

The Arab and His Haunts

A Series of Incidents and Pen Pictures from Arabia

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IF you came with me out to Arabia, about the first thing that you would be likely to notice is the fact that the people are poor. Standards of living are low; indeed among the Bedouins of the interior, possibly as low as anywhere in the world. One day I sat with a well-to-do city Arab in the Kuwait Bible Shop, and we saw one of these Bedouins pass along the street in front of us. "Do you see that man?" asked my companion. "Do you see that man? Those people are Wuhoosh." "Wuhoosh" is an Arab word meaning "Wild Animals." Applied to human beings it is a term of great contempt, as might be imagined.

"Oh, no," I said, "I do not think so."

"Yes they are," replied the Arab. "They are Wuhoosh. Do you know what that man will do? He will go to the cloth merchant and buy himself a piece of sailcloth, the strongest and the heaviest he can get. Then he will have a dishdasha made out of it." A dishdasha is the undergarment these Arabs wear. A sort of nightgown, it is, reaching from the shoulders to the ankles. "When it is finished he puts it on, and he lives in it, and travels in it, and works in it, and sleeps in it, and he never takes it off until five or six or ten years later it begins to fall to pieces. Then he buys a new dishdasha and puts it on over the old one, which gradually drops away of itself, a piece at a time. They are Wuhoosh."

"No," I said. "They are not Wuhoosh or any such thing." But they are poor and standards of living are low.

POVERTY, DIRT AND IGNORANCE

Once I had a chance to travel across the desert between Bagdad and Damascus. There were three of us, two Arabs and myself. On that trip I had an opportunity to see how those people live. I do not mean that they always eat just the same food as they did then, but the standard is much the same. We got up at four in the morning, and traveled till ten. By that time we had a real appetite. We halted, choosing a place where there had previously been an encampment of camels. Some of the dry camel dung was gathered, and with the aid of a dried camel-thorn bush, and a match, we soon had a bonfire. While this was burning down to ashes, the Arab postman, for we

were traveling with the official Turkish post, began the preparation of breakfast. He had a little tin pan into which he poured a certain amount of flour and water. He worked this into a big pancake, about the size of a large dinner plate, and about an inch thick. Just as nice and light as a paving stone. The fire had burned down to ashes by this time, and he put the pancake into the center, and covered it up with the hot ashes. After about fifteen or twenty minutes it was baked, and we broke off pieces like pieces of pie, and putting them into our pockets, we mounted immediately, eating as we rode along. That was breakfast, and we rode on till sundown, and then we cooked a precisely similar meal, which was dinner. The people are poor.

In the second place, you would probably notice that the Arabs do not take as many baths as would be for their good. I remember two Bedouins that came to stay in the hospital in Kuweit. They had one dish between them, a wooden dish, which apparently had never been washed since it was made. Whatever there was to eat went into that dish. If they had buttermilk, this dish held buttermilk; and if it was rice, the dish held rice. It was not possible to wash the dish when it was full of something to eat, and when it was empty there was no reason for washing it then; so it never got washed. I was telling one of my American friends about that dish, and she said, "I should suppose that the dish might have absorbed a great deal of dirt, being made of wood." When I saw the dish it had not absorbed anything for a long time. The absorption limit that we used to study about in physics had been passed long before, and the dirt was being plastered on to the outside.

Indeed the first introduction you have to the Arab is likely to be something of this sort. You travel on a steamer and the report goes about that a Doctor is on board. In the morning an Arab hunts you up and remarks: "I was in a fight last night, and somebody hit me on the head with a stick. It is sore up there now, and I want you to put some medicine on it." So you remove his turban, and what you see brings back memories of the days when you studied Greek, when Xenophon came to a large, well-inhabited, and prosperous city. You are glad to put on some medicine, and replace the turban. It covers a multitude of sins.

I learned a number of things on that desert trip to Damascus. One of them was that for traveling in the desert, old waterskins are better than new. All the water for such a journey must be carried in skins, two slung on one side of the camel and two on the other. An old skin does not give any taste to the water, but a new one just tanned gives very nearly fifty-seven different varieties of taste to it, and none of them a good taste. I was foolish enough to get new skins for that trip, and I learned by the experience. We had a little waterskin, too. One made from the skin of a lamb, with the hair left on the outside.

I suppose it cooled the water better that way. That little waterskin was just about the shape and size of a big cat. We filled it at the beginning of each day, and passed it from one rider to another so that we might not have to stop the camels each time we wanted a drink. It looked just like a big fat cat, and the water out of it tasted like one, too. I used to shut my eyes so as not to see it, and drink it down quickly so I should not taste and smell it any more than I could help.

In that country we can almost divide the year into seasons by the small acquaintances that we make at different times. We have flea season, and then we have fly season. We have some other seasons too. I remember one night when I was living in a native house in Kuwait. It was flea season, and I picked twenty-three fleas out of my trousers before going to bed. I did not have time to catch and execute any more that night; so I left the rest till morning.

And in fly season, traveling is a particular pleasure. We eat with "the Five" in Arabia. I have often had to brush off the flies from the dish of rice lest my handful should be mixed up with them like raisin bread, but in one place in Oman, we were compelled not only to do that, but to keep on brushing them off all the way up to the mouth, and put the rice in with haste. Even so, one of us ate a fly. It is a country where more cleanliness would do no harm.

And the people are ignorant. The foreigner is the object of great curiosity. An Arab comes up and carefully feels the cloth of your coat. "Just feel that," he says. "Isn't it soft? Where do you suppose it came from?"

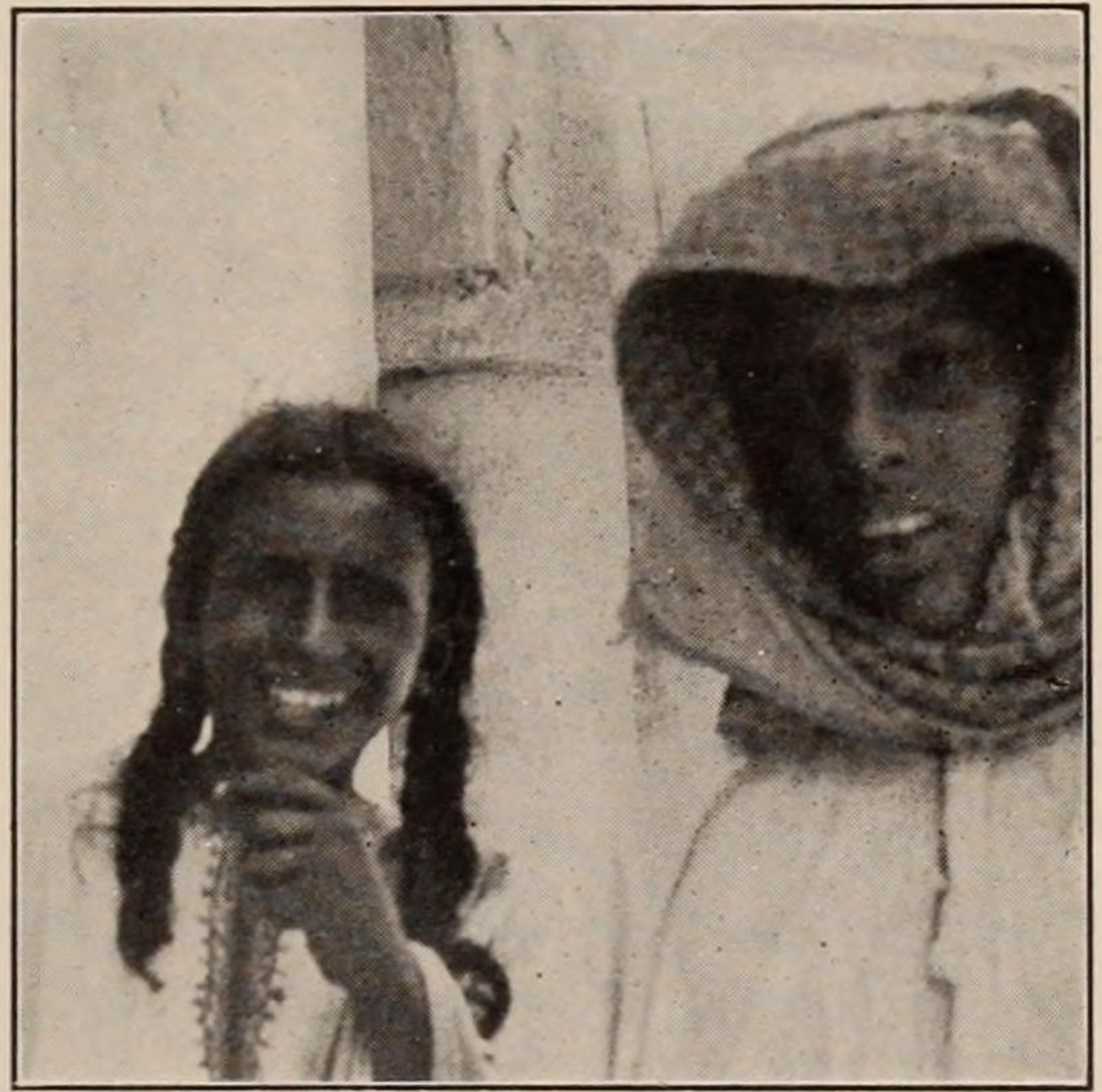
"Certainly from the land of the Franks. What do you suppose it cost?" asks another.

"It appears very expensive. And how warm it must be."

Then one of them turns to you: "Where did you get that cloth, and how much did you have to pay for it?"

And perhaps one of them takes you aside at the first opportunity and asks whether you have an old coat of that sort, which you would be willing to give him. We must not judge him too harshly. In somewhat the same way he gets things from his own chief, and the request is more than half a compliment.

When I was in Kuwait, the local leaders decided that they ought to organize a school for the boys of the city. There was a great con-



BEDOUIN BOYS OF ARABIA

troversy over the curriculum. The Radicals desired that geography and arithmetic should be taught, but the Conservatives would not have them. Just what harm arithmetic might have done I was not able to discover, but geography is a dangerous subject obviously, for if the boys studied that, they might learn that the sun does not set in a pool of black mud as the Koran says that it does, and their faith would suffer. The Conservatives won, and the questionable subjects were tabooed. Geography is a closed book for them. One afternoon I was talking with one of the judges of Kateef, and the conversation turned upon China. "Yes," said the blind old judge, "there is such a country—our books tell of it—but it is separated from us by a sea of fire, over which no man can travel."

"Well," I said, "there must be some road, for my brother who lives on an island near that country sends me letters regularly."

This statement displeased the old man somewhat, so we talked about something else.

Our machines look marvellous to these desert people. One of them came to the Tigris river and saw a river steamer for the first time in his life. He took passage on it, and sat down to watch the wonderful engine which worked on and on, turning the great side wheels. He watched it for a long time, and finally turned to the engineer and asked: "Doesn't it ever get tired?"

INDEPENDENCE AND LOYALTY

But the Arabs are a race of splendid qualities. I imagine that no race on earth is more independent. One afternoon I hired a donkey-boy to take me out to a boat. I was on my way to a nearby island to see a sick man. The price was agreed upon, and I mounted while he led the donkey through the shallow water. Something was evidently on his mind for he turned to look at me, first over one shoulder and then over the other. He did not enjoy leading along a donkey on which rode an "infidel." After a little he spoke: "I am just as good a man as you are."

"Well," I said, "I know you are. I did not say you were not."

He was mollified and took me on out to the boat, received his pay and departed.

In the days when the mission work was being started in Kuwait, the leading mosque preacher of that city was an old man named Sheikh Ahmed. Sheikh Ahmed saw the religion of his fathers crumbling around him. At least he thought he did. It did not appear to the missionaries to be crumbling very fast, but this old Puritan saw the times as corrupt and degenerate, and he preached against the laxity of the new generation with great vigor. He was a feeble old man, and only occasionally was he strong enough to do it; but whenever it

was announced that the following Friday Sheikh Ahmed was to preach, the largest mosque in the city would be filled. One Friday he spoke against the ruling chief of the city, a hardhearted, cruel, efficient ruler, who had the power of life and death over his subjects, the preacher not excepted. But Sheikh Ahmed did not hesitate to denounce him roundly; to mention his outbreking sins in bringing there dancing girls from Egypt, and in neglecting the rites of his religion. He told the people to have nothing to do with him, to keep away from his judgment hall. The wise old Chief said nothing. The old preacher's admonitions were unheeded, but his position in the city was such that it would not have been safe for even the ruling chief to lay hands on him. Some weeks later he preached again. This time he denounced the merchants of the city and the rich men in general, who were openly demanding and receiving interest on their loans, contrary to the Mohammedan law. He denounced them as of the reprobate in this world, and of the "Companions of Fire" in the next. Many of the people he was denouncing were in his audience, and many were the quiet smiles on the part of the others. In discussing the sermon the next day, the smiles were not all quiet. His next sermon was directed against the American missionaries who had come to the city to corrupt the pure religion of true believers. "It is better to die than to have your disease relieved by that doctor. Don't be seen in their neighborhood. Have nothing to do with them." But the people came for medicine just the same. I would have given a great deal to get acquainted with that old man, but he would have nothing of it. There was something magnificent about the stern inflexibility of his faith, and his own fearless courage as its advocate.

And they are a loyal people. One day there came to the Kuwait hospital a sick man brought by a wealthy brother. Five years or more before there had been a raid, and Hamadan was wounded. He had been disabled ever since. They came from a great distance to the hospital. It was a tedious case. A number of operations were necessary, and it was perhaps five months before he could go home. During that whole period the sick man was cared for by his well brother with a loyalty that was splendid. He kept the sick man clean, spent his money for him, stayed with him to keep him cheerful, did anything that could be done to help toward a cure, and finally to their great delight, it was possible for them to go home together, two well men. I do not know that I have ever seen a finer example of loyalty in my life. I love to ask those inland Bedouins about their great chief in Riadh, and see them grow enthusiastic as they tell of the greatest chief in the world, of his great stature, and marvellous prowess in war; of his perfect democracy of spirit, so that the humblest of his subjects has as easy access to his ear as the richest and strongest; of his relentless justice in dealing with offenders. I will not deny that I am looking

forward with no small anticipations to meeting that man myself. Men of this type may not be easy to get acquainted with, but there is real gold inside if it can be uncovered. I have friends among them that would not steal from me, I am certain, though I do not doubt that they would be glad to steal for me if I so desired.

CHEERFULNESS AND HOSPITALITY

And I am sure that the Bedouin is the most cheerful individual in the world. It seems to be impossible to make him complain. I used to try to make them complain about the weather. It is not difficult to get an American to grumble a little when the thermometer stands a hundred and twenty in the shade. "Today is a terribly hot day, isn't it?" I would say.

"Oh, I don't know," was the usual reply. "God is generous; to-morrow may be cooler."

Living in wretched, black cloth tents, patched and torn, with nothing to keep them warm in winter, and nothing to keep them cool in summer, with no square meal for months at a time, and not a clean or a well-ordered thing in his whole possessions, the Bedouin's common phrase is "Praise the Lord, anyway," and he does not complain. The sound brother of the two mentioned above was a man of some wealth in his own country. I said to him one day, after he had been taking care of his sick brother for several months, "I am afraid that when you return home you will find your property all gone. Raiders will have taken it." For in that country property is in livestock, and is more likely to take wings than is true with us even.

"Oh, yes," said he, "I suppose they will have it all by that time."

"Well," I remarked, "the matter does not seem to concern you a great deal."

"No," he said, "it makes little difference."

"But," I said, "I should suppose it might make a great deal of difference. You have been a rich man for years; and now you return home to find yourself poor."

"Oh, well," he replied, "it really does not make any difference, for as soon as I get out of here, I will steal somebody else's sheep and camels, and it will be all right."

I am sure that they are the most cheerful people in the world.

And as to hospitality, we of the West know little of what the word means. When the Kingdom of God is completed, I am sure that the Arab will teach hospitality to all the rest of us. In America, if I wish to go and see a friend in Akron, we will say, I must write a letter, and say, "You will remember that I met you a few months ago in Toledo," if that is the place, "and you were good enough to invite me to come and see you whenever I passed through Akron. I am going to

be in Akron within a week or so, and if you wish I will be glad to stay with you." And then if it is not convenient, he writes back that because his wife's brother's cousin or somebody or other is sick or in prison, or something else, it is not convenient; and then you cannot go.

In Arabia we have a much better method. I am in Muscat and I want to go to Rostock. So I gather together my donkeys and my servants and we travel from eight o'clock in the morning till three in the afternoon, when I arrive in Rostak. Once there I catch the first small boy that I can lay my hands on, and inquire the way to the house of Sheikh Abd Ali, the chief of the place.

"That is it," he says, "the big house down this road."

So we go to the house of Sheikh Abd Ali, and we walk into the big guest room, where we tell the servant, "Go and tell your master that the Doctor is here."

So he goes off and tells the chief, who comes in to take me by the hand. "I am so glad to see you; how are you, and where have you come from?"

"From Muscat."

"And did you not find the trip a hot and dusty one?" The only time that he even begins to complain is when he commiserates you on your hot and dusty trip.

"Yes," you admit, "it was a little hot and dusty."

So he gets a Persian rug, and sets a cushion against the wall for you to rest on, and he offers you a drink of water. "Abd Ullah," he says, "make coffee at once."

So Abd Ullah the servant puts a handful of green coffee in the little round-bottomed frying-pan with a long handle, and roasts the coffee over an open fire; then he pounds it in a mortar; and shortly you are served with the best coffee you ever drank. In the meantime the old chief has gone away to order you a feast. Now because you are an unusual guest, you must have an unusual feast; and because it is an unusual feast, it takes a long time to get it ready. You arrived at three o'clock in the afternoon, and your appetite at that time was perceptible to the naked eye. You wait till eight o'clock, and by that time as you look around on the landscape, there is nothing to be seen anywhere except your appetite.

But by and by, the servants come in, and such a feast. A platter nearly if not quite six feet across, piled high with rice, bushels of it. So much indeed, that a whole boiled sheep is quite decently interred under it. Two legs stick out of one side and two out of the other. Nothing is to be seen of him. So you sit down and eat with "the Five." There are times when it is an advantage to eat that way. When you have traveled from eight o'clock in the morning till three in the afternoon and then waited till eight o'clock in the evening before you have anything to eat, a spoon is an awfully small thing to eat with. We