

My First Arab Meal

MISS CORNELIA DALENBERG

OF all our new and interesting experiences since we came to Bahrein I think the picnic at Moharrek was one of the happiest. Not a jaunt out to the woods, to be sure, with baskets loaded down with sandwiches, pies and wienies, but a Picnic just the same!

It was during the Christmas holidays that the ladies of our mission received an invitation to spend a day with Ayesha, who lives on the island of Moharrek. It seems that this had been planned for some time and all of us were looking forward to the event eagerly. Unfortunately the invitation came on a day when the Mission was holding "Open House" for all the Persian women and children of the vicinity, so only three of us could go.

Mrs. Harrison, Miss Rachel Jackson and I set out, leaving Bahrein about noon. It was about a half-hour's ride by sailboat to the other island and the tide was out when we arrived, so we had to go ashore by donkey. My first donkey ride! That is commonplace enough for anyone who has been here, I presume, and the donkeys, too, seemed to be serenely unconscious of anything unusual as they splashed through the water. My donkey's back was broad enough to insure safe transit so there really was nothing to be alarmed about but the giddy spectacle of the two figures ahead of me trying to keep their balance was too much for me, and I must confess I was glad to reach dry land.

With such an exciting initiation the day promised to be full of interest and it surely turned out to be so. Our hostess was one of the wives of the heir apparent. She lives with her father who is also a sheikh. He is very solicitous for her welfare and as a result she is given rather more freedom than most Arab women seem to enjoy, especially when her husband is away. On this particular day he had gone away, I understand, and Ayesha had planned her feast accordingly. When we reached the sheikh's house, which was about five minutes' walk from shore, we were welcomed at the door by some of Ayesha's friends who ushered us up to her mejlis (reception room) on the second floor. A few guests were already seated in this room; we went through the formalities of greeting and then found places on the rugs beside them. After a few moments Ayesha herself entered. She was elaborately dressed, bedecked with jewels, and heavily perfumed. There was a quiet dignity about her that I have not seen in any of the other Arab women we have met, and she looked almost queenly as she walked about the room greeting her guests. She welcomed Mrs. Harrison warmly—they are very good friends—and seemed interested in the two new "Khatuns." How I wish we could have talked to her! She had such a sweet wistful look; I longed to ask her hundreds of questions. But all we could do was gaze admiringly at her as she seated herself gracefully on the rug and proceeded to tell about her plans for the afternoon. We were to wait at the house until their two machines,

owned by her father and husband, returned. So the women chatted with each other while we slid up closer to Ayesha in order to inspect and admire her jewelry. She slipped one of her broad gold bracelets from her arm and let us try it on. It was too small, of course; all the Arab women I have seen are very slight.

Soon there was a commotion outside and we heard the two machines chugging into the court space. We went down, all of the Arab women drawing their veils and carefully keeping their covered faces averted from the crowd as we entered the court. Amid the awe-inspired gaze of the onlookers who had gathered from the streets round about, we piled in, ten of us in the seven passenger car and the remaining number, seven or eight, in the other car, which was a five passenger. The velvet-jacketed Indian chauffeur clicked the doors and we were off.

I wish you could have seen those two cars dashing, actually *dashing*, through the narrow tortuous passageways between the houses,—streets, did you say? while dark figures scurried away out of the path of danger, and curious faces peered out at us from narrow cracks and openings in the buildings. We finally reached the broad opening outside the village, and, needless to say, breathed more freely. All except the chauffeur, whose equanimity had not been disturbed in the least. He seemed to have been utterly calloused to danger! The ride through the open, over the wide white sands, was delightful. Recent rains had made the paths beautifully smooth and solid, as good as any boulevard in America. In less time than it takes to tell it we reached the end of the island and saw before us a magnificent date garden which Ayesha told us was her father's. We alighted there and the machines were sent back to the village.

Ayesha and some of her friends went to a small building at one end of the garden to receive other guests who were coming and incidentally to supervise the preparation of the meal. Meanwhile the rest of us wandered about the garden, walking on the soft shady paths between the vividly green patches of alfalfa, or sitting on the edge of the well, watching some of the women eat radishes which they had pulled out of the ground. A most unusual sight to me, because they ate leaves and all! After a bit our hostess came out and joined us; we admired her garden and she showed us all around. When we came to the windmill, an American one which has been set up just recently by Mr. Pennings and Mr. Dykstra, she showed us how it pumped water into the little irrigation ditches. But she was puzzled because it was not working. Why wasn't the wheel going round; was the machinery out of order, she wondered. Mrs. Harrison explained to her that the wind made the wheel go round and there was no wind just then. When we had seen all of the garden she led us back to the mejlis where the others were assembled. The number had grown surprisingly; there were approximately fifty of us, but the room was large so we all found comfortable seats on the rugs spread around the sides. The women seated nearest Mrs. Harrison began asking her about us, the new Khatuns, as we are

called. They tried to converse with us and thought we were most stupid because we could not understand them. They felt so sorry for us, too, because we had no husbands. So old, and not married! From another part of the room a voice rose above the hub-bub; a rather pleasant voice raised to a high pitch half singing, half chanting in a weird minor tone. "Can she be singing." I asked. No, she was reading. The company quieted down and listened. Parts of the story must have been interesting or amusing; a response came now and then—a laugh here, a titter there. Parts of it seemed to be familiar, too; others joined in and chanted a few lines with the reader. It was most weird, and not at all my idea of a picnic!

Coffee, then tea were served. You have all read about the way Arabs serve coffee, with their tiny little cups and long-nosed coffee-pots. And you have heard about Arab coffee, that bitterest of bitter beverages! After my first taste of Arab coffee I decided that the sooner it was down my throat the better and tried swallowing the contents of my cup in one gulp. Fortunately they do not fill the cups. But that was poor policy: the minute my cup was empty it was promptly refilled. After that I made the first one last. One is grateful for the tea which follows; it is far more palatable.

So the afternoon passed and through the small openings in the wall we saw the sun was setting. It was the hour of prayer. One by one the guests passed out of the room and we watched them going singly and in groups to different parts of the garden to say their prayers. Meanwhile, preparations for the meal had been going on in a certain part of the garden. From the window where I sat I could see a large charcoal fire under one of the ethyl trees, with cooking utensils and steaming kettles standing around and figures scuttling to and from the well. Fragrant odors were wafted to us from this spot and when finally all the guests had reassembled and the first signs of food appeared, we all agreed in English and in Arabic that it was a most welcome sight.

Two large straw mats were brought in, about eight or nine feet in diameter. These were arranged on the floor far enough apart to allow plenty of seating space around each one. We drew up around the mats; every inch of available space was occupied. The problem of heating guests at an Arab meal is solved simply by sitting *tight*. When every one had found a place Ayesha asked Mrs. Harrison to ask a blessing. I thought this very considerate and respectful of her since this custom, I understand, is entirely foreign to them.

A servant came in carrying a large tray piled high with rice,—a veritable mountain of it, and over the rice, gracefully draped, lay a whole sheep, head and all, "done to a turn," as we say at home. This was placed in the middle of the mat while another servant scattered dates here and there and loaves of Arab bread. Their loaves are large and flat, like our pancakes.

The meal was ready. Arms stretched across from all directions and soon cadaverous holes began to appear in the one-time shapely mountain

of rice. I must say they have eating with their hands down to a fine art. Try as I would, I could not get a handful of rice to my mouth without losing half of it. I watched the others and saw that they squeezed each handful deftly and getting their thumbs under the lump thus formed, shoved sections of it in their mouths. As a matter of fact, I was so busy watching the others that I rather missed out myself. I envied Mrs. Harrison and Miss Jackson, who were eating with apparent ease and facility. I asked them, "Do you like it," and they assured me they did. It certainly looked like it; they were enjoying it as if they might have been eating creamed chicken off Haviland China plates.

The food was fast disappearing. Two or three of the women pulled the meat apart and distributed large chunks of it to those who could not reach it themselves. The huge pile grew smaller and smaller. At this stage I managed to get a bit of the stuffing of the sheep, which was a mixture of some kind of cereal, seeds and whole hard-boiled eggs. You might not have recognized them as such, but they were real eggs and powerfully good! We finished up on dates.

An Arab meal does not last long. There are no delays waiting for courses, no conversation to amount to anything, and the food is very rich so one needs but little of it. One by one the women paddled out to the doorway where someone had mercifully provided a pitcher of hot water to pour over our hands. I stole a glance at their hands as they went by: only the tips of their fingers needed washing, while my hand was greasy to the wrist. By this time the autos had returned to take us back. It is one of the points of Arab etiquette, I learned, to leave soon after refreshments have been served. Ayesha thanked us for coming, Mrs. Harrison in turn expressed our appreciation of her hospitality. So ended our picnic. No baskets to carry home, no fires to quench, no empty pickle bottles to throw into a near-by stream. This had been a novel picnic indeed. Wouldn't you like to be invited to an outing like this? Ayesha asked us to come again and we are looking forward to our next visit to Moharrek.



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