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The Trial by Ordeal in Arabia

REV. EDWIN E. CALVERLEY

Some years ago two silver forks were stolen from our home. The table-boy, a Shiah, who felt that he was naturally suspect, offered very willingly to have me take him before the "*sayyid*," who would try him with grains of wheat. The *sayyid* would recite curses over the grains. Then the boy would have to swallow them. If the grains stuck in his throat, his guilt would be evident. But if he could swallow them, his innocence would be proved.

A few months ago our colleagues here had a rain coat stolen from their home while we were all away attending our preaching service for Moslems. A fruitless search was made in the room of the servants who had access to the house. Then a Najdi hospital assistant, of the Sunni sect, suggested that all possible suspects be taken before the "*sayyid*" to "lick the fire."

"But I do not think it will be necessary to have the trial," he added, "because I believe that as soon as the thief knows he will have to stand the test he will confess."

Various methods are in common use in Arabia for securing admission of guilt. The first is that of the oath. This may be taken on the Qur'an, or simply with the raising of the right hand, and is administered regularly by the *Qādhi*. The second is "eating the cane," the bastinado, until confession is volunteered. A modification of this "third degree" method is used when suspected thieves are "crucified." This crucifixion does not mean killing. Just this month a servant suspected of stealing Rupees 700 was crucified in the great public open space in Kuwait where visiting caravans park their camels. A pole



A BLIND ARAB SHEIKH AND HIS SCRIBE

was stuck upright in the ground and the poor fellow was placed with his back to it, and with his hands tied to it behind him.

Still another method of ascertaining guilt is that already referred to, the trial by ordeal. The article on the subject in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th ed., indicates that Burchardt (*Arabien*, pp. 98, 233, are the references given) was acquainted with the custom, but I do not have his book and do not know how fully he described how it is practiced.

My own investigations in the subject have been facilitated because I was fortunate enough to have the son of such a practitioner in our school. This *sayyid* is not the only operator in Kuwait, although, in the nature of the case, the power such a custom assumes could not be ascribed to many different men. There is another practitioner living at Buwairda, on the Arabs' River opposite Abadan. He seems to be resorted to in Basrah cases, and he sometimes comes to Kuwait. Cases are also sometimes brought from Basrah to Kuwait for trial.

The Basrah *sayyid's* method is to use the *tawwa*. This is an iron plate, round and very thin, fifteen inches or more in diameter. On it the Arabs are accustomed to bake their delicious very thin bread. This *tawwa* is heated red (not white) hot. Each suspected person picks it up. Guilt is indicated when it sticks to anyone's fingers.

Among the Shiáh *sayyids* of Kuwait there are several practitioners. One of them uses the leavened dough test. All the suspects take a portion of the dough in their fingers and work it. Those whose dough works well are indicated to be innocent. The one whose dough crumbles as he works it with his fingers is declared to be guilty.

Our Sunni friend has quite a large répertoire of tests. A word or two about him may be of interest. He is a man short in stature, slight in build, heavily wrinkled in forehead, sunken in cheeks, black bearded, with small and deep-set eyes, constantly shifting. As stated, he is a *sayyid*, or descendant of Mohammed. He is learned in Islamic lore, but I fear not those pure disciplines which elevate the mind, but rather those dark subjects which debase the soul. He studied ten years in Baghdad, three more in Basrah, still further in a *mandal* (he called it), or necromancy circle, above Kerkuk. Then, with a company of others, he was sent to Cairo, where he stayed seven months for examinations. He secured the *murraqqa'at*, or patched robe (it cost him six pounds Turkish), and other apparel of the darwish who has passed his novitiate and become a qualified mystic. Until now he has denied to me that he is a Sūfi. He belongs to the Abdul Qādir al-Jilani order and says that he has had the usual darwish exercises in his house except during the last two years.

He has not gained a position of respect here, and he would not be allowed to preach in the mosques of the town, but matters are sometimes brought before him for his opinion of the law in the case. His opinion of the learning of the learned here is not high. He does not associate much with people here because, he says, their society is valueless. I have heard from others that it is because he does not want to have his occult powers put to the test. He is sometimes asked to vie with others in finding articles that are hidden on purpose, and it is said that he succeeds.

On one occasion he gave me as excellent a discourse on the essentials of true worship as any I have ever heard. It was what any Sūfi would say. One could wish that the man's life gave evidence that he even tried to live up to the lofty ideals he expressed. His reputation speaks of concubines to the extent of his buying power. That is of course not beyond the sanctions of his faith. He himself has told me that he followed a common custom here and had bought and set aside such a slave for the use of his son until the boy became ready for a proper marriage. The father said to me, however, that the lad had no use for the arrangement, which was what the son had himself previously told me.

I had long been looking for an opportunity to attend one of the trials by ordeal that the *sayyid* conducts. Such trials are not infrequent, since he not only adjudicates private cases, but also has cases sent to him by the ruler of the town. It was last November that the opportunity was given me.

The *sayyid* holds his trials in his reception room. This is a low, small, uncleaned, rough-plastered room, with the wall recesses filled with unarranged piles of torn and discolored books, as well as bottles and lamps. Bits of fur and skins hang from nails and rafters. Gazelle parchments are much recommended for magic spells. There is a large clock on the wall and two cheap, well-worn rugs stretched with a space between them on the floor. Light comes from the door and one window which faces the court yard.

When I arrived the *sayyid* was sitting beside his *suraīdān*, a carved wooden box with a bowl let in the top to hold charcoal. A detachable bellows furnishes the draft. Sitting further along the wall were three young Arabs obviously from Central Arabia. Opposite them sat another Arab, who I learned was the accuser.

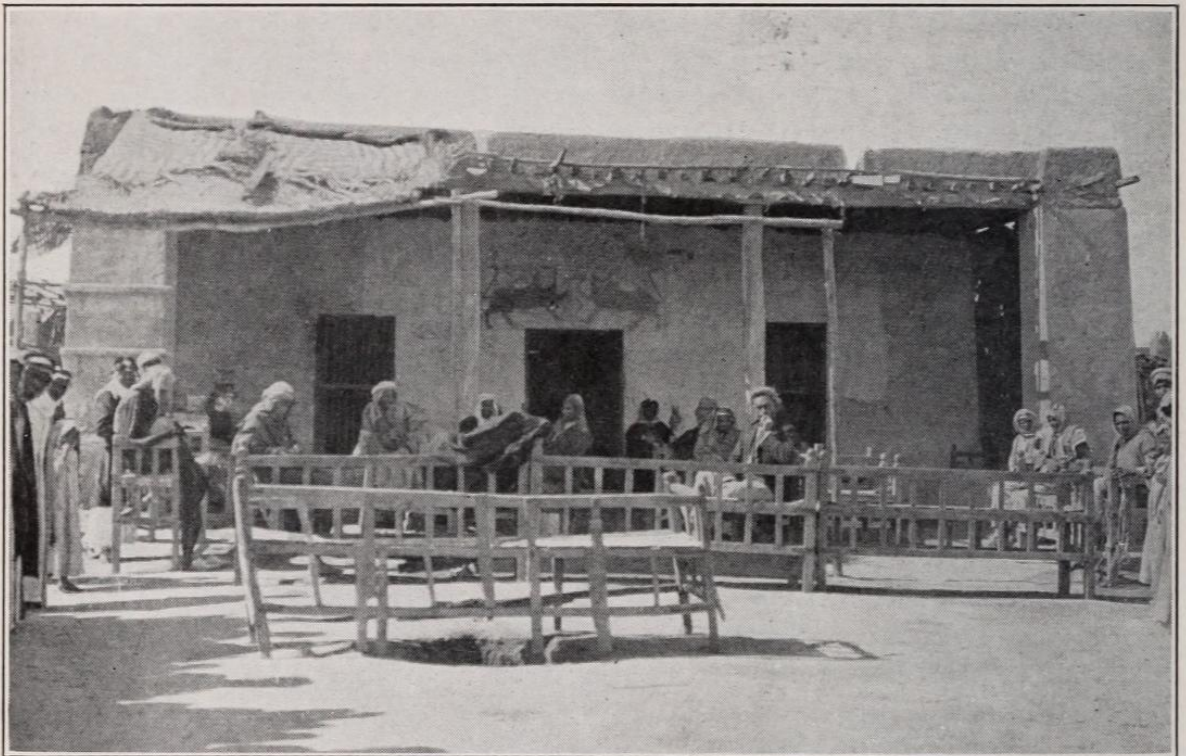
After cursory greetings I sat opposite the *sayyid*. My presence was not a disturbing factor. I might say I was not noticed. Certainly I was not considered. There was a matter of serious concern engrossing the attention of the Najdies. It was explained to me quietly that the complainant had been robbed of forty-seven rupees, over fifteen dollars. His brother was among the suspects.

As I looked at them I came to the conviction that it was the brother who was guilty. I had been told that the *sayyid* was already sure who had stolen the money. But it need not be noted that if either he or I had pointed out the thief, the money would have been restored. The conviction had to be assigned to some power other than human reasoning or intuition in order to secure a voluntary acquiescence.

In the fire of charcoals was a long iron rod, at the end of which was a circular flattened disc, as large as a dollar. It ordinarily is used for stirring coffee beans as they are being roasted. This disc was being heated. Several times the *sayyid* took it out to see if it were hot all through. Meanwhile he discoursed disjointedly on the evils of stealing, its ingratitude, its uselessness. His every action was watched with solemn interest. I noticed that the *sayyid* did not recite any incantations over the rod or the fire, but merely talked to the young men.

Finally the disc seemed to be hot enough to suit him. He called for the nearest Najdi to come and squat before him, face to face. He spoke briefly to him and then had him stick his tongue far out. He then took the rod out of the coals and struck his own bare heel once or twice with the red hot disc. Then with the other side of the disc he struck the outstretched tongue of the first suspect, once, twice and a third time, in steady, but not rapid succession. The young man then resumed his former place without a word. The iron was put back into the coals and heated again. The *sayyid* dealt with the second in the same way.

With the third, the brother, he talked a much longer time, repeating his remarks on stealing in general and assuring him of the power of the fire to prove guilt. The young man declared in whispered tones that he did not steal the money.



A PERSIAN TEA SHOP IN KUWEIT

“But what would you do if the fire put the guilt on you?”

“I would pay. But I did not do it,” he added.

“I did not say that you did,” said the *sayyid*. “But the fire knows. If you are taken, it will be the fire that takes you.”

Then the *sayyid* slapped the disc on his tongue three times. The fellow stood the “lick” (*luhsa* is the name of this ordeal) quite as well as the others. Then a glass of water was called for and each of the suspects was given a drink from it. Then they were told to look for the “sign” on each other’s tongues. This they did, each pairing with the other. Then a small mirror was given them, and each had a look at his own tongue. All were as solemn as hospital patients.

“Have you seen it?” asked the *sayyid*. None would say.

“Well,” said the *sayyid*, turning to the brother, “the *nishan*, sign, is on you.”

Without a word they all got up and left.

The *sayyid*, I was told, would receive a fifth of the amount involved.

On another occasion I asked the *sayyid* why he had recited no incantations.

"Oh," said he, "that iron has been recited over hundreds of times. I have done it so often that it does not need to be recited over on particular occasions now."

He lent me a badly tattered hand-written book, containing, he said, the proper charm. The book has no cover or title page, but is one of that class of magic literature of which the *Shams al-Ma'arif*, the Sun of (Divining) Knowledges, is a shining example. I have seen three different printings of the latter work here in Kuwait. The charm the *sayyid* indicated I have translated as follows:

"*'Azīmat al-Hadīd: The Spell for Iron.'*

"It should be heated in the fire until it becomes red. Then recite over it the *Fātiha* (the first chapter of the Qur'an) seven times. Then recite this spell: In the Name of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate. O Fire! O Storehouse! O Hiding-place! I have charmed thee by the quenching spells of Zamzam (the famous Meccan well) and of the solid-built Ka'ba! O Iron heated! Hasten burning and blessing! O Fire! We have brought them near to outwit the raging causer of grief! Destroy him! Wither his lips! Recover his forgetfulness! Allah has made room for thee! To the peaceable, give peace. Allah's innocent, do not wrong! Be for me and the peaceable as the fire was for Ibrahim, the Friend of the Compassionate, 'cold and safe . . . and they planned a trick against him, and we caused them to be the losers' (Qur'an, xxi, 69, 70). I have subdued thee by a thousand thousand (repetitions of) 'There is no strength and no power except in Allah, the High and Great.' I have subdued thee by a thousand of the Verse of the Throne, and a thousand of the Eternal (name of Allah) and a thousand of what decreases strength, and by a thousand of what is believed and a thousand (repetitions of) 'She has nought but Allah, the One, the Only,' and by a thousand of the Wise Qur'an, and by a thousand Blesseds and a thousand of 'All the Angels of Allah,' and a thousand of 'There is no strength and no power but in Allah.'"

Another test, used also by the Shiah *sayyids* here, is the *bal'* (swallowing) of bread. Its formula is given in the same manuscript as follows:

"For those suspected write on some wheaten bread. Break each loaf in pieces. The suspected ones eat it. The thief will be unable to swallow it. These are the names to be written on the bread.

HH, HH, HH, 'HH, 'HH, 'HH, 52 over bh, and 52 over bh. (52 is the numerical value of the letters bh.)

Stealer of the property of such a one, son of such a one. This is valid, tried."

Other methods of trial by ordeal used by the *sayyid* consist in writing several names of Allah on the head of a large iron nail (which

is conspicuous in his office), and hammering the nail into the ground in the presence of the interested parties, accompanying each blow with an incantation. Then all are told to rise. The guilty one remains as if fastened by the nail to his place. The molten lead method is the one usually employed when women are concerned, as their faces may not be seen. The lead stiffens only around the guilty person's fingers. He also mentioned one impolite and one distressing condition that he was able to cause.

In forming a judgment about these practices, there is reason to avoid ridicule based on any pride of racial superiority. I had called to my attention Goodes' delectable illustration of the Trial by Ordeal in Bill Nye's "History of England," and it would cure anyone of any such tendency. Further, the *judicium Dei* cannot be ruled out of court altogether as having been a possible and real event, for authority for such trial in a particular case was given in the Bible (Num. 5:12-31). That is the one case where evidence is admittedly most difficult to secure, and, in a theocratic government, here, if ever, God would intervene to condemn or acquit his people. The Jewish rabbis believed the sanction for such trial persisted until it was abrogated by Hosea (4:14), (Hast. Bib. Dict., art. Marriage).

Nothing that I saw in our friend's practice or have learned of the whole custom gives evidence that it is God who is expected to declare judgment. There is an ascription of supernatural powers to the fire, the lead, the incantations, and the like. That is superstition. Even those strictest Moslems who claim that Muhammad authorized only the use of the name of Allah in *du'as*, prayers, yet degrade these prayers into incantations by their dependence upon the power of the words used. Moreover, those *sayyids* and mullas who, unlike our friend, are respected and allowed to preach in the mosques, write charms for the sick in body and mind, invoking and expecting only God's operation, still believe that God will act because of the words imbibed or worn.

Some of these last, perhaps, may not be accused of fraud, for they are at least sincere, giving evidence of their sincerity by accepting no money for their amulets. Yet, it is not certain that our friend is a conscious imposter. His mystic studies may have induced him to believe in such occult powers. He claims to be able to see the secret and the absent by means of ink spots and magic squares. But his appreciation of God's character and requirements and his own personal life, together with the uses he makes of his studies, do not tend to inspire approving confidence.

The *sayyid's* success in the case I saw needs no explanation. His reputation may easily rest on nothing more than his own powers of inference and insight and the application of known psychological laws.

This superstitious custom, though it has been practiced in these regions from Hammurabi's day until the present, will disappear from general usage through the general education of the people, as has happened in European countries. The credulity it indicates obviously needs to be replaced by an obedient faith in the immanent God whose presence ennobles, enlightens and abundantly enlivens His people.

A Visit to Basrah

MRS. C. STANLEY G. MYLREA

It was like a pleasant dream, only when I woke up it was all true. An invitation came asking us to come to Basrah for a little visit, and as we had the hot summer to look forward to, we thought we would run away for a fortnight. We started off from Kuwait at dawn in a small government steamer and arrived at Fao about 5 p. m. As we were to spend the night there we thought we should like to go ashore for a little walk. There are only two or three buildings there, a Post Office and Telegraph Station, but it guards the entrance to the river and a powerful searchlight plays from sunset till dawn. It was the first place taken by the British on their way up to Basrah in 1914.

The next morning at daylight we were off again. The date gardens on either side of the river looked so pretty and green and were such



INDIAN SOLDIERS IN BASRAH

a wonderful change after our Kuwait desert. We passed a number of launches and monitors, besides several large ocean-going ships, but it was not until we neared Basrah that we got a glimpse of what Basrah really had become. The river was full of ships of every description and all seemed very busy. Two large camouflaged ships had evidently braved the Mediterranean and their weird markings had perhaps saved them from submarines. We passed several quays belonging to different military departments and went alongside Bhoussa Pier. Although it was 1 p. m. and hot there were plenty of khaki uniforms to be seen. No time to be sleeping as in the old Turkish days. Presently we and our luggage were put into a friend's launch and away we went up the creek to the Mission House. On our left a building attracted our interest. We were told it was the new garrison church,

and on the following Sunday we had the privilege of worshipping there morning and evening. Both services were well attended and the Bishop of Lahore preached on each occasion.

We had time for a little rest and then were off to a Y. M. C. A. picnic. From then on the days were quite full. Our friends were most kind in showing us all the wonderful things to be seen. One day they took us in a car to see the different base camps. Beautiful concrete roads have been built and we sped along through the date gardens and then out into the big open spaces full of tents. After seeing the camps at Magill and Makina we stopped at the Makina Club for tea and to listen to the band. One could hardly believe that one was in Basrah.

We spent one morning going over the Post Office and it was most interesting to see the arrangement for each department—Artillery, Engineers, Cavalry, Infantry, etc., and last of all the letters of those who had been moved off to other places and those on leave. Surely there is as little delay as possible in the letters reaching their destination. Then we visited the Censor's Office, a place one has often pictured to one's self and wondered if all the letters really were opened and read or if sometimes they did not let them go through. Each language has its special censor and we were told that the only one they could not read was Welsh, so all the letters written in Welsh, and they are many, have to go to London to be censored. The railroad runs right up to the Post Office and the mails are put into the vans and started off to Baghdad and other places up the river.

Very often about sunset we used to take a walk and usually passed by the Labor Corps Camp. Their tents are in a date garden and the cleanliness and order are wonderful. During the day each tent was rolled up for several feet above the ground and the whole garden was kept swept and spotless. After sunset as we returned from our walk, the men had come from their day's work, and were sitting in groups talking or lying on their blankets resting. One wonders how long it would take these low-class Arabs and Persians to get back to their filthy way of living if they were left to themselves or would they really prefer the clean way. I doubt it.

We spent two evenings at the cinema. I believe there was a moving picture palace in Basrah during the last days of the Turks so that the three cinemas that are there now cannot claim to be the first. The hall is quite large and is almost always well filled. The front rows are filled with Arabs and Indians and behind them the Tommies sit. Then come the boxes and seats where the officers and Red Cross nurses sit. Down in the pit you can have ice cream and lemonade brought to you. The two nights we were there the films were all from America, some of California and some of cowboy life. The Arabs and Indians seemed to enjoy them immensely and laughed heartily at all the funny parts.

One afternoon a friend lent us a car and we thought we would go to see the Shaibeh battlefield. There is not much to see, I believe, just the graves of those who fell there. When we were some fourteen miles out of Basrah, right in the desert, our car broke down. Our chauffeur took things to pieces, screwed and unscrewed everything

he could, but the car wouldn't move. The sun went down and the prospects of getting home became fainter and fainter, when we noticed some tents a little way off. As our road had run parallel to the telegraph wires, one of our number went off to these tents to see if they had any connection with the telegraph. In the meantime two carriages came from Basrah. We stopped them and asked them if they were going back to Basrah that night. In each carriage there was a long narrow box without a lid, one end resting on the driver's seat and the other on the hood behind the back seat. At first they said they were not going back and when we pressed them they said: "No. The funeral won't go back to-night, and besides we have no lights. If you have a lantern with you we might come back for you." All at



A DARWISH AND RIVER ARAB WOMAN IN THE BASRAH HOSPITAL COMPOUND

once we realized that the long boxes were coffins containing corpses which were being taken to Zobair for burial and as there was plague in Basrah we hastened to assure them that we would not need their assistance.

Presently the one of our number who had gone to the camp came back saying that he had been able to wire to Basrah explaining the situation. He had also made the interesting discovery that the group of tents was nothing less than Zobair Railway Station, although it was three and a half miles away from Zobair. A train from Nasiryeh for Makina was due at 8:30. It was then about 7:15 and we sat in our comfortable car waiting for the time to pass. We offered to have a sentry from the station come to guard the car so that the chauffeur could go home but he said his orders were that he must never leave

his car and he could get on without food if we would just send him a drink of water from the station. We were at the station on time and as the train pulled up we were told where to find the first-class carriage. No tickets had to be bought. Our little train puffed its way into Makina and as it drew up at the Station which, like Zobair, was only a group of tents, the Station Master met us saying that a car would soon arrive from Basrah to take us home. It soon came and as we rode home the driver asked us about the breakdown and said he was sorry he could not have taken us but that he had been engaged that afternoon. He intimated that if he had been with us there would have been no breakdown. We sat down to our dinner at 9:30, glad to be safely back but pleased with all our experiences.

Our visit came to an end all too soon. There were more things to see, but we enjoyed every minute of it, and got a little idea of what it means to occupy a country. If British occupation means such a rapid advancement of all that we include under the term "Christian Civilization," one can only hope that the good work will go on.



The Feast of Moharram

MRS. PAUL W. HARRISON

As I looked from my window one day late in October I saw a number of flags floating from the tops of some of the houses of a Persian village close by. This was a new sight, and I wondered what it could mean. Each house seemed to have two flags, one of black, and one of red, white and green, and on the latter there was an ensign. On inquiring, I found that this decoration was in honor of the feast of Moharram which the Shiah sect of Mohammedans celebrate in commemoration of the death of Hussein, one of their religious heroes, a grandson of Mohammed.

Hussein was killed at Kerbela on the tenth of Moharram (the first month in the Mohammedan year). His tragic death is mourned in various ways, wherever the Shiah sect of Mohammedanism is found. In Bahrein last year quite elaborate celebrations took place. Every strictly orthodox Shiah wore black clothes for the entire month of Moharram, and decorated his house with a black flag, the sign of mourning. Since the greater number of Shiahs in this town are Persians, the Persian flag, red, white and green, was in great evidence also.

The Shiah mosque was draped in black. In the homes of the people, throughout the town, an unusual number of readings was held, the theme of which was the sufferings and death of Hussein. At these readings the women beat their breasts and wail and weep real tears over the death of their beloved Hussein.

On the ninth day of the month a bier draped with gaily colored cloth was carried through the streets on the shoulders of four men, followed by a number of men and women beating their breasts and crying; this in honor of the nephew of Hussein who was murdered on that day.

The culmination of these religious demonstrations was reached in the "Eed el Ashoor," the feast of the tenth day. On the morning of this day a big parade was held, in which the religious zealots, who are anxious to obtain a good reward in the next world, took part. A very elaborately planned procession it was. First came the standard-bearers carrying black flags, an emblem of mourning, and the Persian flags. Following these were two companies of about twenty men each, brandishing swords in the air and occasionally gashing themselves on the forehead and chanting in a mournful tone, "O Hussein! O Hussein!" These men wear new white garments to display the blood from their streaming wounds to the best advantage.

The body of the procession was made up of men and boys representing different relatives of Hussein who were taken prisoners, some of whom were killed. Two camels, one of them bearing the son and daughter of Hussein and the other bearing his sister, headed this division. Following these were two horsemen, Hussein's assassins, accompanied by ten or fifteen men on foot, all of whom were wildly brandishing staves and swords which they carried and pressing closely