

NOTES ON CURRENT TOPICS

The Call of Arabia

Dr. Paul W. Harrison, has been voicing the call of Arabia before American churches and colleges. He believes that the peninsula would welcome medical missionaries everywhere, and that now is the time for establishing new work in the unoccupied provinces. "Not for decades nor for centuries has a call come to the Church of Christ such as every day brings to us from the Moslem world now. It is the call of open doors and great opportunity. Arabia, the citadel of Islam, is open, and all we have to do is, with faith and prayer, to enter. It is the Missionary to whom the door has opened." "You," said the chief of Debai to me with a fine engaging smile, "It is a good thing you did not come here in a steamer. You would never have gotten ashore. You are the first white man we have allowed in this city since the great trouble ten years ago." That was three years ago, and since then the doors have opened wider and wider. We have a standing invitation to come and establish a hospital there on the Pirate Coast, and the doctor to do it is in sight.

The strange people that inhabit the region back of Ras el Kheima beckon to us with the same request. They have a language entirely different from Arabic, and customs that remind one of college boys rooting at a football game. No explorer even has penetrated their mountain fastnesses, but a medical missionary can do so at any time that the Church sends him out.

Hassa is open—Hassa the province ruled over by the most feared man in all Arabia, a man to whom human life is a cheap and light thing when it is possessed by a criminal or an enemy, but who is a father to his people, especially to the poor and defenseless. He is one of the sincerest and most outstanding friends that the Mission has. The medical missionary can come to Hassa whenever he has time, and stay as long as he wishes. He can bring other missionaries with him. Hassa is open, Kateef is open, Kattar is open. There is not a closed door in all that region."

The Hejaz Railway

During the war, the railway between Damascus and Medina was blown up in several places, bridges damaged and traffic ended. The question of the restoration of this pilgrim route came up at Lausanne. We learn from the Egyptian press that an agreement has been made for joint control and restoration of the line, as follows:

"In a declaration dated January 27, the Government of Great Britain and France, acting in the name of Syria, Palestine and Transjordan, and in order to give effect to the desire to recognize the religious character of the Hedjaz Railway, declare their willingness to agree to the formation of a Moslem Council to advise upon the upkeep and maintenance of the line. This Council will comprise four Moslem

members, nominated by Syria, Palestine, Transjordan and the Hedjaz respectively, and two additional members chosen from the Moslem inhabitants of other countries interested in the pilgrimage. Its seat will be at Medina. All profits from at least, the sections in Syria, Palestine and Transjordan will be applied to the maintenance and general betterment of the whole line, any sums that then remain being applied to the assistance of pilgrims. It is stipulated that the recommendations of the Moslem Council shall not be in opposition to the requirements of the International Sanitary Conventions.

"No mention of Turkey is made in this Declaration, although the dispute really lies between that country and the King of the Hedjaz. We may recall that the line was built by Sultan Abdul Hamid with funds which he collected from all over the Moslem world, for the sole purpose of facilitating the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. To what extent the arrangement now come to will be affected by any decision taken by Angora with regard to the signing of the Peace Treaty is problematical."

Moharram and Its Passion Play in Baghdad

The following interesting account of the Moslem Passion Play, as performed at Baghdad last year, is condensed from an article by E. S. Stevens in *The Near East*.

Moharram is just over—"without incident." This is always a matter of congratulation for the police, upon whom the business devolves of keeping order among the excited and fanatical crowds brought together by Moharram, and tactfully and cleverly they perform their duties. A Persian flagellant dead of his austerities; an indiscreet Jew mauled a little—these were the only casualties this year.

Some Sunnis courteously gave us permission to view the processions from the roof of a mosque which, situated in a roomy square into which a number of narrow streets from other quarters converge, gave us a good view of the various processions as they came up and passed through the square. The streets and coffee-houses were already crowded with spectators as we drove up, just before nine, and every roof was edged with black-veiled women gazing below.

The frequenters—or, as we should say, "congregation"—of each mosque get up a procession for themselves, so that one may see as many as six or seven separate processions in one quarter in a night. There is, naturally, rivalry, and thus the maximum of effort is produced by each band of devotees. There is little collaboration between the processions, with the result that one may have to wait in a side street while another is passing through the square, and it is possible to witness, as we did several processions at once from a vantage point such as the flat roof of our mosque—flagellants chanting and scourging themselves beneath, in one street; half-naked breast-beaters in another, their arms moving upward like flails in the torchlight and coming down on their bare breasts with a savage thud, and in a third the solemn splendour of Hussein and his horsemen with sacred banners, green and gold, and tall standards of wrought metal. But all eventually pass through the square, and it is better to sit on the strip of roof which dominates it. The smoky glare of the torches and petroleum flares, the fitful thunder of the drums, the chanting, the strident noise of the brass instruments, and, above all, the long, shrill wails of the women on the housetops, make

it easy to believe one is witnessing a scene of Dante's Inferno. Some of these souls in torment, however, on this seventh night are merely feigning torment. The chain-men do not flay their backs with great vigor, and the breast-beaters' chests, though bruised, are not broken and bleeding as happens on the two last days. They are reserving their greatest efforts till then. Occasionally a devotee will pause and light a cigarette or fall out to take a cup of coffee as it is offered from the crowd.

The order of the procession varies, but is roughly as follows:—First of all come torch-bearers, then the *mash-al*, a wooden crossbar mounted on a pole, about fifteen feet across, to which are affixed some twenty tin sockets. Into these rags soaked in petroleum are stuffed, and are fed with oil from a can while still alight. Showers of sparks and burning pieces fall on the crowd perpetually, setting some unfortunate person a-smoulder, or the *mash-al* holder himself, whose garments and turban are permanently charred. There are usually people suffering from burns in the hospital after Moharram, and houses often catch fire in the narrow streets. Sometimes the *mash-al* bearer dances and whirls the flaming thing around, sending down showers of fire. The torches are made of oil-rag, flares on long poles. The kerosene is carried in skins on a donkey or in tins in a push-cart so that the flares are never suffered to die down. Drums precede the procession, and each section has its own drums. The flagellants scourge themselves to the beat of the drum; as it quickens, their blows rain faster.

Next come led horses, heavily caparisoned and draped with embroideries, and often bearing steel helmets transfixed by arrows. Later on in Moharram, Hussein's steed is covered by a blood-stained sheet transfixed by numerous darts. Then come Hussein, his brother Abbas, his family, and his followers, riding on more caparisoned horses. Hussein and Abbas wear splendid armour, usually old Persian armour inlaid with gold and silver, borrowed from curio-dealers, or kept in store from one year to the next, some of it extremely fine. All the followers of Hussein are clothed in green. Qasim, Hussein's cousin, is usually played by a handsome youth, for his wedding was to have been held on the day of battle in which he was slain, and his bridal bed decorated with silken hangings and lamps, and a gay lit model of the bridal chamber (El Gubba) are borne in this part of the procession.

"Breast-beaters are men of finer physique than the chain-men, and are naked to the waist. They are mostly men of low class—boatmen, porters, labourers, and the like. They do not beat themselves continually, but at intervals their leader turns and faces them, calls a halt, and in a wild, rapid chant, incites them to effort. Or they utter short exclamations such as "Ali! Ali!" or "Hussein! Hussein!" The pace gradually increases and becomes fiercer till suddenly, at a second signal, they stop and move on, often linking arms and chanting as they go.

The processions on the eighth night are more elaborate. The "corpses" of Hussein, Abbas, Abdullah, and others are borne along and work the beholders to a frenzy of grief. The hands and feet of the "corpse" protrude from the blood-stained stump, the actor's own head being covered by the sheet. The corpse of Hussein is guarded by two tethered doves, their feathers dabbled in blood, and on his bier sits a little girl representing his daughter, her hair dishevelled and strewn with earth and grass, wailing and flinging her arms over the body.