Charting the World's Last Plot

A typical stretch of the Arabian Desert that has now been crossed for the first time

By H. E. Bates

H. M. TOMLINSON once discoursed on the prosy modesty of great travellers, marvelling how Wallace could compress a long sea-voyage to South America in 1848 into forty words:

> "It was on the morning of the 26th of May, 1848, that after a short passage of twenty-nine days from Liverpool, we came to anchor opposite the southern entrance to the River Amazon."

Out of those forty words Conrad might have written an epic, and similarly, out of the concluding words of *Arabia Felix*, "The Rub' al Khali had been crossed," he might have had the inspiration for another *Heart of Darkness*. Six words!

The modesty of Thomas is astounding. When one realises that those six words, so quiet and unobtrusive, delivered without a trace of pride or triumph, represent the climax of a feat of exploration that has rarely been equalled in the history of modern exploration, one is inclined to look with irony on those travellers who, armed with a kodak and a fountain-pen, travel a brief space on a bit of familiar desert, and return to write gossipy books which sell in thousands.

"The Rub' al Khali had been crossed." Thomas does not even permit himself the luxury of a single exclamation mark of relief or pride. Yet these six words contain in them the story of a miracle. Until Thomas set out The Rub' al Khali had not been crossed,

> —"that virgin Rub' al Khali, the last unwritten plot of earth big enough for a sizable man's turning in twice or thrice about, before he couches."

These are T. E. Lawrence's words, and who better to introduce us to Thomas? —and Lawrence goes on to say:

> "Few men are able to close an epoch. We cannot know the first man who walked the inviolate earth for newness' sake; but Thomas is the last; and he did his journey in the antique way, by pain of his camels' legs, single-handed, at his own time and cost. He might have flown in an aeroplane, sat in a car, or rolled over in a tank. Instead, he has snatched at the twenty-third hour, feet's last victory and set us free."

Arabia Felix!—the very word felix can mislead us as to the nature of that uncrossed desert and the greatness of Thomas's exploit. To us, who can never hope to follow him, the map can tell much. The great, yellow, unspotted waste of the Rub' al Khali looks everything but happy, though to Thomas, full of enthusiasm as well as modesty, this was "the true Arabia Felix of today," the uncrossed, the unknown, the fascinating blank on the earth's surface.

Thus Thomas, always modest, would have us believe that this harsh, scorching bit of unexplored desert was as easy for him to cross on a camel as the Berkshire downs on a pony. Do not believe him!

As though the mere progress through terrific heat and sand, without comfort or tolerable water, were not enough to occupy his time and strength, Thomas found other things to do—to collect geographical and geological data, conditions of climate and vegetation, reptiles and amphibians, flowers and birds, so that his achievement becomes not merely one of adventurous significance, but one rich in scientific importance.

Reviewed On This Page

ARABIA FELIX. By Bertram Thomas, with an Introduction by T. E. Lawrence (Cape. 25/- net).

THE DIARIES OF WILFRED SCAWEN BLUNT, 1888-1914 (Secker. 12/6 net).

SEÑOR BUM IN THE JUNGLE. By Algo Sand (Gollancz. 10/6 net).

Somehow he found time also to measure the heads of tribe-men and to record their chants and to investigate their sexual customs.

There are times when one wishes that Thomas, as a writer, had in him a drop of Conrad's blood, or T. E. Lawrence's, or Tomlinson's, so that one could *feel* the heat of that desert scorching one's blood and taste the sand in one's mouth. He is, however, as modest a writer as he is a traveller. Had he been as *great* a writer we could not have measured him, but one cannot ask too much of a man who can write of miracles with an economy which is almost Biblical. "All honour," says Lawrence, "to Thomas." All honour, indeed! The very immensity of his journey has made his book big and memorable.

Lawrence's introduction to the book adds greatly to its value, but Lawrence confesses that "Thomas shocked me when he asked for a foreword to his great journey-book," and gives his reasons: "You see, in my day there were real Arabian veterans. Upon each return from the East I would repair to Doughty, a looming giant, white with eighty years, headed and bearded like some Renaissance Isaiah. Doughty seemed a past world in himself; and after him I would visit Wilfred Blunt."

Blunt, like Doughty, seemed to Lawrence a Master Arabian, which ought to be sufficient recommendation for his diaries, now published in a cheap edition, making a fat volume of comment and memories, very imposing, like Blunt himself:

> "There in a great chair he sat, prepared for me like a careless work of art in well-worn Arab robes, his chiselled face, framed in silver, curling hair. Doughty's voice was a caress, his nature sweetness. Blunt was a fire yet flickering over the ashes of old fury."

That last sentence might well describe his diaries.

Thomas is modest, Doughty a world in himself, Blunt imposing and versatile, Lawrence an enigma—all great travellers, each large with the dignity that Arabia seems to give those who conquer her, and Señor Bum stands in relation to them rather like an impudent and reckless schoolboy. His publishers, not satisfied that his journey into the wasting swamps of Venezuela was genuine, and having "no wish to 'palm off' on the public a piece of fiction in the guise of fact," made some investigations into the *bona-fides* of the author," and it seems that they satisfied themselves that it all happened, that Señor Bum really did make this incredible journey of his up the Orinoco, down the Rio Negro, and out on the Amazon.

It may be so; there is no point in disputing it. If these astounding adventures among Indians, crocodiles, snakes, revolutionaries, beautiful senoritas did really happen then one must praise the courage of the author as a traveller and his truthfulness as a writer. If they never happened at all then one must praise his extraordinary powers of invention, the colour of his imagination, his uncanny gift of making every line of his book appear as authentic as a volume of history.

A young novelist, praised once for a description of the daily life of an obscure African tribe, confessed that he had "got it all out of the 'Encyclopædia Britannica,'" and it is possible that Señor Bum has never been within a thousand miles of Venezuela and has, too, used only his imagination and the encyclopædia. It might be done, and Señor Bum is impudent enough to have done it.

Fever, poisoned arrows, murder, robbery, snakes, wild beasts, love, starvation, disease, he rattles them off in a flashy debonair, utterly captivating way until one forgets to be sceptical and becomes credulous, excited, and finally absorbed completely.