

# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## DOUGHTY'S "TRAVELS IN ARABIA DESERTA"

By C. E. Andrews

THIS is the greatest of all travel books. It is written by a brave spirit with the romantic heart of an Elizabethan voyager and the keen observation of a trained modern mind. These two bulky volumes give the story of his wanderings in Northern Arabia among the lawless tribesfolk of the illimitable empty wastes. The book, originally published in a very limited edition in 1888, has taken its place not only as the chief source of information on the Arabian nomads and town dwellers, but also as a classic in modern literature.

The first few chapters tell the story of the author's joining the Damascus pilgrim caravan and journeying with it as far as Medain Salih, a water station in the long desert way to the holy cities of Medina and Mecca. Here he lived in the port under the doubtful protection of the sheik, visiting ancient monuments, copying inscriptions, and studying life for two months until the returning caravan passed northward. After accompanying it a part of the way he struck out across the desert with a Bedouin sheik and, passing from tribe to tribe, wandered for two years in the almost unknown region of the Negd and finally down into the Hejaz.

A most striking impression that the book leaves is of the personality of the author. He is a sympathetic observer and yet extremely critical. He has an eye alert for every kind of fact

and the imagination of a poet who can dream. We see him now making notes of the geology of a region, or of a dialectic pronunciation; now inquiring into the manner of tribal government or musing over a Nabatæan inscription, fingering some fragment of an old mummy cloth or pondering ancient ways of life; and now leading on some strange dim spirit to talk of the legends and wild beliefs current among men of the wildernesses. He has put all Arabia into his book and much of humanity besides. There is an impression of truth on every page. Of the persons in the story he says: "If the words (written all day from their mouths) were rehearsed to them in Arabic, there might everyone, whose life is remembered therein, hear, as it were, his proper voice; and many a rude bystander, smiting his thigh, should bear witness and cry, '*Åy, Wellah*, the sooth indeed!'"

And then the courage of the man undertaking such a journey! A true adventurer led only by the desire to know what new men and manners lie always beyond the next horizon! He was in constant peril in this land where every other man may be a robber and where a furious fanaticism makes a virtue of slaying a Nazarene. "There wanted but some betraying voice from our company, some foolish woman's crying 'Out upon this kafir!' and my life might be ended by a rash shot." His presence among them and his interest in them were a perpetual puzzle to the nomads. Was he come to spy out the land or was he a seeker of hidden treasure? "Though thou shouldst know, O Kalil, the name of all our

camping grounds and of every *jebel*, what were all this worth when thou art at home, in a far country? If thou be'st no spy, how can the Arab think thee a man of understanding?" Other perils, no less great, were the hunger and the hardships of the rainless barren region of his travels, with frequent reminders of mortality in the sad sights of the way. "As for me who write, I pray that nothing be looked for in this book but the seeing of an hungry man and the telling of a most weary man; for the rest the sun made me an Arab, but never warped me to orientalism."

No other writer has so completely given us the Arab character—its intense religiosity and mad fanaticism even among tribesmen so ignorant that they do not know the prescribed prayers, the supine fatalism, the constant suspicion of desert dwellers, the thievery, the blasphemy, the sense of humor and of courtesy, and the principles of hospitality. All these qualities are exemplified in fascinating narratives and scenes in the black tents of the nomads and the homes of oasis dwellers. And there are stories of parricides and feuds and the secret miseries of wild princes in the bloody solitudes of the Negd.

In these deserts thinly peopled by these tribesmen are the relics of many former civilizations: flints from the prehistoric age, dim vestiges of the fenced cities of Joshua, tombs of Himyaric kings, monuments of Nabataean times, and the rude rock scrawlings of ancient wayfarers. The Sem-

itic east is a land of sepulchres, which remain as vain monuments to man's desire to lead eternity captive. These glimpses of the past of Arabia seen in the book help one understand the thought of the Old Testament. And in the land and the life of these Semites today are constant reminders of the patriarchal past.

In writing of this ancient land one falls naturally into archaic ways of thought. The style of Doughty recalls the prose of the sixteenth century. His grammar and his phrases have an Elizabethan ring, further enriched with Chaucerian echoes and the fine cadences of old Sir Thomas Browne. The reader who loves to roll phrases on his tongue as he goes, will find these volumes a great joy. Let me end with a handful gleaned from a few pages: ". . . his visage much like a fiend dim with the leprosy of the soul and half fond"; ". . . Sometimes the soil is a flaggy pavement of sandstones, rippled in the strand of those old planetary seas"; ". . . sandstone droughty mountains full of eternal silence"; ". . . where the desolate soil is blown naked by the secular winds"; ". . . Friends, I answered, these are fables of a land far off, and old wives' malice of things unknown"; ". . . Here is a dead land, whence, if he die not, he shall bring home nothing but a perpetual weariness in his bones."

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Travels in Arabia Deserta. By Charles M. Doughty. Two volumes. Boni and Liv-  
eright.