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C LEWIS

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When I desire thy counsel, I will tell thee," returned Abou Kuram, shortly. "Look thou to the way and leave the rest to me. And methinks thou hadst better mend thy pace."

After this no man durst speak and keen as was the disappointment, there was no murmuring—only the men sat a little more grimly and prodded a little more viciously with their riding sticks. As we passed, many a man turned with yearning eyes to the verdurous spot, thinking perhaps he should be dead ere another came in sight.

If the forenoon had been hot, the afternoon had an atmosphere of living fire. Yet we toiled on, dissolving and open-mouthed, and wondering how long we could stand the burning lances of the sun.

I speak of the rank and file. As for Abou Kuram, he seemed to be oblivious of heat or thirst or fatigue. How I envied him! While my mouth was cracking, he was evidently as cool and moist as a ripe pear. Koor Ali, who rode beside me, must have noticed the painful twitching of my lips, for looking in my face with an expression of concern, he asked if I was thirsty.

"As dry as a baked brick," I croaked. Koor Ali's son, Ahmed, a lad about my own age, rode beside us, and on hearing my raven voice, burst into a fit of laughter.

"What art thou laughing at, Ahmed?" demanded Abou Kuram, turning slightly in his saddle. Ahmed pointed to me.

"The stranger croaketh with thirst," he said, "ere we are half way over the desert."

I tried to explain but failed; my mouth was as a rusty machine that had not moved for a century.

"Give him thy water-skin, Koor Ali," said Abou Kuram, "lest he faint. It were ill to die in the desert," he added, smiling at me.

The water was dingy and beginning to smell badly, but just then a stagnant pool would have been sweet, and I took a huge gulp. Taking another, I held it in my mouth for a minute, then squirted it out, sending it, as if by pure accident, over the sprightly Ahmed.

"By my faith, I like not to be spat on by an infidel," he cried, grasping his spear as if to have at me.

The laugh was now on my side, though I perceived the danger of indulging in it.

"'Twas but an accident," I said, apologetically. "Yet it is good and will cool thee."

I tried to propitiate him by handing him his father's water skin to drink, but he disdainfully declined.

"Nay, I am not a babe like thee," he said. "Thou shouldst have brought thy mother with thee," and he tossed his head as if he were safe from the weakness of thirst in a desert land.

Three mortal hours of panting toil and dripping sweat had yet to pass ere Abou Kuram ordered a halt, and then it was but to dismount, swallow a mouthful of dry dates, and fowl, lukewarm water, and scramble into the saddle again. Through the broiling afternoon we stewed and gasped and pushed on, fainting, never drawing rein till sundown, when we stopped for prayers and the evening meal.

I had scarcely eaten when I was asleep on the sand, and my eyes appeared to have just closed when those atomizable drums were beating the order to mount and march again.

Words cannot tell how sore and tired I was, or how I longed to lie down and be at peace. The feeling was as if some one had pounded me limp and nature was slowly stiffening up again with the joints all out of place, and every muscle and ligament stretched beyond endurance. But as the Arabs said nothing of fatigue, I would have cut my tongue out rather than complain.

Five days we panted on through scorching sands under a flaming sky, and five nights the bright Arabian moon lighted us on our trackless, hurrying march. By the third day man and beast were showing decided signs of exhaustion. Camels fell and were left to die, sometimes with their burdens on them. The horses lagged with low heads and protruding tongues, and men dropped suddenly from their saddles with strange stertorous noises, and lay as senseless as logs. Two went raving mad, one of them succeeding in killing another and himself ere his comrades could overpower him. Hollow graves, which the jackals and hyenas could reopen with a scratch of the paw, were scooped out for the dead and their camels given to others.

The young soldiers shook and looked anxious, for sudden death and unceremonious burial are disconcerting to juvenile nerves. The old ones clinched their teeth, growling that war and the desert were not for children, and Abou Kuram, self-possessed, but a trifle grimmer than at starting, spoke roughly about the delays. So the cavalcade toiled wearily on, yearning so fervently for rest that it forgot glory, yet stolidly enduring the harshness of fate. But indeed an Arab is a wildest in vitality, and more than a wildest in the capacity to bear pain uncomplainingly. We pressed silently ahead, counting the beads of sweat as they rolled down, and wondering how many of us the desert would swallow ere we got a chance of taking it out of the enemy.

At last we left the sands for alkaline lands, scantily clothed with hard, scur grass and sarsless diminutive shrubs, and gradually ascending to a range of mountains that crossed our line of advance north and south. It was somewhere within those ramparts that we expected to find Amood Sinn and his discomfited army. Being now close upon the scene of the late battle, we had to exercise double vigilance, for Yumca Yusuf would naturally be on the lookout to prevent aid from reaching the man whom he wished to destroy utterly. Nearly all the cooking was done by day, so that there might be no fires at night to indicate our presence and position, and when we lay down to rest the number of sentinels was increased. But we reached the foothills without molestation, and far from sorry that we were likely to be able to pick ourselves together before fighting.

As it would be at once extremely dangerous, extremely difficult and tedious to take the whole body of troops to the rendezvous appointed by Amood Sinn, Abou Kuram decided to send Koor Ali forward with an escort to ascertain whether it would not be possible to effect a junction of the two armies outside the mountains. It was near sunset when we arrived at our halting place, and his little band set forth, Tabal still leading.

According to the guide we might expect them back at the latest by noon next day. Noon came, however, without bringing them. The afternoon wore slowly on, darkness fell, prayers were said and supper was eaten, and still no Koor Ali. Abou Kuram was getting impatient. After a forced march across the desert, it was exasperating to be kept waiting at this stage. The camp lay down to sleep, moon and stars kept their vigil, morning broke, and still no tidings of the absent ones. Abou Kuram strutted sullenly about the camp, recalling his stock of Arabian oaths. Noon came again, and again sunset, supper and prayers, yet there was no sign of Koor Ali and his escort.

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(To be Continued.)

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