

## Children of Rumm · *Stephen Menick*

HIS GUIDE had been killed for drinking from another tribe's well and now he had only his compass; and to steel his nerves, to forget the sun that drained the color from the cliffs, and in a mood of a boy on holiday, the golden Englishman began to sing—in time with the rolling of his saddle.

*You could hear the girls declare:  
"He must be a millionaire!"*

And the cliffs tossed echoes in the air yonair yonair yonair—

*You could rump teetump teetump teetah!*

Teetump teetah teetah—the speakers on the ceiling answered him too. It was a January night in 1963 at the Criterion on Times Square, and when Peter O'Toole as T. E. Lawrence rode into Rumm in Super-Panavision 70, I was there with him. I'd just turned fourteen.

The Criterion then wasn't the hive of mini-cinemas it's become since, but one room, a sleek canyon with a strategy of stereo and a sky of a screen. Not a whiff of popcorn and all the men wore ties. Some late arrivals sidled to their seats, blackening the screen with their backs, and caused a vexed but civil tisking of tongues. I remember those as different times. New York was Robert Wagner and Robert Moses and it was still a city of newspapers. I wasn't a city kid myself, just couldn't wait for *Lawrence of Arabia* to come around to the suburban oases.

Another beginning takes me a year and a half further back, to the summer of 1961.

My family traveled in Europe that summer and a day or two before we sailed home from Naples, my mother and I walked down into the ruins of Herculaneum, the casualty of Vesuvius. Cypresses enshrined the Roman town. I can still see a brick bakery with halfmoon ovens, a mosaic floor, loaves of petrified bread, the pottery shard I scavenged and palmed. More than sudden death and Roman archaeology, Herculaneum stands for the

finds of my memory, my private excavation, the bakery, the mosaic, the bread, the shard. At that age, twelve, I wanted to be an archeologist. In a trench there were barebacked young men loosening the volcanic earth with jackhammers. I guessed I would have to serve my apprenticeship doing that sort of work too.

If Herculaneum took up the morning then Vesuvius came after lunch and siesta. My brother and sister must have stretched theirs; my parents drove me up the mountain, past garden walls and stucco houses possessed of that ochreous decay I'd seen all over Italy, every house an antique. Above the vineyards rose a world of lava fields. The bulge of the mountainside seemed the very roundness of the globe. I wanted to jump out of the car and lose myself in those lofty black wilds, live in a hut, thrive on shepherd's fare and books. Stubborn trees survived there, so could I. The road climbed up to a hill of cinders and from there you took a footpath to the lip of the crater. My parents stayed in the car.

I can remember the give of the cinders, the impressive solitude, the Bay of Naples swimming in the haze and a man with a wheelbarrow, mending the path, who had a sheaf of walking sticks and handed me one. So I rated a walking stick—that was refreshing. Going abroad had dramatized how much of a child I was, barred from some places, let into others at half price, which to me was just as insulting—a child, a minor (hated that word). But the walking stick was recognition. I walked with my stick, dry and brittle in my hand, and stabbed the cinders softly.

On my way down I passed the wheelbarrow man again and he took the stick away from me. All my keepsakes were intangible ones. The licking of steam, strong with sulfur; the figures of two other Vesuvians standing on the far lip of the crater, tiny as pine needles in the gray hollow muteness of the place; the muttering of stones tumbling down the throat. My hour at the crater gave me one of my first juvenilia, though I no longer have those pages. Nor do I have the shard from Herculaneum, which I washed in the sink in our hotel in Naples. The shard came out a sparkling crimson in that sink, itself a deep old-world affair with porcelain pears for handles.

A long liner carried us out of the Bay, Vesuvius dwindling in the haze; carried us past Gibraltar, past the cloudy Azores, which I heard it said were volcanic. On board ship I shrank to the status of a child again. If I sat in the ship's bar I was chased out. The movie theater was off limits and "children's bathing hours" were posted over the swimming pool. A snarl-

ing old palooka guarded the Turkish bath, dozing in a perfect imitation of the bulldog in cartoons, a folded towel on his shoulder. The transatlantic life was adult, exclusive, important and smelled of ashtrays and bourbon. One rough day when the decks heaved and you could look down at fretted seas I thought I was alone on board. No one else cared for the elements.

I had the run of the ship's library, there was never anyone there; I poked inside the writing desks, tried the clotted pens, held a stippled square of green blotting paper up to a mirror for snatches of people's letters. I combed the bookshelves and discovered Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*; leafed, skimmed, skipped through Arcadia with Pan, saw the underworld with Persephone, drank with Dionysus. Graves' stories were encrusted with footnotes, and I loved the footnotes, the ancient Mediterranean matrix of cults and festivals and calendars; his stories were like my crimson shard from Herculaneum, blushing from the earth. Surf storms, Vulcan's anvils, mermaid Nereids with Seaweed for hair, rapes and satyrs—all one great rampage of nature and sex, and it became my *Lady Chatterley's*, my *Fanny Hill*. And I didn't have to read it on the sly.

That fall, back home, at the town library of ivied brick, I fingered the cards for more Robert Graves. There were titles and titles. *Hercules, My Shipmate. I, Claudius. King Jesus. Lawrence and the Arabian Adventure.*

From myth to myth—I must have been starving for myths. I dropped the Greeks for Lawrence. Easier on the imagination. Why be a faun or Hercules in a worldful of gods? Better to wear robes, blow up trains, ride with Beduin, be a god among savages.

To the men in the War Office in London, Allenby's Palestine campaign was a sideshow, a far cry from the Western Front, and when the drumfire of British artillery in Flanders set windowpanes rattling on the Kentish coast, it was hard to disagree. Yet Palestine was a lovelier war for 1917, a war of maneuver, a war being won. Not long before Allenby captured Jerusalem another British offensive had ended at Passchendaele, a village or once a village in Flanders. Passchendaele or Passiondale, either way it spelled a hundred and fifty thousand British killed, all to win four miles of Flemish bog. Palestine was indeed a far cry from that, and into the bargain it had a British general liberating the city of the Holy Sepulcher. American propagandist Lowell Thomas, for one, knew a story when he saw one—and a honey of a story it was.

Thomas had been sent abroad by a group of Chicago financiers to find stirring things to say about the Allied effort. America had declared war and its public needed whetting. He scouted in vain along the Western Front, where even the toughest reporters were seldom so indelicate as to tell the whole of what they saw, then transferred to Egypt and Palestine to follow Allenby's fortunes.

In his 1924 biography *With Lawrence in Arabia* Thomas claimed to have heard of Lawrence first while on shipboard in the Mediterranean. Whisperings of an Englishman leading a Beduin horde "somewhere in the trackless desert of the far-off land of Omar and Abu-Bekr. When I landed in Egypt I heard fantastic tales of his exploits. His name was always mentioned in hushed tones, because at that time the full facts regarding the war in the Land of the Arabian Nights were being kept secret. Until the day I met him in the palace of the governor of Jerusalem I was unable to picture him as a real person. He was to me merely a new Oriental legend." Like the sharp pitchman he was, Thomas confessed to an early skepticism—Lawrence, he was sure, "was the product of Western imagination overheated by exuberant contact with the East."

"I want you to meet Colonel Lawrence, the Uncrowned King of Arabia," lilts Ronald Storrs, and a bantam in royal Arabian robes, with azure eyes a moment ago deep in a book on archaeology, shyly shakes hands with Lowell Thomas. Step right up for the magic carpet ride.

Gone to Palestine to dress Allenby in crusader's armor, Thomas chanced instead upon an image whose potency would outlast the call of those Chicago financiers. In March 1919, five months after the Armistice, Lawrence was advising the British delegation at the Paris Peace Conference; but in New York his legend was slaying the thousand-headed dragon convened in the dark of a dream palace. First it was the Century Theatre. Sellout crowds took the show to Madison Square Garden. The voice of Lowell Thomas and the film and lantern slides, as they were called in those days, of Harry A. Chase.

The show shipped to London. Six months at Covent Garden. In London Thomas met Lawrence again—a different Lawrence this time, dressed like any other man, and carrying two books under his arm—a collection of Persian poems and W.N.P. Barbellion's *Journal of a Disappointed Man*.

Interesting perhaps that Lawrence should have been reading it; but then a lot of other people were too. W.N.P. Barbellion was the pseudonym of

Bruce Cummings, born in 1889, dead the last day of 1917; his *Journal*, covering the last fourteen years of his life, became a bestseller in 1919. The hapless Barbellion, this striving young naturalist with the paired passions of insects and introspection, never served in the war—bad heart—but left the trace, as H. G. Wells avowed, “of the tragedy of his hopes and of the dark, unforeseen, unforeseeable, and inexplicable fate that has overtaken him.” Raging, lucid, shamelessly honest, the *Journal* read like a trench diary. Never mind that its author in a moment of forgetfulness had scribbled that he knew more about lice than any man alive—his readers forgave him that. Cut by “the keen edge of untimely fate” (Wells again), he died, if factually in London, by analogy at Ypres, Vimy Ridge, the Somme, Passchendaele or any other calvary of France and Flanders. In his unwitting way Barbellion bequeathed one of the earliest Great War books, years ahead of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden and the other writer-soldiers who really knew their lice. The Disappointed Man did his bit in the postwar coming to terms.

Lawrence, Lowell Thomas’ “modern Arabian knight,” was part of the victory celebration—but what a beggar’s celebration it was. The guerilla war in which Lawrence had taken part seemed the sort of victory the war of the Continent was supposed to have been—nimble, smashing, a lark. The sand and camels and robes were exotic but the exoticism was weaker than the nostalgia—nostalgia for the world of the early Kipling, Rider Haggard, George Alfred Henty (*With Clive in India*), a world of juvenile daring where the romance was in the victory, the ease of it all, and the hero felled savages by the handful. A world Lawrence represented, Lawrence the shy scholar—not a warrior at heart, mind you, just a redblooded fairhaired lucky lad—terror of the Turks, lightning raider, dynamiter of trains. In Lawrence the rollicking schoolboy in every Disappointed Man still lived—an anachronism, but in 1919 a comforting one.

I was twenty-seven and living in Manhattan, and for two weeks numbered among the unlucky. Our duty as citizens? The drafting of minds into the service of justice? Jury duty was neither, but a punishment for crimes too vague to warrant our standing trial. We sat out the leaden hours and had our sensibilities offended. A fellow detainee named Crockett would deliver himself of complaints—“Oh for God’s sake,” “Kafka, anyone?”—so tonelessly that his voice seemed to come from no-

where, and neither the judges nor the marshals could pin it down. It was a trick he'd learned in the merchant marine and he used it to expert effect. It changed nothing, but one well-placed grouse said more than a hundred sighs.

Crockett and I were slated to serve as jurors in criminal court but we never got past selection. Every time it came to light that I'd studied philosophy in Paris and he'd spent a life at sea or writing plays ("What sort of plays, Mr. Crockett?" "Avant-garde, you wouldn't have heard of them.") the prosecutors saw Molotov cocktails in our eyes and back we'd go to the waiting room, where we'd station ourselves by a window, eight floors up, and talk on and off all day.

He had squiggly veins at his temples and wore a tired old pair of British Burma shorts (it was July, and the buildings reminded me of the patterned sugar cones, sticky with melted ice cream, in trash baskets all over the city). He said he'd volunteered with the Haganah, fighting in the Negev in 1948, hence the red rosette that puckered at his lapel. Knew his Conrad and Céline and Wolfe. Told me he'd read *Look Homeward, Angel* the first time as a boy in Roanoke, Virginia, sitting up one night at the kitchen table, reading into the dawn. "And they say you outgrow him but you don't, you don't." Talked about Mother Alcohol, an unfinished history. Talked about his wife, who had died that year—a dancer, like Céline's ladies, he said, and quite lovely, from her pictures.

He was moving out to a farm in Minnesota, taking one suitcase with him, getting rid of everything else he owned, and he invited me to come pillage his books. They stood before a sealed fireplace in a brownstone about to suffer renovation—no bookcase, nor even bricks and boards to prop them up, but tier upon tier, a rickety ziggurat of out-of-print things. When I asked Crockett for his forthcoming address, he hedged. Ten days later and his phone had been disconnected.

Was it he or was it his wife who put ballpoint pen to page and underlined in vintage editions? But the eyesores really are few, and I open a book and am told that I have it thanks to Crockett. One in his collection was a thirties reprint of *Travels in Arabia Deserta* by Charles Doughty, with T. E. Lawrence's 1921 introduction.

It must have been that introduction, indexed under Lawrence in the same card catalog where I'd delved for Robert Graves, that first got me to

read *Arabia Deserta*, or to try to read it — when I was thirteen or fourteen. Just what year it was doesn't come back to me as clearly as what it was like to have the book in my hands. The "date due" leaf pasted inside the back cover was sparsely stamped; it was a book as unfrequented as the land it laid at the doorstep of my imagination. A wilderness of words, vast and impenetrable, though not without beauty. Sometimes the words became windows, and in the middle of a page, around the corner of a page, in the tail of a paragraph wriggling down to a point, I'd see things — tall camels stalking in the lake of a mirage, or a clear night over cold volcanoes, dripping with meteors. Picture a book with color plates of knights with broadswords and tree nymphs as finespun as candle smoke, in front of a child who could barely read.

"The book is not milk for babes," Doughty said himself. He was a squire's son from Suffolk who ventured alone into northwest Arabia in the eighteen-seventies and published *Arabia Deserta* in 1888; as a writer he was a revivalist; nothing in English prose or poetry past the sixteenth century was to his taste, and he mined the old ores when he sat to write. "No matins here of birds; not a rock partridge-cock, calling with blithesome chuckle over the extreme waterless desolation. Grave is that giddy heat upon the crown of the head; a subtle crepitation it seems, in the glassiness of this sun-stricken nature. . ."

I could read *Arabia Deserta* now with a riper brain and a better ear but my eyes hadn't changed. The pages still shimmered with windows. "Mountains looming like dry bones through the thin air, stand far around about us: the savage flank of Ybba Moghrair, the high spire and ruinous stacks of el-Jebal, Chebad, the coast of Helwan!" I looked for those bones of mountains on Doughty's map, an alphabet soup of place names and tribal ranges and geological commentary, with a gray froth of lava fields.

When the ashes of Charles Montagu Doughty were buried at Golder's Green, on a properly somber day of January 1926, the press missed a story in the RAF enlisted man who came and went, not on his usual Brough motorcycle, a beast twice his size, but discreetly by train. A good reporter ought to have guessed that the elusive Lawrence of Arabia would be there at Golder's Green to bid Doughty farewell.

That elusiveness had seemed thematic already in 1919. To Lowell Thomas, looking for him in London, Lawrence "had apparently vanished

into the blue just as he used to do in the desert." It was Lawrence, living under an assumed name in an attic in Westminster, who contacted Thomas. The mystery man had not returned to Arabia; he was nearer than that; he was living in our midst.

He lived too much in our midst for us not to wonder whether the mystery he personified might actually be our own. Perhaps he would have truly vanished by settling in a country cottage or putting himself in mothballs in academe. Winston Churchill promised him a future in diplomacy, but by 1922 Lawrence had chosen a public life of another kind as a grease monkey in the RAF. Anonymity it may have been, at least before the reporters found him out behind the aliases, Ross and Shaw. Reclusion it was not—not in a barrack with twenty other men.

Lowell Thomas had called him "one of the most romantic and picturesque figures of all time," and that was sheer Lowell Thomas double-barreled hype; but others would come along to write the name in letters almost as big. Lawrence was "a symbol of the power of chance over human affairs, and of the constant eruption into history of the uncontrollable force of a demonic will exerting itself to the limit of endurance," historian Elie Kedourie wrote in 1956. Lawrence was "not merely an exceptional figure, but a representative man of our century . . . a prince of our disorder," wrote Irving Howe in 1963.

Lawrence himself suppressed the publication of his war memoir *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, mordantly subtitled *A Triumph*. In 1925, after the latest of his Brough motorcycles flung him to his death on a Dorset lane, the awaited book was brought out, all 280,000 words of it, and the hauntedness and nakedness of revelation gave the Irving Howes and Elie Kedouries their man.

The lionizing had its countercurrent from the beginning. As far back as the summer of 1917, when a bedraggled Lawrence had appeared at British headquarters to report the capture of Aqaba ("At Cairo my sandalled feet slip-slapped up the quiet Savoy corridors . . ."), the Arab dress had offended. And who should try to defrock him but one of his own generation, an old soldier of the Western Front, Richard Aldington. *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry* (1955) seemed a throwback to the kind of war in which Aldington had fought in his youth; as if Lawrence's life, from illegitimate birth to Dorset lane, were one long invitation to a siege. First of all Lawrence should never have been born. And then he was a



menace on the roads. “*Requiescat*,” Aldington had written as his last line, his parting shot, but rest was one thing Lawrence would not do. He rose again in 1956 in Colin Wilson’s catchy *The Outsider*. And again in Terence Rattigan’s play *Ross*. A couple thousand Huwayyat tribesman gathered at Rumm for David Lean’s cameras. A boy saw it in *Life* magazine and knew he was on to something.

The latest road maps still show Doughty’s journey line down from Damascus. He took the Darb el-Haj, the pilgrim way, tagging along on a march of Meccan pilgrims. The pilgrim way has long since been macadamized. In Jordan it’s Route 15, and it runs south from the outskirts of Amman through Qatrana and Ma’an and a place called Batn el Ghrol, or the Belly of the Ghrol.

In the soft lobby of an Amman hotel late in July 1982, as I sat with Crockett’s copy of *Arabia Deserta* open on my lap, I heard a voice from the armchair next to me ask what I was reading. A picture of the ghrol, sketched for Doughty by a shepherd, had caught my neighbor’s eye. I passed the book to him; he plucked his glasses from the vest pocket of his suit and frowned at a creature with wings like a chicken’s, one hoof, an ostrich foot and a long beak for eating Beduin children.

“Why on earth are you reading this?” He flipped to the title page but kept a thumb on the ghrol. Until a moment ago he’d been speaking behind a screen of Arabic to the man sitting across from him.

“It’s an old book,” I said.

“Old or new, this is nonsense.”

I wanted to tell him I knew it was nonsense, that children around the world had their bugbears and hobgoblins and the ghrol was just a local species, but I didn’t think anything I said would save me.

“Enjoy your book!” And he handed it back to me.

The lobby population ebbed and flowed while on a console television under a photograph of a very young King Hussein, a band of even younger California surfers were living entangled lives. It was love among the waves, James Dean at the seashore, adolescence at its most adverse. American movies are big on Jordanian television—big and bold and good for one’s English. Around me sat men with coffee cups and worry beads. Three Saudi blades, long and svelte in their perfect white dishdashes, grinned and chatted. Their kuffiyehs were their plumage, the red weave

stacked like sundaes, the black ropes tempting gravity, they were cocked so far to the side. Another young man in a red shirt was courting a girl in jeans and white spike heels.

At ten all attention centered on the evening news—West Beirut under an Israeli siege. Even the lovers seemed to forget each other as they held hands and stared. If your eyes were quick enough you could actually see the shells dropping in the streets. A lens pounced hungrily on a bloom of smoke. The spears of one great black burst were taller than the high rise in front of it. A seaside Ferris wheel slept through the fury. There was night footage—flares smearing pink on videotape. A halo winked and over my shoulder I heard a sharp intake of breath.

I rented a little Renault and drove south on Route 15. In Jebel Sherra, the name for the Jordanian highlands south of the Dead Sea, the old Nabatean god Dushara still whispers.

He seems to have been a cousin of Dionysus. Dushara's effigies show him with a chaplet of grape vines. In the Dushara cult, said one ancient source, blood was sprinkled on a black stone. The Black Stone in the Kaaba in Mecca, the focal point of Islam, may have been an heirloom from the Nabateans. In the early seventh century Mohammed stripped the Kaaba of the idols of Allath, al-Uzza and Manot, the goddess of chance. Those were Nabatean deities.

The religion of the Nabateans cast its shadow on early Christianity as well. Christianized Arabs of the fourth century chanted hymns to al-Uzza, virgin mother of the only begotten Dushara. Their contemporary Saint Epiphanius branded it heresy.

In the year 106 the Romans laid successful siege to Petra, the Nabatean capital city in the heart of Jebel Sherra. The kingdom had come and gone in three centuries. At one time or another it had reached across southern Palestine to Gaza and down into Arabia as far as Wejh on the Red Sea. Doughty, as he mapped the range of the Huwayyat nation of Beduin and observed how closely it corresponded to the confines of the vanished Nabatean kingdom, wondered if there were Nabatean blood in the veins of the Huwayyat. To this day some of them say there is.

The chalk heads of Jebel Sherra stand over valleys soft with willows and oaks and juniper. The mountainsides show their white ribs and cool

cypresses gather around the springs. Where the trees begin to thin, the grasses fur the rolling country as far south as Ras en Naqb, a windswept heath. And then at the thirtieth parallel, a hundred and thirty miles south of Amman, seventy south of the Dead Sea, the land breaks and tumbles to a sandy plain.

Fifty miles farther south lies the border of Saudi Arabia, but the border's a recent invention, negotiated in the decade following the First World War, and it reflects the stroke of a pencil more than it respects the natural boundaries. In classical Arab geography the land's end of Jebel Sherra marked the southernmost point of Syria, es-Shem, a region quite a bit larger than the Syria of today; and the Arabs of the Arabian peninsula rhapsodized old Syria for its countrysides like the Sherran highlands, spangled with greenery, running over with brooks.

Past Jebel Sherra, heading south, Arabia was said to begin—arising with the Hissma sandstones, which serrate the horizon for another hundred and fifty miles to the great lava fields of the peninsular northwest.

The Saudi truck road to Medina travels in the Hissma's eastern shadow, along the shore of the deep inner desert. There used to be rails, the Hejaz Railway of the latter days of the Ottoman Empire, and the rails followed the footsteps of a thousand years of pilgrims to the holy cities. Before that pathway was the pilgrim way, it had been one of the great trade routes of the ancient world, the traditional road of the gold and frankincense caravans that crept up the subcontinent from the never-never land of Yemen.

To the west of the Hissma trend the lowlands by the Red Sea, whose central trench belongs to that Great Rift that crackles up from Mozambique. The Great Rift also indents the fingerlike Gulf of Aqaba and the Dead Sea, sunken under a gunmetal salt haze; parallel to the Rift, ninety miles south of the Dead Sea, a fault line splits the Hissma sandstones and thrusts them up on their granite seats. The fault line is Wadi Rumm, and it gives Jordan its highest elevation in Jebel Rumm, the western rock, with its blunt peak at a little less than six thousand feet above sea level or more than two thousand above the desert floor.

I came down off Jebel Sherra on Route 52, which links Ma'an to Aqaba and is met in the highlands by the road from Petra. For some miles the swells had been getting drier, their grasses browned by a close sun. The

road sliced into the gradient and released a smell of chalk; my eardrums felt the change of altitude. The landscape unfolded. I steered onto the shoulder and stepped out to have a look.

Down and away from the spurs of Sherra spread a broken crust of country marbled with gullies and shading a dark taupe in the tired afternoon. I could see days of boyish ramblings there though it was all upstaged by the distant Hissma and its promise of Rumm. Looking south was like looking out over a sea enshrouded in mist, only instead of the sea steaming as mist it was Arabian dust lifted by the wind, making the Hissma smoke. The southern quarter of the sky paled to white and the sandstones were phantoms.

The wind beating upward rattled my shirt. On the next ledge the big black caterpillar of a Beduin tent lay with its back to the roadside, it too drinking in the view.

So these people too (I was thinking) had eyes that could still thirst for scenery like this. Why else would they have perched here? Unless they sold tea. In Jebel Sherra I'd had glasses enough. "Come mister, sirrup shai? Shai three hundred fils, is not dear." You were shown to a straw mat or a blanket—I never saw a carpet in a poor Beduin tent—and you settled down to sip the life. It was brewed from a fistful of tea leaves and yet it had a little of everything around you, the goat's hair the tent was made of, the babble of Arabic, the fire and the feathers of ashes, the impassive stones, the pastoral, the air itself, dry as starched linen; and it was amber and strong and aromatic in a shot glass, with an oriental dose of sugar. The Beduin knew how to give you what you wanted. But it was their life and their tea was its distillate, and you lightened your pocket as you left. You did it with discretion. With a sort of sleight of hand, erasing your motions as best you could, you gave the coins to the lady of the house, never to the man.

Used to be a time when travelers were waylaid and squeezed. You crossed the tribal range, you paid your tribal dues. All that came to an end some fifty years ago. I never had the least misgivings about being alone with people in the empty hills. But it had struck me (surely because I wanted to see it that way) that when they took me into their tents to sirrup shai they were commemorating their wilder ways.

Here now on the windy brink a woman in black came out of the tent and paced along the ledge; noticed me, returned my wave and vanished.

Yasin and I drove on with the sun in our eyes.

Yasin al-Swahhayin was a thin beetle of a man who ran a general store in Petra and smoked Gold Stars. He'd smoked one in the shade of the car while I gaped at the Hissma. The hairs of his tense moustache were tiny quills. He coiffed his white kuffiyeh in an upsweep in the summer heat, all three tails of it lapped over the top of his head, and it dwarfed him; the first time I saw him I thought of Lewis Carroll's (or John Tenniel's) mad Duchess of Wonderland with her big shoe of a face and her monstrous three-cornered hat. But Yasin had a small face, beautiful skin and beautiful manners, and I only saw him irrational once. On another day we were cruising on an asphalt beeline across the desert, he was driving, and he hit eighty to pass a Mercedes taxi. There was a woman at the wheel. "When I see a woman drive," he said, "I become veddy angry."

"Slowly slowly slowly," he soothed as the turnoff for Rumm rushed up on our left. I braked and veered. The fourteen-year-old at the Criterion was sitting on the edge of his seat.

I'd read that the Hissma was once the floor of a Cretaceous sea; to my eyes it was all reefs waiting naked for the tide to swallow them up again. Another turnoff, this one to the right, and the sandstones jumped to their feet and mustered in a double file as symmetrical as a Rorschach card. Two grand massifs frowned at each other down a corridor of sand, the long coasting straightaway of Rumm—the undercliffs of Jebel Rumm, Mount Rumm in shadow hard by the right of the broken asphalt road, and Oum Ayeshareen, Mother Ayeshareen baring her fangs at the setting sun. The corridor was peppered with rimth bushes. At the thimble fort of the border patrol perhaps halfway down the valley the road stopped and the great beach rolled on. A gathering of Beduin tents made a sleepy village.

Flies scribbled over the quiet. A pair of bored soldiers sat on a bench talking. Their low voices reached me as if whispering in my ear. What a depth of emptiness wedged between Rumm and Ayeshareen. Past Ayeshareen a thunderhead swelled over the bay of rimth—Ghazali Mountain.

Ghazali was cleft down the middle and the gloom trapped there could almost have twitched with lightning. There were carvings inside, "of a deep antiquity," Yasin said and rustled up a Beduin with a four-wheel to ferry us out to see them. And so we went, but not without company. A couple of mini-buses pulled up at the fort and spilled melodious Italian

vacationers and an East German schoolteacher and her charges, and at a half-dollar a head they added up nicely for two swift Beduin cousins with pickup trucks. The Italians wore cunning little shorts and gold over their tans and in the cool cleft of Ghazali they sounded like jungle birds. The East German students were all boys. When they started climbing the rocks they got a sharp restraining bark from their den mother—fairly young, dowdy and great friend of the Arabs, who twinkled sceptically. Just above our heads, as inscrutable as stars, ibex, footprints and archaic men were scratched into the skin of the cleft. The boys whipped out their flash cubes. Ghazali got its lightning.

For the bouncy ride back I wound up sitting thigh-to-thigh with the East German lady. I said the erosion patterns on the wall of Ayeshareen reminded me of hieroglyphics. "It would be interesting if they were," she sniffed, "but of course they're not."

My innocence must have endeared her somehow. She set to work organizing a sleepover at the Beduin village and it suddenly appeared I'd won a place in her troop. Yasin and I got to the car and were off.

"You did not like this woman," Yasin said over the wind.

"I couldn't stand another second of her. I thought she was pushy."

"Yes, yes, *pushy*."

"She was loud."

"Loud!" he laughed. "I am quite glad at you for not liking her." And shook my hand.

"Her voice! It was a honk. Like a goose."

"A goose?"

"It's a sort of bird," I ventured, and did my best as we left the sandstones soaking up what was left of the light and the rimth shading into dandelions. My shoes were dusted with cinnamon.

It was a dusty time of year and not all the dust was so tasty.