding going on, the Arabs would be very much on the alert.

We started again in the late afternoon and travelled till sunset. Hamad came with us and said he would stay with us until we had got food from Liwa. Knowing where the Arabs were encamped he could help us to avoid them. Next day, after seven hours' travelling, we reached Khaur Sabakha on the edge of the Dhafara sands. We cleaned out the well and found brackish water at seven feet, so bitter that even the camels only drank a little before refusing it. They sniffed thirstily at the water with which al Auf tried to coax them from a leather bucket, but only dipped their lips into it. We covered their noses but still they would not drink. Yet al Auf said that Arabs themselves drank this water mixed with milk, and when I expressed my disbelief he added that if an Arab was really thirsty he would even kill a camel and drink the liquid in its stomach, or ram a stick down its throat and drink the vomit. We went on again till nearly sunset.

The next day when we halted in the afternoon al Auf told us we had reached Dhafara and that Khaba well was close. He said that he would fetch water in the morning. We finished what little was left in one of our skins. Next day we remained where we were. Hamad said that he would go for news and return the following day. Al Auf, who went with him, came back in the afternoon with two skins full of water which, although slightly brackish, was delicious after the filthy evil-smelling dregs we had drunk the night before.

It was 12 December, fourteen days since we had left Khaur bin Atarit in Ghanim.

In the evening, now that we needed no longer measure out each cup of water, bin Kabina made extra coffee, while Musallim increased our rations of flour by a mugful. This was wild

extravagance, but we felt that the occasion called for celebration. Even so, the loaves he handed us were woefully inadequate to stay our hunger, now that our thirst was gone.

The moon was high above us when I lay down to sleep. The others still talked round the fire, but I closed my mind to the meaning of their words, content to hear only the murmur of their voices, to watch their outlines sharp against the sky, happily conscious that they were there and beyond them the camels to which we owed our lives.

For years the Empty Quarter had represented to me the final, unattainable challenge which the desert offered. Suddenly it had come within my reach. I remembered my excitement when Lean had casually offered me the chance to go there, the immediate determination to cross it, and then the doubts and fears, the frustrations, and the moments of despair. Now I had crossed it. To others my journey would have little importance. It would produce nothing except a rather inaccurate map which no one was ever likely to use. It was a personal experience, and the reward had been a drink of clean, nearly tasteless water. I was content with that.

Looking back on the journey I realized that there had been no high moment of achievement such as a mountaineer must feel when he stands upon his chosen summit. Over the past days new strains and anxieties had built up as others eased, for, after all, this crossing of the Empty Quarter was set in the framework of a longer journey, and already my mind was busy with the new problems which our return journey presented.