



# *NEGLECTED ARABIA*

Missionary News and Letters

Published Quarterly

FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION AMONG THE FRIENDS OF  
THE ARABIAN MISSION

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## A Visit Along the Coast

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FOR a long time it has been my desire to visit the villages along the coast southeast of Maskat. Although an opportunity presented itself for such a tour during the Christmas festivities, I did not feel that I could leave Maskat at that time. Then came the week of prayer, which only under rare circumstances I could afford to miss. However, on January 12th we left by sailboat for Koriat, the first important village thirty-five miles from Maskat. Before we arrived half way the wind was strong and the waves beat high and they roared angrily. The boat was not large but the sail tremendous, so we made time. But suddenly the rudder jumped off its hinge—as these rudders have a habit of doing—and the wind whipped the sail and nearly upset the boat. But like minute men the sailors loosed the ropes and lowered the sail. Though we were bobbing up and down for twenty minutes, the rudder was replaced and a smaller one hoisted, then we proceeded, though more slowly, and with less joviality and not without some anxiety. Our landing was made with difficulty in a small canoe, but no damage was done here except that our clothes and bedding got wet. Paul's voyage and shipwreck mean more to me since I have become acquainted with sailboats.

In Koriat we were entertained by the Wali. He seemed greatly honored by our visit. His specialty did not seem to me to be religion. When I opened religious discussion he had the habit of leaving. Asking why he repeatedly did this, the men told me that he went out to have a smoke. There was only one among his men who made any objection to Christianity and he must have been the religious leader. Most of them said that our religion is like theirs, although they know very well that we have no place for Mohammed. The Wali has thirty soldiers under him and their main occupation is eating dates and drinking coffee and escorting him on his morning walks. I was asked to walk with him one morning. At three different places we squatted on the ground for the purpose of eating dates and drinking coffee. Waste

of time has no meaning to them. They do not waste it for they have nothing to do. The fishermen, however, know their luck; before the East turns to red, they are far out at sea, and at noon bring in their draught of fish, minnows, sardines, sharks, etc. But they, too, are quite content to sit when the wind blows for days and they cannot catch fish.

The next village we visited was Doghmar. I had a letter to the head man of the village and when he read it he said, "On my head and eye," which means, "Leave it to me." He gave us a room six by eight feet in a date stick house, but it was the best he had. He is an old man who had lately married a second wife who was a kind of servant in the house. When the elder wife was down with fever, I noticed the younger took the care of the children, although it was evident not as a mother would. The host slept in the cramped quarters with us and watched our movements. "What a wonderful thing a camp cot is!" "A lantern!" "What fuss these people make over their beds!" Such comments must have come to his mind as he scrutinized us. He thought my prayer before retiring very short and simple. I did not observe any ablutions; did not face Mecca nor change my posture in prayer. These were no doubt serious omissions, but the fact that I prayed put me in a class with all good Muslims.

The only person in the village able to read with any degree of fluency was the village schoolmistress. She put the men to shame. She willingly accepted a Gospel of Matthew, and there is no reason why the first chapter on the manner of Christ's birth and the sermon on the Mount should not be intensely interesting to her. Here we hired a small sailboat, small enough to respond to the oar as well as to the wind and sail. This could be hauled on shore in stormy weather. There was ample time and opportunity for reflection. For five solid hours we sat on that little boat, talking little but thinking a good deal. We passed many small villages and at sundown made a landing at Bema. I never anticipated such difficulty in getting the boat safely on shore. Some of the waves were about six feet high and although thirty men pulled with might and main, the boat was not safely landed between waves. Just as the stern of the boat was on shore and higher than the bow, a wave rolled in and filled the boat. This time we kept our bedding dry by casting it ashore before the waves had filled the stern, but the charcoal was soaked.

At Bema the people stood very much aloof. We asked for the sheikh of the place but found that he was not in. No one, not even the boys were willing to guide us to his dwelling. Of course no house was offered to us until I reminded them that their book offers great reward to the man who harbors a stranger even though he is of a different faith. One old fellow was more friendly than any, but he proved to be an Indian fakir making his way to Mecca and had come this far after two months' tramping. No doubt he expected some help from us, a pilgrim stranger to the forbidden cities. When we were comfortably settled for the night in a mud house I was called to see a young man stricken with malaria. I knew how his head was aching;

how his bones were twisting as if out of joint. We have all had it. He was more than grateful for some quinine and some salts. After sundown, although scarcely able to walk, he came to our house and said in a trembling voice, "Sir, if I were better I would not let you sleep here. I would want you in my house. But if you are here tomorrow noon you are to eat lunch with me." There was no doubt of his sincerity. It was like cold water in the desert. He was more like the real Arab.

It is difficult to imagine denser ignorance than we met in Bema. When I repeated, "In the beginning God created Heaven and Earth," five times and they seemed none the wiser, I began to sing the National Hymn in Arabic. They caught the words and asked me to sing it



A COTTON SPINNER AT SAFALA—OMAN

repeatedly. Only perpetual repetition will make an impression on these poor fishing villagers. In the morning the sheikh appeared. After making enquiries about me, he called me aside, and thinking I had inside information about politics asked me what benefit the nations were to them. I asked what nations he meant. Thereupon he said, "England, of course, the Sultan of Maskat is finished." I told him I was an American and thus had nothing to do with politics in Arabia. However, I said that I could not see why a Government should support the people and not the people the Government. This struck him as an idea so radical that he rose up and went and told me to do likewise. After

meeting the sheikh, it became very plain why the people were so peculiar. In all these places, "As the king so the people."

After Bema we were prepared to meet almost anything. We had no reason to expect a better reception at the next village. A landing was made, again at sundown. The boat was not dragged on shore this time, there being no people to assist in the difficult operation. The waves were not high but they rolled. One of the sailors offered to carry me ashore. As I was well perched on his shoulders, he lost his balance and I plunged into the water. I had fortunately removed my shoes and coat so that when I landed I could at least put them on dry. The boatmen begged for permission to return although they had promised to take us to Sur, fifteen miles farther. But we dismissed them; we were as weary of them as they of us. On our return I learned that they lay along this shore four days because of contrary winds.

The people of Kalhat—where we had now landed—were expecting their sheikh from Maskat. When they spied our sail they came to the sea to welcome him. This was our good fortune. They did not seem disappointed that we came and not the sheikh. Immediately I saw that the people were different from those of Bema of the night before. We did not ask for a house. They offered one and were glad to entertain us. I think they took pity on us as we stood shivering on the seashore. The boys saddled our luggage and we were made to feel at home. A splendid dinner was prepared and after eating it we felt none the worse for the trip.

Kalhat is a very old town, nestled in the hollow of towering rocks, twenty minutes from the sea. A large proportion of the people can read and write, and the former missionaries and especially Ibrahim the colporteur are well remembered. We sold some Bible portions but the demand was for books on history, poetry and medicine. They were exceedingly anxious to know the affairs of the nations—and especially of Mesopotamia, Turkey and Syria. They get all their news from hearsay and it is surprising how much they know, although much is misinformation.

After spending the night in Kalhat, we left by donkey for Sur, the largest place on the East coast of Oman. Inquiring about the distance and difficulty of the trip, we received as many different answers as we asked questions. Some said we could make it in one hour, some two and others four. They think as little of distance as the cow-punchers of Wyoming, and they have no more accurate conception of the length of an hour than we get from the expression, "A little while." This is only natural as they have no watches and do not have to catch any trains. It took us actually five hours and the donkeys went on the trot.

Sur must have a population of not less than 10,000 for they tell me there are about 2,000 houses. The city sends out 100 large sail vessels and 2,000 smaller craft to India, Basrah, Aden and Port Said. It is situated at the mouth of a winding river which forms an ideal protection for native craft in windy weather. It is an old city. Col.

Miles says it is the prototype of ancient Tyre on the Mediterranean. He says it was the ancient distributing center for commerce between India and Babylonia. But for the lack of roads across the desert to the Red Sea, it might have retained its ancient prestige.

I presented a letter of introduction from the Sultan of Maskat to the Wali. He received us royally and entertained us lavishly. He is not yet forty years of age, but quite able to perform the task laid upon him. I understand his main qualities are sociability and liberality. The kitchen fire never goes out and the coffee pot is never cold. Dates and coffee are ever in order, the first thing in the morning and the last in the evening. This is a *sine qua non* with the Bedouin tribes. A stingy ruler in Arabia is short lived. When the tribes from the desert come in and demand a sum of money he produces it. He is one with them, on the hunt and in the house. It is quite plain that this is the secret of his success. He was equally free and easy with me. I naturally took advantage of his openness in presenting some Christian truth. He was not at all fanatic. It was quite plain, however, that he had objection to religious discussion in the presence of the other men. He said such discussions did not benefit. They would never become Christians and we would never become Muslems. I therefore refrained from such discussion in public but did not lose the opportunity when I was alone with him. He accepted as a present a leather bound New Testament and promised to read it.

The second day at Sur we went to a house of mourning. An influential merchant, lately returned from our hospital in Bahrein, had passed away. The custom prevails there as in Maskat, that when a death occurs the relatives remain in seclusion for three days, during which time people come to mourn with them. Custom demands that they kill the fatted calf at this time. It is an abominable custom and a great burden to the bereaved relatives. A death is made an occasion of feasting as well as mourning. We were ushered into a dark room where no less than fifty men sat, repeating the first Sura of the Koran and praying for the departed and his relatives. At noon the biggest Arab dinner was given I have seen since coming to Maskat. If this was any indication of their lavish entertainment, they must have slaughtered numbers of sheep and oiled bags of rice. As we left the house one could see squads of men squatting on the ground taking it all in. There was not much chance for a message here for I was a perfect stranger. I thought them quite liberal to let this strange Christian in at all. However, I related some death bed experiences of my own relatives, showing thereby that death need not be a loss but a distinct gain. This, according to Muslem thought, is anomalous, for Allah may not choose to give the deceased that bliss he imagines is awaiting him. Hence the prayer for the dead. Even after death, man's fate is in the hands of the great artificer. There is no assurance, no "Let not our heart be troubled," no song but a dirge at a Muslem funeral. To attend one of them is a painful experience.

The last day in Sur was spent in a rich Arab's house. This man was also planning to go to our Bahrein hospital for a much-needed

operation. He and his son were very busy bringing planks, rigging, etc., of a steamship that had partly foundered near Ras-Al-Had two years ago. He bought it for 5,000 Maria Theresa dollars from the Bedouin sheikhs who had received it from the British as a present. He plans to take the parts to Bombay and sell them for three times that price. His son was most interesting in the questions he asked us. Here are some of them: "Are the nations still at war? Has Mesopotamia independence now? Have the Americans discovered the North Pole? Have they reached the moon with their aeroplanes? Where is the darkness? Our book says that Alexander the Great went to a place of darkness. Who built the pyramids?" Among all his questions none was about the person of Jesus Christ. It was a most difficult task to wedge in Christian truth of any kind. He must have felt like another man in Sur, who, when I offered him a Gospel, said, "O, we want news about politics and business, things of the present. We have the book for the future life and that has abrogated all the religious books that went before." No doubt these are the sentiments of hundreds in Arabia.

Sur is a great missionary field. The fact that people travel all the way to Bahrein for relief from their ailments shows that they need and want our hospitals and doctors. It has a vast region of Bedouin population to the south and west. The trade routes lead to Inland Oman so that a doctor could start from there as well as from Matrah to visit the hinterland. I am told the climate is more healthful than that of Maskat. That is quite possible as the soil is sandy and there are no mountains near to stop the breezes in summer. The big problem is lack of sweet water. All drinking water is brought from Bilad—the place where the Wali resides—a distance of four miles. In summer this is a *burning question*. The missionary who could get the people to agree to put in a pumping system and erect a tank on the rock half way between, would bestow an untold blessing upon the place, and it would give him an influence invaluable in the future.

To think that in all these villages there is no witness for the Gospel brings one to his knees. A visit to them reemphasizes the fact that Christ only supplies the needs of the human heart. "And this is life eternal that they should know Thee, the only true God."

