

Alone in the Desert

(1932)

I will camp here, at Bir Messaha, for three days, 500 km away from the closest human habitation.

As far as the eye can see, a yellowish grey infinite desert all around. Above me the sky is sizzling white, seemingly impenetrable, who knows when was it last invaded by the last tattered cloud.

Close beside me a few rocks jut from the sand, flat stones lie on the surface, but all these fade into the sizzling uniformity of the mirage even from a small distance.

My whole world consists of the green tent, and 200 feet away the high wooden scaffolding of the well and an adjacent small shed. Scorpions live at the shed, they must have been brought here with the wooden planks, so my tent was pitched at a distance.

Bir Messaha, the “Surveyor’s Well”, lies 120 kms to the southwest of the little Terfawi oasis, only 30 kms to the north of the Egyptian – Sudanese boundary.

The well was dug by the Egyptian Government in 1927, to test the artesian water theory of Dr. Ball. There are subterranean streams everywhere below the surface of the Libyan Desert, it’s just a matter of digging deep enough to find water at all points of the Eastern Sahara.

Dr. Ball, comparing the altitude of the known oases above sea level, has drawn a map of the “permanent water levels”. Oases are only found where this level meets the surface. Where the altitude of the country is above this level, exactly the difference needs to be dug to find water.

According to the measurements, at this point of the infinite sand plain the water level lay 70 meters below the surface. The long time desert explorer, Beadnell came here with his Ford cars five years ago. Using his surveying tools, he searched the area for a depression, which is impossible to detect with a naked eye in the endless plain, and started his work at a point where only a shallow layer of sand covered the nubian sandstone bedrock below. With the help of a handful of natives, using only the most primitive tools and plenty of explosives, they opened the well shaft in the rock. In the two square meter floor of the shaft only one person could work at a time. Day by day they carved the hole in the rock, and lifted the debris after explosions in a bucket. The cars supplied the small party with water and food from Kharga, and the indefatigable Beadnell found plenty of time during this 12 month long monotonous task to survey and map the surrounding untraversed desert in all directions.

Exactly on Christmas eve – at a depth of 65 meters – water was finally found. It was sweet and plentiful, exactly as Dr Ball predicted.

The well mouth was covered with a wooden rim and a tinplate lid, so the sandstorms could pass over it. The wooden scaffold of the rope pulley towers above it, and the workers have built a small shed from the remaining planks and wooden petrol crates to cover the cog-wheeled pulley drum. The steel rope passes through a small window between the drum and the pulley. One side of a 60 liter steel water tank was cut open, and fixed to the end of the rope in lieu of a bucket.

This completed Bir Messaha, and 12 months after the first human word was spoken, the age-old silence was restored. The only change was a different tone in the hum of the northern wind as it passed through the logs of the well scaffold.

I'm camping here totally alone, awaiting the return of my friends.

We have come from Kharga with four Ford vehicles, to place the first petrol dump for my aircraft expedition. The first part of our supplies was carried by a truck, two low chassis box cars, and an open four seater. We came on compass course, in a day and a half. On the eve of our arrival we could not find the well, and pitched camp about 15 kilometers to the east. The next day we have traversed large circles around the camp with the touring car, until we glimpsed the long plank that was set upright by Beadnell atop a dune to show direction. Our guide, the inspector of the Desert Survey, P.A. Clayton was here a year ago, but even he found it difficult to locate the well in this immeasurable emptiness.

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Our task completed, our car column may return to Kharga, however one of us must remain here to give smoke and mirror signals to the approaching aeroplane.

A few days ago I have flown my little "Havilland" plane from Cairo to Kharga. According to our agreement the next stage – from Kharga to Bir Messaha – will be flown by my friends Sir Robert Clayton East and Major H.G. Penderel. It was a sudden thought to volunteer to be the one to be left behind at Bir Messaha, and the morning after our arrival I was listening to the engine hum of the departing vehicles, until the silence of the desert sank on my solitary encampment.

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Alvinsky at Bir Messaha

Alone in the desert!

I have accepted this task without any forethought, yielding to a momentary urge. What new feelings will I experience, if once – even though for a short time – I become a voluntary captive of the desert?

When the murmur of the cars faded, I returned to the well. Our native drivers replaced the lid of the well. A thought suddenly struck me: will I be able to lift the lid,

and work the pulley by myself? They left me without a drop of water, presuming I will pull it from the well!...

The sudden panic glues me to the fresh tire tracks clearly visible in the sand, urging to run after them: stop, come back !...

Then I slowly lift the lid, inch by inch, checking my balance, not to fall headfirst into the well.

My next thought:

The big fantass (steel tank) will be too heavy to be lifted by one person. If a bucket reaches the water and fills, will I be able to lift it?

I have asked these questions to myself aloud, and my voice sounded no different then before. At a safe distance from the yawning opening, using the prepared tools, I disjoined the tank from the steel cable. Then I cut open the lid of one of the several empty petrol tins lying around, searched for a suitable piece of wood among the many objects littering the shed - careful, scorpions – and nailed it to the tin as a handle. Now I could attempt to pull water with it.

If I turn the locking lever on the pulley drum, the heavy steel cable runs down pulled by its own weight. Could I catch and hold it, if it's end runs off the drum?

Raising is a lengthy task, requiring much strength. My bucket finally appears above the rim of the well, gently swinging at the end of the rope. Is there any water in it? I cannot see any dripping, what happens if it did not reach the water level?...

I must lock the lever, and walk to the well. Carefully I lean out to catch the cable. The bucket is full, it's outside dried while raising it. I place a plank over the well, go back to the shed, and lower the bucket onto the plank. The water is clear and cool, and now I realise I'm not even thirsty. I raise another two tinful, giving me enough water for five days. Now I can experiment with the big fantass.

In my tent I filled a Shell tin with water, and placed it atop an upright petrol crate. I selected a thin rubber tube from among the spare parts carried in case a petrol tube ruptures, sucked on its end, and now I only have to lower it to have running water shower in the desert!

I built a windbreak from the crates holding our spares and supplies on the northern side of my tent. I placed the heavier crates higher, with the food readily accessible. What did our cook, Hassan bring with the first transport? Candles for the samandan (storm lamp), boxes of matches, toilet paper, washing soap ... hm, ... maybe here, ... spirit and petroleum in sealed tins for the primus stove, vinegar, ... cooking oil, ... - these chaps left so damn quickly I didn't even have time to think! ... - At last some potatoes – some food at least! – and some packs of macaroni. More, ... salt, pepper – I'll kill this Hassan – Elhamdulillah, praised be Allah, finally I've found some tins, ... Oxford sausage, bully beef, Heinz beans, peppered sausage ... that's all right now!

How does this primus work? Yes, I remember ... first the petroleum in the tank, then the spirit in the ring. Do I twist the screw forward or reverse, ... and how much air needs to be pumped to avoid the whole thing blowing up? It's very convenient to let the tea water out through the rubber tube...

I'm no longer alone.

Outside at the well something moved. Yes, they sit on the scaffolding of the well: two large grey desert hawks. The male is slightly smaller, has lighter plumage. Probably they came from Bir Terfawi, or perhaps from the El Sheb well? Now I notice that they

must be frequent visitors, the logs are white from their droppings. How do they make a living here? Or perhaps they come for the water ... to smell it?

I filled my washbasin with water, placed a few slices of sausage into it, and placed it invitingly by the well. The hawks reluctantly took to the air, and landed only a hundred feet away. Now they walk about suspiciously in the sand...

My diary speaks of the preparations for this expedition. How did it all start? The plan was all worked out a year ago. It was then decided to use cars as a roving base, and an aeroplane for reconnaissance.

I have departed with the "Moth" from London to Egypt to join the British motor expedition we have agreed to cooperate with. I have been caught by a storm over Syria – the struggle lasted 12 minutes – and my small aeroplane was shattered near the ruins of Antioch. The cars left without me for Sudan, and I had to send the aeroplane back to England for rebuilding.

It was then that I met Robert. We spoke of the desert, or rather I talked, and have possibly mentioned Zarzura – only three months ago – and now the "Moth" is sitting in Kharga with folded wings, laden with sandbags, while Robert is on his way to fetch it, and fly it here to Bir Messaha.

The falcons have actually drunk from my basin, or at least put their heads into it. Perhaps they only picked the meat slices? They are sitting again on the scaffolding, blinking in the afternoon sun. I'm looking at them with binoculars, they seem to be ill at ease, unprepared to meet a human here – even though they pretend not to take much notice of me. Now the female flaps her wings, and the male obediently follows her. Quick with the compass! They fly off at low altitude, at 41 degrees, straight on course for Terfawi, some 120 kilometers away. They can easily reach it in two hours, pity they haven't stayed.

Raising the big steel tank is much more difficult than I expected. The easiest is to turn the lock after each turn of the cable, and work on my diary for awhile.

Here in the shed the heat is much more tolerable than in the tent. I fixed its roof, and nailed the planks of empty petrol cases over gaps where the merciless sunrays found their way in. Beadnell left everything here at hand. Broken tools, several used tires, a few petrol cases with tins, - a half dozen are still full, a welcome addition to our supplies. Over there a pile of dust covered booklets "The Geographical Journal", - this will help kill the time – a few bottles, - no scorpions among them? Packs of nails, two buckets, and a white walking stick. Wait, I'll keep that, it came here with the Kufra refugees last year. Clayton stumbled on them not far, hopelessly lost.

Those hapless people never realised that they are close to a well! Clayton first brought them here, then to Kharga...

Our cook, Hassan - who was with Clayton last year – recognised the stick. It belonged to Emir Saleh el Atewis, whose daughter died here at the Messaha well.

In Clayton's office in Cairo I saw the framed Royal Decree giving him the highest praise for his life saving work. Then again, what is this recognition compared to the thought of finding lost people here in the land of sand and stone, and guiding them to safety?

I have to interrupt my diary, it's becoming too dark to write. Now, after sunset, the desert is even more desolate than at daytime. Nothing more, but this tabletop flat yellowish grey sand plain, in the mystic twilight of the western sky.

Yet there is a kind of melancholic beauty in this endless monotony, which can be felt inside, but cannot be described.

I start to cook my dinner, potato soup with tinned meat. The primus stove works perfectly, its low murmur a welcome change after the hours of silence.

Then I sit in front of my tent for a long time, gazing at the magnificent star filled sky of the desert night.

A loud bang startles me from my thoughts, - strange, how the break in the silence scared me, – the sound came from the desert. Probably an empty petrol tin, than shrank with the night cooling; tomorrow morning I'll find this peace-breaker and fill it with sand.

Another sound? A faint noise here in my tent, not a scorpion, is it? No, a jerboa, I'm not alone after all. The cute little animal sniffs around, always moving in the shadow, carefully avoiding the light circle of my storm lamp. It's a little bigger than our field mouse, yellowish grey, with a dark stripe along its back. Its bare tail is much longer than its body, and its long kangaroo like hind legs are almost white. If I move, it jumps up with a comic gesture, without changing location. Its big, round ears and black bead like eyes give a kind, curious look to the little animal.

Now it's beside the food supplies, - its struggling – if only a potato could be rolled away so easily.

How do these animals survive? There have to be some insects in the desert feeding the scorpions, the rare skink lizards, jerboas and snakes. These animals apparently never drink, otherwise it would be impossible to find them in the vegetation- and waterless sand plains. Probably each species is in constant struggle with its prey and predators, and the small ones all dread their common enemy, the desert hawks.

I placed a date in the light circle, and my shy visitor approaches with the utmost care. The sweet scent has suppressed its inherent fear, and now it hops out of the tent, the date secure between its chin and front paws, possibly to a crevice among the rocks, perhaps to its young surprising them with the unknown delicacy.

I just wanted to turn the light off, when my little friend reappears, apparently asking for more. The little jerboa took another three dates, then returned no more.

I have to close the entrance of the tent, because the moonlight creates almost daylight like brightness in the desert.

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I pull up the big tank twice a day from the well, early in the morning and before sunset, when the heat is more bearable.

In the meantime I have tidied the area around Bir Messaha. I carried the scattered petrol tins to one place. Those, which are from the time of well digging, are fogged from the constant sandblast, the shiny ones are left from last year's Clayton expedition. None have any rust stain. Some have been rolled away for several kilometers by the wind, this means long walks for me, taken at night, as I cannot think of anything more sensible to do in the scorching daylight hours than to sleep in the shed by the well.

It's a strange feeling to walk in the almost daylight like moonlight for hours across the sandy desert, following the tracks of a petrol tin. Some have left a clear regular trail as the wind rolled it, as if a giant caterpillar has crawled across the sand. I spot most

of them in the evening, when the horizon seems to rise, from the top of the shed with binoculars, only having to note their direction with the compass.

With the unusable cans I have marked the four corners of the airfield, placing ten of them in a right angle in each corner, ten feet apart.

The usable cans I stacked in order beside the shed and covered them with planks. I also collected the pieces of wood lying about, so the wind cannot scatter them. Who knows when will someone in need be glad for this pile of firewood?

During my tidying work here and there I have found some rags, these I collected in a ruptured petrol tin, so I could give smoke signals on the arrival of the aeroplane. Somewhere a brightly embroidered headscarf stuck out of the sand, delicate Bedouin embroidery, but inside the scarf there were rusty bloodstains. This headscarf, as the walking stick, belonged to the Kufra refugees. I just remembered, somewhere here a girl is buried in the sand...

My jerboa is quite tame by the second evening, it takes the offered dates from my hand, never more than four. Now I also know which stone pile hides its den. Before I leave, I will leave a bunch of dates there.

The falcons have not returned.

Tonight I practiced with the theodolite, following twenty-four star passes. My results are quite inaccurate, perhaps because I know the coordinates of Bir Messaha by heart. Without a purpose and alone, one is overwhelmed by the calculations...

Yesterday, - or perhaps the day before yesterday? - I had to take the primus stove apart and clean it. I was preparing risotto, and the rice did not soften.

It's a strange life, during daytime I sleep, read or write my diary, during the night I wander about in the moonlight. I have nothing on except my shoes, the white walking stick, and a couple of clinking petrol tins in my hand on the return. The sunrises are magnificent in their crimson glory, as are the sunsets with the final emerald green flash of the last beam of light over the horizon.

Truly, the noble tranquility of the endless desert brings us closer to the mind of the Almighty governing our existence.

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What is it with me? I slept ... and just awoke on the camp bed in my green tent.

The sun is high ... soon it will be so hot that I cannot remain in the tent.

But this uncomfortable feeling? Possibly the heat ... I feel it on my arms and legs, like small pinpricks...perhaps heat rash?

No, this is something different. My whole body vibrates, resonates ... the tent canvas too ... what is it?

I asked myself aloud, and this released my ears from the grasp of the desert silence.

Engine sound! The "Moth" ... my companions!...

Quick, quick, the binoculars, the mirror, the matches! With giant leaps I'm beside my prepared smoke pot. Uncork the petrol bottle, oh, what the fuss, break off its neck and a flaming match into it ... like this ...

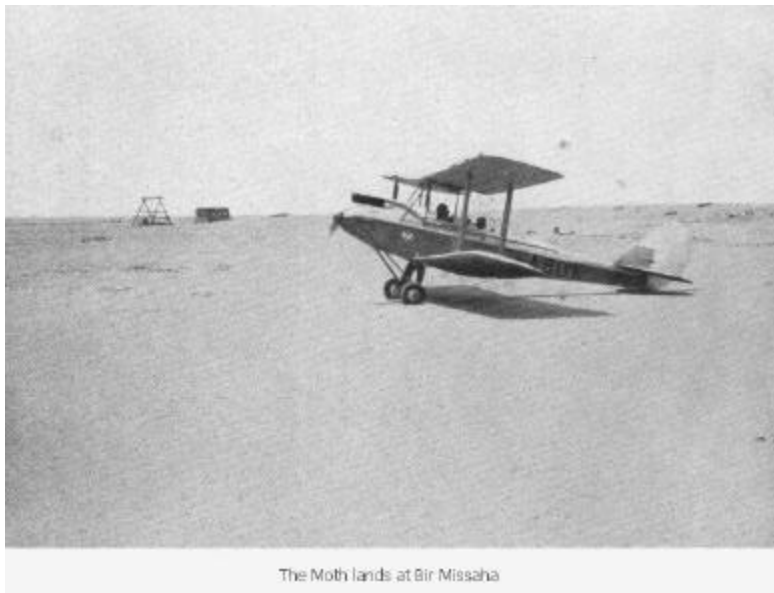
There ... very low the silver wings of the "moth" glitter over the blinding desert! It is coming towards me only a few meters above the ground. It is following the straight

tracks of the cars in the sand – where is the wind from ... there is hardly any wind at all, so signal them to land with the sun in their backs!

I catch the sunlight with the mirror in front of me, then slowly direct it towards the plane. In slow rhythm up and down, as we practiced it. The smoke signal? It's so white, it's hardly visible! Maybe my friends will not even see me, nor the tent, the shed, the landing circle ... will pass over, away from me?...

The mirror! I continuously give the signals ... finally they saw me, one of them waved ... now quickly the camera! For God's sake, he won't attempt a turn at so low altitude! The wing almost touches the sand, ... whew, this time he made it ...now he steers straight towards me ... I show the landing direction with outstretched arms, the engine becomes silent, the wheels touch the sand, one bounce, one more, - that's not nice, it was rough, very rough ... at last! I run towards the slowly rolling aeroplane.

My desert hermitdom has ended.



The Mothi lands at Bir Missaha