



SOME OF OUR SISTERS OF ARABIA

## With Our Sisters in Arabia\*

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IF I were an Arab woman I might not appear before a mixed audience with an unveiled face. In Arabia we missionaries do not adopt the Arab dress, because American clothes are more comfortable and better suited to our work and also because the Arabs are as interested in seeing foreign clothes as Americans are in seeing an Arab costume.

As I walk along the street, in Kuwait, in my American clothes, the people who do not know me call out:

"What is that? Is it a man or a woman?"

It seems incredible to them that a woman should walk in the street with her face uncovered.

One day an Arab neighbor came to me and said:

"Oh, I have the funniest thing to tell you! A woman came into our house and exclaimed, 'I've just seen the queerest man on the street. He was tall, and wore a long coat and a big hat, and he had a white face with no whiskers on it, not even a mustache!'"

"Oh," laughed my friend, "that wasn't a man; that was the doctor lady!"

Come with me for a little visit to Arabia—our adopted country. It will mean a sea voyage of six or seven weeks to reach our home in Kuwait. We must cross the Atlantic, skirt the southern coast of Europe, pass through the Suez Canal, through the Red Sea, along the southern coast of the Arabian peninsula to Bombay, and from there take another ship and steam northward up the Persian Gulf, along the eastern coast of Arabia, to Kuwait.

\* Mrs. Calverley delivered her address in Twilight Park, N. Y., at Northfield, Mass., and elsewhere, dressed in the costume of an Arab woman.—EDITOR.

As our steamer enters the harbor she is surrounded by sailing boats manned by noisy Arabs, chanting as they pull the ropes, or shouting in excitement as they unload the part of the cargo destined for Kuwait. After bargaining with a swarthy Arab we secure passage on one of the sail-boats, and seat ourselves on boxes, bales, and bags of rice, while the men of our party close in about the edge of the group, to shield the women as much as possible from the rudeness of staring, jesting Arab passengers. If the wind is favorable we may reach the shore in less than an hour.

As we approach the land we see a town, the color of sand, rising out of the desert. Hundreds and hundreds of sail-boats are beached on the seashore awaiting the coming of the season for pearl-diving, the main industry of the place. A cloudless azure sky is overhead and the deep blue sea is dotted with sails, but never a tree nor a patch of green!

We land by stepping from stone to stone through the shallow water until we reach dry ground. Then we make our way through narrow, dirty streets—foul with the stench of dead animals left in the road until they pass once more into the elements of which they were formed. We flatten ourselves against the wall to let a camel pass or a donkey with huge loads overhanging on either side. A mob of mischievous boys follows, taunting and jeering—singing in Arabic:

“Englezi, Englezi—Abu dhela,

Asa an yemut hel lala,”

“Englishman, Englishman, with a swelled head,

We hope that to-night’ll find him dead.”

Some of the little children run screaming with fright at the sight of so many strange visitors; but the women and children who have come to know the missionaries greet us with smiles and questions and showers of blessings on us and ours. Many of the children have swollen, streaming eyes—black with flies to which they have become so accustomed that they no longer attempt to brush them away.

As we pass along the streets we get little idea of the houses, for all we see are the blank outside walls with a barred wooden door here and there. Finally we reach a door in a wall, and bid you welcome, for that is our home.

#### Home Life of the Women

Arab houses are built around a central court, a square of ground exposed to the sky, and having all the windows and doors of the surrounding rooms open into it. There are no outside windows lest passers-by should catch a glimpse of the women of the household. Some of the highest class of women do not go outside the four walls of their house from the time they are brought as brides of twelve or thirteen years to the home of the husband, until they are carried out to the graveyard. The middle class have more freedom, but they must never go out unless their faces are entirely covered with the black veil and cloak—leaving just as little an opening in the cloak as is really necessary in order to see the road.

The wealthy houses have a second courtyard exclusively for the women, and which can be reached only by passing through the men’s court. A man will not trust even his father or

his brother to see the face of his wife. Even the poor Bedouin Arabs who spend their lives wandering over the desert from oasis to oasis have their tents divided by a curtain through the center so that the men may sit on one side and the women on the other.

At meal-time the dinner is brought to the heads of the house, and not until after these have ceased to eat do the women sit down to consume

in America? How do you endure the privations of life in Arabia?"

Can you realize that in Arabia I feel that my life is that of a queen compared with the lives of those around me?

I come from the dispensary, from the sight of so much unnecessary suffering, from the filth and the smells that make one sick to the heart, into our clean little courtyard, into our little living room, where,



A CHRISTMAS CROWD IN THE MISSIONARY'S COURTYARD, KUWEIT

One Arab woman will be noticed whose curiosity got the better of custom—she lifts the veil

what is left. A man would not condescend to eat with a woman. I knew an old man who loved his daughter dearly and used to call her to sit by his side while he ate, but she might not eat with him because he was a man and she a woman!

A man will not condescend to walk with his wife on the street. If they must walk to the same place, he walks ahead and she behind; and if there is a burden to carry, it is the wife who bears it on her head.

People ask: "Do you not miss the comforts to which you are used

over a snowy table and a dainty, wholesome meal, I can talk with my husband about the events of our day, and the news of the world. The occasional guest, a government official, sea-captain or a merchant will not sit down until I am seated, because the maxim "Ladies first" is the acknowledged rule for conduct. Then I think of the women next door, whose voices I can hear through the wall, as they sit huddled over the remains of the evening meal. When I realize this—I feel like a queen!

Then I sit down to enjoy the magazines and papers which our weekly mail has brought, and to answer the precious letters of friends; and I remember that, according to one of Kuwait's best authorities, only one Arab woman in 1,000 can read, and only one in 25,000 can write. This authority was asked why Arab women are practically never allowed to learn to



A CORNER OF THE CALVERLEY DINING- AND SITTING-ROOM IN KUWEIT

write, and he answered, "Do you think we would teach them to write? We have enough trouble with the women as it is—and they would be more troublesome if they knew how to write."

At the close of day we lay aside our reading and the thoughts of our work, and come together for family prayers at the throne of our loving Heavenly Father, who understands

all our cares and problems and weaknesses and who gives us help in every need, a Father who makes no difference between bond or free, male or female. Then remember that, according to the Mohammedans, a woman has no soul!

Finally, when the lamp has been put out and the door bolted for the night, we take our lantern and mount the stairs to our flat roof, where, on cots beneath the open sky we seek the sleep which can not be found in the hot and stuffy house.

There is a wedding in the neighborhood. "Tom-tom-tom-tom-tom-tom," we hear in endless monotony from the drums beaten by slave women. The shrill singing of dancing-girls rises and falls in rhythm with the beating. Tom-tom-tom-tom-tom-tom on through the hours of the night and early morning. Then comes to us the breath of salt air from the sea, and we look up into the beautiful night sky of Arabia—that wonderful vault of deepest blue with its jeweled constellations—that silent witness of God's infinite glory, and there comes to me the verse:

"Peace, perfect peace,  
With loved ones far away  
In Jesus' keeping  
We are safe, and they."

Ah! This is best of all gifts—and the Arab woman knows no peace.

#### Social Life of Arab Women

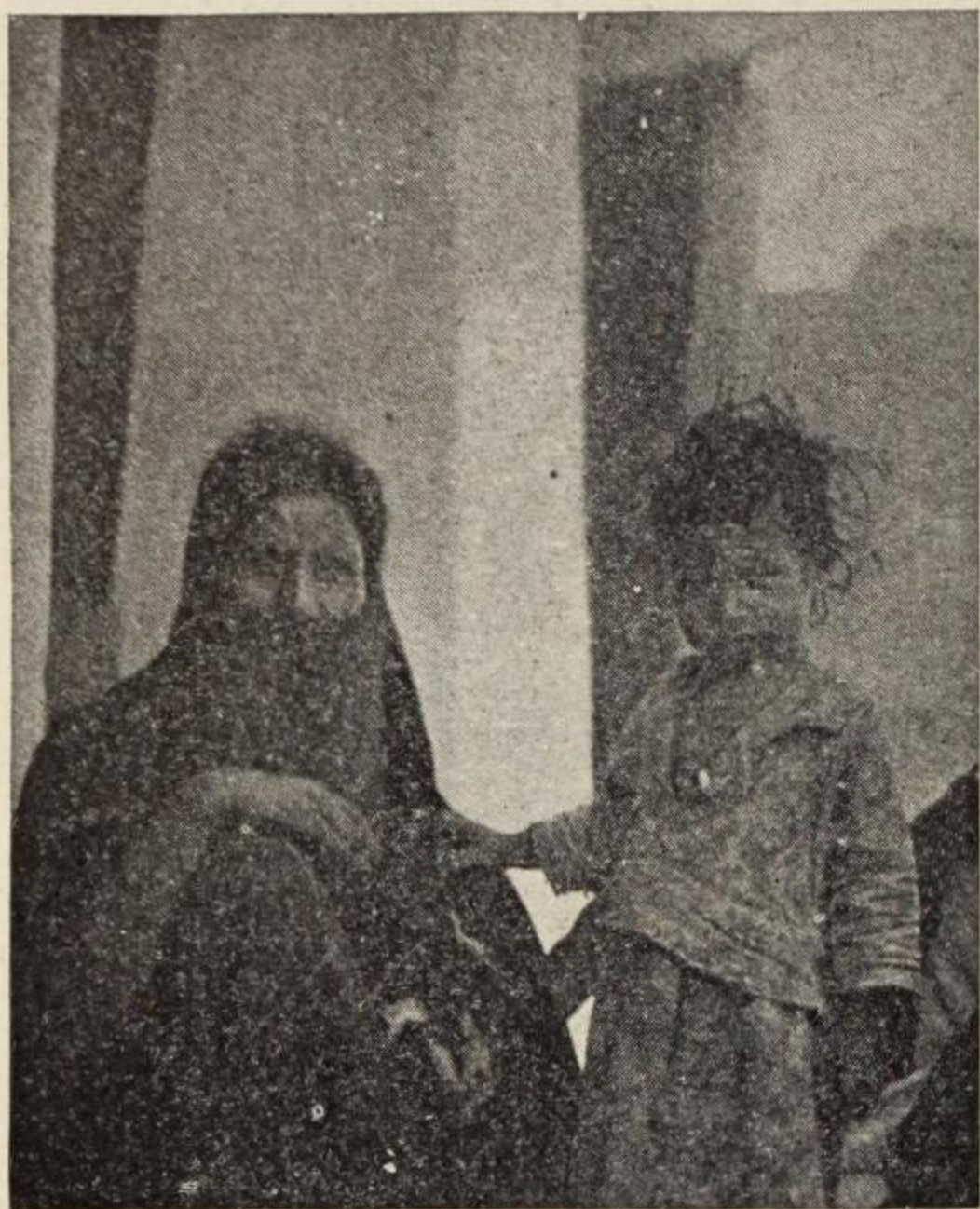
As soon as we moved into our little house in Kuwait, Arab visitors began to come. By twos and threes the women entered our courtyard, black, shrouded figures. They were welcomed and conducted to the room which serves as church on Sunday,



THE OPERATING ROOM OF THE KUWEIT DISPENSARY

school-room on week-days, and reception-room after school hours. Here I could assure them that they might remove their veils without fear of having their faces seen by any man.

A Sunday-school picture roll hung on the wall, and this seldom failed to excite questions and give us a chance to tell the Bible stories which



PATIENTS—A WOMAN AND CHILD

they represented. Then there was a baby-organ. The women had never seen an organ before, and always wanted us to play and sing to them. This furnished us an opportunity to explain such hymns as "Jesus loves me" and "I need Thee every hour."

Baby Grace was also an attraction, for the Arabs love children and were eager to see the little girl who was as welcome to us as tho she had been a boy. One woman, very friendly but none too clean, wanted to kiss Grace on the mouth. Of course I had to explain that we do not like people to kiss babies on the mouth, because it isn't good for the babies' health. Immediately the woman thought that what I feared

was the influence of evil spirits, and she began to spit three times in the direction of Grace's face, exclaiming, *Ma sha ullah, Ma sha ullah, Ma sha ullah*. "Whatever God wills," which she considered a charm capable of keeping off evil spirits!

One day the wife of a wealthy Arab came to see me. She was very haughty and reticent at first, as she sat there drest in her beautiful silks and jewels, but after we had done our best to entertain her, and had served refreshments in Arab style, she began to tell her troubles.

"You know," she said, "Khatoon, my husband has another wife, I have never seen her. She lives in another house, and just as I have two children—so has she. She hates me, and I hate her. My husband says he can not afford to keep two houses; that we must live together. I can't do it! I won't do it! I will die first! Do you think I could sit and watch that woman cross my courtyard? If she ever comes into the house, I shall leave!"

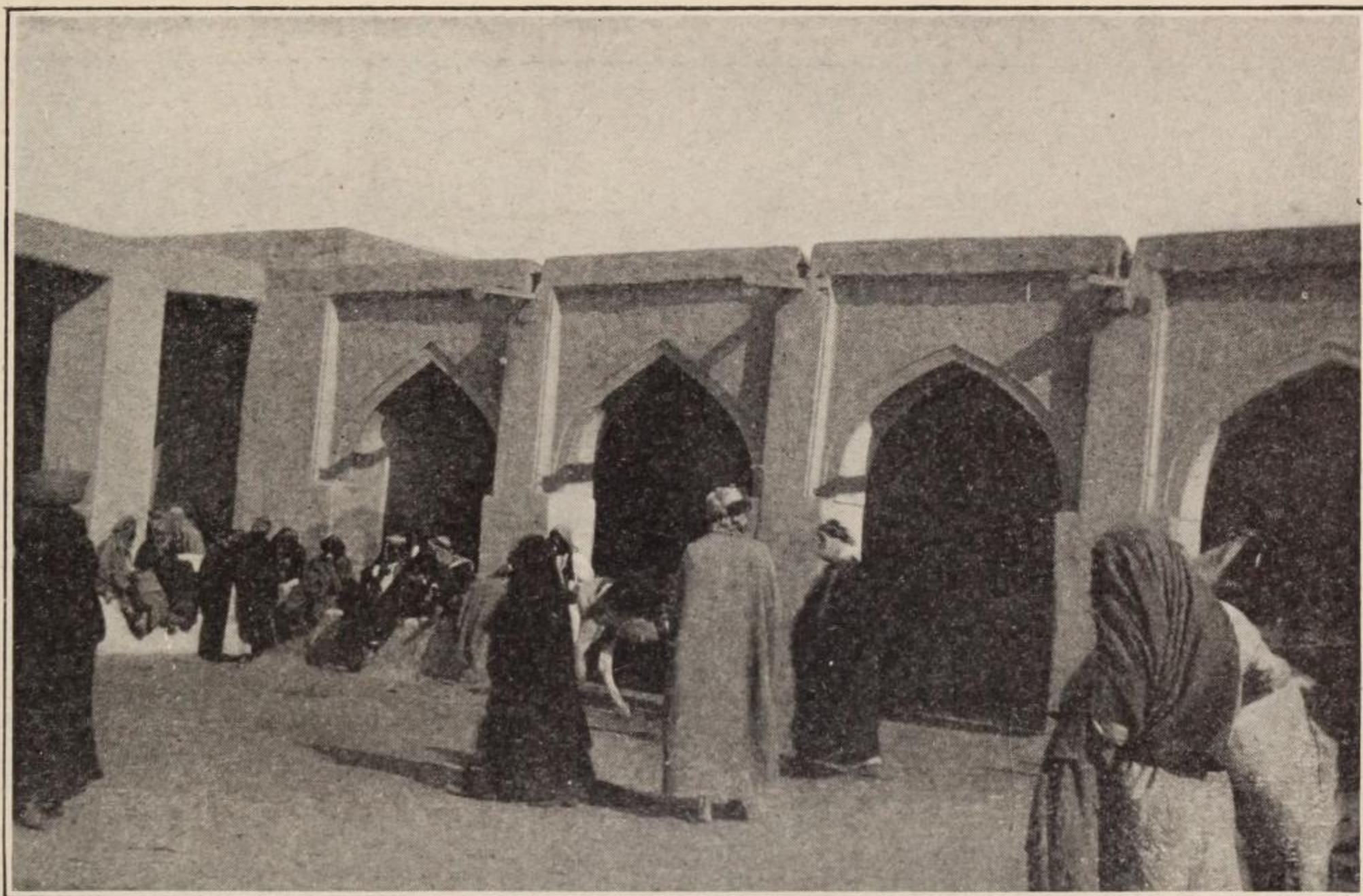
In that very room, a few months previous, that woman's partner-wife had told me the same story. A sweet, pretty little woman she was, who had not been consulted when the other woman's husband bought her for a wife. Oh, the heartaches of Arab women! What comfort can I hold out to them! In my heart I knew that I should feel the same way under the same circumstances. I could only read them the words of Jesus about marriage and divorce, and show them that God had not intended them to suffer in this way. Each of the women agreed that our way is better. "But," they said, "our religion allows a man to have

four wives at a time, and any number of concubines, and what can we women do about it?"

Before my friend left I showed her our living-room where our dining-table stood.

"And do you and your husband eat together?" she asked. "Come, see," she called to her companion;

husband belongs to the royal family. He loved this gentle wife—but God had given her no children, and he could not think of making her his only wife. She became very friendly with one of our women missionaries, and told her story in this way. "Every time my husband is planning to take a new wife he comes to



THE GOTHIC ARCHES OF A COFFEE-SHOP IN KUWEIT

"this is the table where they eat. The Khatoon sits on this side, and her husband on that side. What do you think of that?"

After that I took her to another little room, about as big as a hall-bedroom, which has a very rare advantage: two small outside windows, one of which commands a view of the sea and the customs house.

"O, look! look!" cried the woman, "there is the customs house where my husband works! O, you lucky woman," she exclaimed, turning to me. "I would give anything to have that window in my house."

There is a lovely, gentle Arab woman in one of our stations, whose

me and says, 'Now Lulua, I am going to be married again; but I don't want you to think that I don't love you any more. Here is a gift for you to remind you that I love you best of all.' Then I say, 'Oh, all right; I know it must be God's will, and I hope God will bless you in this new marriage.' But when he has gone," she said, "I throw myself upon my bed, and cry until I think my heart will break." What a Christian this woman would make!

#### Relieving the Suffering

The medical work allows one to get an even more intimate knowledge of the life of Arab women.