



## The Bounds of their Habitation

MRS. JOHN VAN ESS

*"And He made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek after God if haply they might feel after Him and find Him."—Acts 17:26-27.*

THIS is a day when I make a round of calls on some of my former school girls, so we will begin at this house on the creek, which would have a lovely view if all the windows were not so tightly closed and shuttered, giving it almost the look of a blind house. We go into the little hall-way, past the door-keeper who sits half asleep, cross-legged on his bench, fingering a Moslem rosary, and in through a heavy inner door which leads to the women's quarters. Nothing blind here! The inside courtyard is full of bustle and life, one black serving woman washing clothes as she squats on her heels on the stones in front of her copper tub of suds, another in the smoky kitchen, busy over rows of pots bubbling on charcoal fires and sending out most savoury aromas; a Jewess peddler of small wares coming down the stairs, chuckling over the good bargains she has made and the last bit of gossip she has retailed, with her pins and tapes, to the residents of the harem. Up the stairs we go and into a little room which overlooks the court yard. It is spread with rugs and cushions and here, sitting near a charcoal brazier of beaten brass, we find the mistress of the house, a stout and pleasant-faced Arab lady whom we used to call Um Yusuf (Mother of Joseph), but whom since her return two years ago from the pilgrimage to Mecca it is courteous to address as Hajjia.

We exchange the customary salaam and kalaam with her, literally greetings and talk, and then she calls out loudly "Bedrea, oh, Bedrea! Come, come quickly! Here is your teacher come to see you!" And then comes in my dear ex-pupil, the Hajjia's daughter-in-law, whose pretty Arabic name means Full Moon, and whose face is beaming almost like one. In her arms she bears proudly her beautiful three-months-old baby, as chubby and winsome and well cared for a mite of humanity as one could find anywhere in Arabia or America. "There," she exclaims, as she dumps him in my lap, "doesn't he smell like a rose? He has just had his bath." He does indeed, and I agree most heartily, while the baby surveys me with a solemn black-eyed stare. "Well," says his grandmother, the Hajjia, "I certainly did think it would kill that baby to be washed all over every day in this cold weather—his head, too! But God is great!" "I do everything just as you and the lady doctor told me," continues Bedrea, "Bath, clean clothes every day, powder, everything." She is torn between a desire to boast about the baby's splendid condition, and the Arab superstition that such remarks will bring down the evil eye, "tempting Providence," as it is called in more favored localities.

We talk for some time about the baby's future, how he is to go to school as young as possible, never be absent, and never, never use swear words or other bad language, and he sits cooing and gurgling in my

arms. We speak with satisfaction of the excellent progress Munera, Bedrea's sister-in-law is making after an operation in the Government Women's Hospital by the English lady doctor. This was the most radical step ever taken by the conservative old family, fully equal to the baby's daily bath, and the Hajjia is still astonished at herself that she finally gave her consent. This daughter was with her mother when she went to Mecca. "Do you know," she says to me, "Bedrea says she never cares to go to Mecca!" "No, I don't want to go on the pilgrimage and I don't ever intend to. I'm a Feringi (European) in that respect," says Bedrea, with a side-long glance at me, as much as to say that she would say a good deal more to me if her kindly but fanatical mother-in-law were not present. Just now coffee is brought in the picturesque long-beaked Arab coffee pot, and poured into the little handleless coffee cups and passed to each one. One woman who is sitting with us refuses it. "I'm fasting today," she says. "She is making up for some days she lost during Ramadhan through illness," explains the Hajjia to me. "You Christians don't fast, do you?" In a few minutes we are well launched on a discussion of fasting, pilgrimages and Islam in general. "Look here, Um Yusuf," I say, "now don't be angry with me, but what possible difference can it make to God, the Creator of all, whether you eat by day or night? You only fast from sunrise to sunset, does it make you think more about your soul to do your eating in the middle of the night?" She laughs and I go on, "Now our religion, the religion of Christ, teaches that the things we must fast from aren't eating and drinking, but from evil thoughts, bad speaking, bad temper, telling untruths or unkind things, things of the heart and not of the body." "Very good speaking, excellent words," she approves, "but your religion for you, and ours for us. These things are written for us, it is our fate." "Hajjia, think for a moment," I continue, earnestly, "of what you and I have often talked about, the condition of women in Islam. Think of the miseries of plural marriage, and divorce, and young girls married to evil old men, and family quarrels and divisions, all the direct result of your religion, and its laws." She nods agreement, with her face heavy and sad, and all the women present give an assenting murmur. All these things are too well known for us to need to cite even one case for proof. "Very well, you agree to that. Now can you believe that God, be He praised and exalted, could possibly decree a religion which would involve over half of the people that He has created in such oppression and misery? How could He possibly write such a fate over you and all your fellow women of Islam?" But the Hajjia is a devout and loyal Mohammedan of the old school and when she finds herself cornered she takes back part that she has conceded and says firmly, "No one but God can understand all things, but what He has written on us He has written. It is our fate." Bedrea has been listening quietly but with her beautiful dark eyes eloquent. She studied the Bible carefully and thoroughly when she was in school and as I take out my Testament and read to them a little before I go she kindles inwardly to the familiar words.

Our next call is at a far humbler place but we have an equally hearty welcome. Fatima and her husband rent one room in a one-story house on a small side street and the courtyard is full of neighbors' children and washing and chickens, with a large sheep tied in one corner and a half grown gazelle wandering around bumping into everyone's feet. But Fatima's little room is clean and neat, with a large bed in one end, draped in the pink silk curtains which were part of her wedding outfit five years ago, clean mats and cushions on the floor, and ranged round the wall the brass-studded boxes and brightly colored baskets with covers which hold all her possessions. She is a slender delicate looking girl, with a wistful expression, and it is a great grief to her that she has no children. So far her husband, a young Arab of rather modern type, who is in Government employ, has not laid it up against her and has not yet mentioned another wife, or divorce, those two great dreads which overshadow the life of every Mohammedan wife. She has a great deal of liberty too, and is practically never refused permission to go out visiting her friends. While she is getting ready a little tray of nuts and sweetmeats with which to regale us, I will tell you what happened once on one of her calls. I wasn't there but the story was told me afterwards by Makkia. Makkia is one of our Bahrein converts, a black woman, and while she was in Basrah last winter she used to do a great deal of calling among the Mohammedan families and was nearly always asked to read them. One day she was reading in the harem of a well-to-do grocer in Ashar, women who were very fanatical and who seemed to enjoy hearing the Gospel chiefly so that they could contradict and deny it. In the midst of it a flock of visitors came in but after they had laid aside their black veils and abbas, or cloaks, and exchanged greetings Makkia went on. Suddenly one of the visitors interrupted her, "Why that's my book that you are reading! Where did you get it? What do you know about it?" "It's my book too," replied Makkia. "I am a Christian." "Yes, but where did you hear about it? Who taught you?" persisted the other. "Oh, all the missionary ladies, here and in Bahrein, for years and years," said Makkia, running over the names, but she was interrupted again by Fatima exclaiming, "It was my teacher and that is my Injil (Gospel) that I studied and learned when I was in school!" "Are you a Christian?" asked Makkia directly. "God knows," answered Fatima solemnly. At this the lady of the house, who had been listening with the greatest interest, said, "Well, I always supposed this was something Makkia had made up, but if you know about it too and know that it is true, there must be something in it! Go on Makkia, I will listen to it now. This is quite a different matter." I could hardly believe my ears when I heard about this incident afterwards. Fatima, though always a sweet and gentle girl, had been one of a crowd and not particularly quick at learning, nor in school long enough for me to feel sure how much impression had been made on her, and yet years afterward in a purely Moslem company she gave such testimony as this because of the strength of her conviction that she had heard the truth.

Now we hurry along the narrow streets to the house where we are

to have lunch. Our hostesses are two sisters who were married last year to their cousins, two brothers. Not for them is the pleasure which Fatima enjoys of going about. After they left school, they never went outside the house, except to go down the river to their grandmother's country place, until they were married and came to their new home. I supposed that now they would be allowed to make an occasional call for their husbands are up-to-date young men, who have studied at Beirut College and have many advanced ideas—but no! "Father told us," said one of the girls, laughing ruefully, "that if we tried to go out of our house, now, because we're married he would come over here and give us such a beating with his own hands as we had never imagined!" They have quantities of lovely clothes and jewels, and each girl has a suite of rooms gorgeously furnished in Turkish style, mirrors, carved furniture, wardrobes and cupboards, marble-topped tables, and elaborate chairs and settees, and of course any amount of most beautiful rugs. We have a delightful luncheon with the girls and their mothers and various other friends, and do full justice to the delicious chicken and rice, mutton stew and dolmas, crisp Arab bread, delicate milk-pudding (we're glad it is not flavored with rose-water this time) and many other good things. We finish off with oranges, and then sit around the big brass samovar and sip our tea from the little Persian tea-glasses, talking of many things. When it is time for us to go they urge us to come again and again. "We can't come to see you, it's no use talking about it even, but please, please, you come to see us as often as you can!" they say.

There is only time for one more call today so we will go around to a little settlement in the gardens beyond the town a bit to see my little Khadija—little no more but always called that when she was a tiny girl in school to distinguish her from other and bigger Khadijas. Her mother was a poor widow, a servant in an Arab house near the school and she first sent the bright-eyed demure little tot to us to keep her out of mischief and out of her way. Khadija adored the motion songs and the occupation work we gave her when she was not engaged with the mysteries of the Alif, Ba, Ta, of the Arabic alphabet. Her progress was hindered by frequent long absences, not always explainable. Once her mother took her to Baghdad on a visit to relatives, and later she had her head shaved after measles, to keep her from going blind, so of course could not come to school till her hair grew out! For some years she was one of our "regular irregular" pupils, but when she grew old enough to be useful in the house she dropped out entirely. We see her occasionally and she and her mother are always glad to have us come in, listen with sympathy and interest when we read to them, although with the resigned "these things are not for us" air that so many Moslem women have.

These are a few of the many girls who have come and gone in school during the past years. Narrow indeed are the physical "bounds of their habitation," but who can doubt that their minds and hearts "seek after God if haply they might feel after Him and find Him!"