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NEGLECTED ARABIA

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Beauty For Ashes

MRS. EDWIN E. CALVERLEY, M.D.

While Christian missionaries are bringing the Gospel of Christ to the people of the Moslem world, Mohammedan missionaries are taking the Koran and the religion of Islam to Christian nations. It is said that in England a number of people have embraced the faith of Mohammed and that the teaching appeals especially to women. These western women are led to believe, we read, that Mohammedanism exalts womanhood.

To one who lives in the midst of down-trodden Moslem women, this statement is the height of absurdity. Would that those who hear and believe such a claim could visit Arabia and see for themselves a little of the heartache and despair brought about in the lives of Arab women by the very religion which is said to exalt them. Polygamy, concubinage, easy divorce and the teaching that women are inferior to men and were created for their usage, all these things make misery the most common feature in the experience of Arab women.

The evils of the system of Islam are not unknown to the readers of *NEGLECTED ARABIA*, and the denial of the statement that womanhood is exalted by Islam needs no defense. Nevertheless, it is true that the Moslem woman's religion means much to her. It is dear to her. She loves the very hand that bruises her. Why? There must be good in Mohammedanism. Let us look for the good, for the best that Islam has to offer. What is it that makes the Moslem woman love her religion?

It is difficult to analyze the soul's experience. Suppose an Arab woman should attempt to analyze the inner spiritual life of her Christian neighbor. The result would be interesting, no doubt, but how near would it come to the whole truth? The converse proposition, however, is not quite so difficult, for there is no injunction in the Koran similar to the command "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth." Nor is there any instruction to "Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father in secret." Prayer, reading of the Koran, and all the observances of the Moslem religion are enacted with

great ostentation. Moreover, the natural reserve of the western woman is unknown to the daughter of the Orient. She talks freely on all subjects, no matter how sacred or intimate. The name of God and His attributes are an essential part of her speech. She can hardly express any idea, whether of surprise, admiration, desire, contempt, or kindly feeling without inserting some phrase of a religious nature. The more frequently she mentions God's name, the more merit she acquires. Consequently, with so much of her religion on the surface, she is not so hard to study as her western sister.



A MORNING CLINIC

On the other hand, as with Christians, so with Moslems, natures vary. How impossible it would be to generalize about the faith of the Mennonite, the Salvation Army lassie, and the society woman of high church connections. Yet all these are Christians. Things that could truthfully be said about one would have absolutely no application to either of the others. So also the Shia who beats her chest until she dies of exhaustion, weeping for the sorrows of her ancient hero Husain, is looked upon with scorn by her Mohammedan neighbors of the Sunnite sect. Nor is there any great similarity between the Moslem woman of devout religious nature and her more frivolous sister with whom the things of this world weigh more heavily than those of the next.

Our present effort at analysis claims neither to be complete nor exhaustive. Rather it is the idea to put together some of the observations we have made while associating with our friends in the harems and to

deduct from them what a woman who wanted to become a Moslem might expect to gain, of hope, of comfort and of courage from the religion of Mohammed.

I have never seen an atheist nor an agnostic among the women of Arabia. Great and small, good and bad, they all believe with unswerving faith in Allah, the "Creator of the universe, and in Mohammed His messenger." Their belief is also in a way, an affectionate one. Not that they would think of God as heavenly Father, but it is not uncommon to hear an unfortunate person exclaim: "I have no one left to me but Allah!" Not only have they faith in Allah, but they believe also in jinns, in demon possession, in enchantments, and all kinds of charms and magic. It seems never to occur to them to doubt the truth of the supernatural. Everything that falls to the lot of man is "from Allah." Everything which may or may not happen depends "upon Allah." Man cannot in any way escape what is written on his forehead, his fate. There is a certain amount of comfort in fatalism, for it leaves no room for regret or remorse. It takes away something of the agony of responsibility. "What is to be will be." What has happened was ordered by Allah. What use to chafe or to fret? Allah is merciful and kind, no matter how cruel His decrees. He has sent evil or good according to His desire. What is left to the believer but to submit to the inevitable? In spite of this, fatalism does not, it can not, prevent worry and mental pain.

To us the desire for reward is a mean and selfish motive. Not so to the Moslem. A higher motive seems not to be desired. One's reward in Paradise may be increased, in much the same way as one would augment his bank account. Almost daily some one of the patients in the dispensary is heard to explain to another that the missionaries treat poor people free in order to secure merit for so doing. Sometimes blind women are led to the dispensary for treatment by neighbors who desire the reward for this act of kindness. Many kind deeds are performed in this way. Strangely enough, in emergencies, when pressing need arises for someone to render real, self-sacrificing service to a fellow Moslem, no one seems to be ambitious to increase his heavenly account in just that particular way. How frequently do we hear the comment from Mohammedans themselves: "You Christians are merciful; mercy is unknown to Moslems."

Merit may be gained by giving alms, and almsgiving is very generally practiced by the rich. Even in homes of slender means the remains of the Arabs meals are regularly handed out to the hungry beggar who brings his bowl to the gate of the courtyard. It is seldom necessary for the poor to suffer from hunger. "Give me," they call out at the doorways, "of what belongs to God." I have never heard to such an appeal a harsh or unkind answer.

The sacred book of the Moslems is the Koran, but the reading of this book does not resemble our own study of the Bible. The reading is done in a loud and chanting tone, paying more attention to the rhythm of the words than to the meaning. The woman who can read the Koran, and

the majority of women never learn to read, gains great merit by each completion of the recitation from cover to cover. She can divert this merit to the account of some departed loved one or she may sell it to another person who is willing to pay for the act of reading. So far as I know, the Moslem woman never goes to her book, as we do to the Bible, for comfort, instruction, or guidance.

Prayer is an important part of the Moslem's life. Yet their prayers do not correspond to the Christian's prayer life. Five times in twenty-four hours the prayer-crier climbs to the top of his minaret and gives the call to worship for the faithful. Prayer must not be undertaken unless the body is ceremonially clean. Some sicknesses are considered defiling, and until the patient recovers he is not allowed to pray. A bandage is often the object of much concern to a devout woman. "How can I pray?" she will ask. "Can I pour the water for my ablutions over the bandage, or will you allow me to take the bandage off?" She could not pray at all unless she had made the prescribed ablutions. The prayer itself is a stated formula, accompanied by various changes in posture, erect, kneeling, or prostrating. It is performed slowly and with great dignity, facing toward Mecca, the holy city. The worshipper stands, if possible, upon a choice rug, or at least in a clean place. At sunset, one comes across praying Moslems on the seashore, on the sail-boats beached along the water's edge, on the verandahs of the hospital, and in almost every conceivable place. In the midst of a social call upon the missionaries Moslem ladies will excuse themselves, and, selecting a rug in the room, will perform their prayers in quietness and solemnity while their hostess waits.

Prayer seems to be looked upon as a duty. It is Allah's right to be worshipped by those He has created. Those who fulfil this duty acquire merit; those who do not are laying up trouble for themselves in the future. There is an approach to our idea of prayer in the ejaculatory supplications used so commonly by Moslems at all times. "May Allah give you strength!" "May Allah prolong your life!" Grateful patients sometimes exclaim: "Since you have relieved me of my sufferings, I have not ceased from asking blessing for you day or night." Such statements refer to these ejaculatory appeals or to petitions offered at the close of the formal worship. It seems that the person needing guidance or wisdom would not think of going apart to seek it from the heavenly source. But one who is in need of help really appreciates the spoken supplication of his friends and thinks they may be answered in his behalf.

In times of pain the Moslem sufferer calls loudly upon the name of Allah. "O Allah," she implores, "have mercy upon Thy creature. O my Lord, my dear Lord, my Beloved, deliver me from this pain!" "O Mohammed! O Allah! Thou Merciful One! Thou Most Merciful of the merciful! Look upon my plight!" And so, hour after hour. Those about respond at intervals, "He is faithful! He is merciful! He will help those who trust in Him!"