

NEGLECTED ARABIA.

April - June, 1908.

THE PASSION PLAY AT BAHREIN.

DR. S. J. THOMS.

This is the tenth of Muharrem, the Mohammedan sacred month, the day on which Hussein, the grandson of the prophet Mohammed, was killed on the plains of their now sacred city, Kerbela, in A. D. 680.

In commemoration of this event a drama was written of which Sir Lewis Pelly says, "If the success of the drama is to be measured by the effect it produces upon the people for whom it is composed or upon the audiences before whom it is represented, no play has ever surpassed the tragedy known in the Moslem world as that of Hassan and Hussein. Matthew Arnold, in his *Essays on Criticism*, elegantly sketches the story and effect of this Persian Passion Play, while Macaulay's *Essay on Lord Clive* has encircled the Mystery with a halo of immortality."

I wish I might give you a review of this great play which by the Shiah sect of Islam (at least 15,000,000 people) is revered almost above the Koran.



SCENE IN THE PASSION PLAY, NEAR THE NEW MISSION HOUSE.

Sir Lewis Pelly has made an excellent translation of it in two large volumes, but even a brief review of it would be too lengthy for this paper.

Ali, the Prophet's cousin and adopted son, married his adopted sister, Fatimah, the only surviving offspring of Mohammed from his numerous marriages. A division occurred in Islam when, at Mohammed's death, Ali was prevented from becoming Caliph or Successor. He was not made Caliph until twenty-four years later at the death of Othman, the third Caliph. Ali was killed, as was his eldest son who succeeded him, and another dynasty of Caliphs was begun. Twenty years the district of Cufa, north of Busrah, rebelled and called Hussein Caliph. He was on his way to join the rebels when he was killed in rather a brutal manner, in memory of which, the above drama was written making Hussein the savior of all the world. The climax is reached in the scene of the "Resurrection" when Gabriel hands the keys of Paradise to Mohammed, saying that he shall be intercessor for his fellow creatures. Thereupon a distracted band of prophets headed by Abraham begs Mohammed to manage to save them. Jacob, more venturesome than the rest, endeavors to substantiate his claims to the high position of mediator; but the matter is soon settled. Gabriel appears, and addressing Hussein, speaks words of consolation, on which the whole fabric of the Shiah religion rests: "Permission has proceeded from the Judge, the Gracious Creator, that I should give into thy hand this key of intercession. Go then and deliver from the flames every one who has in his lifetime shed but a single tear for thee, every one who has in any way helped thee, everyone who has performed a pilgrimage to thy shrine, or mourned for thee, and everyone who has written tragic verses for thee. Bear each and all with thee to Paradise." Then the sinners (entering Paradise) say: "God be praised! by Hussein's grace are we made happy, and by his favor are we delivered from destruction. By Hussein's loving kindness is our path decked with roses and flowers. We were thorns and thistles, but are now made cedars owing to his merciful intercession."

For the last ten days in the Shiah quarters the people have spent their time in groups, wailing and beating their breasts, around a reader who has recited in a high monotone from the Passion Play. Today the burial of Hussein was acted out in vivid and gruesome detail, many of them cutting themselves with swords and daggers and then, with blood-besmeared bodies and clothing, have danced through the streets beating their chests and heads until, it is said, many fell down exhausted and some will probably die.

The people work themselves into a frenzy and are most fanatical

at these times. The day before the big day two factions of the Shiahls quarrelled in the bazaar and several were badly wounded, so that an order was issued forbidding them to pass in procession through the crowded portion of the town.



SACRED MUHARREM PROCESSION IN FRONT OF MASON MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, BAHREIN.

The Persians are Shiahls, but the ruling Sheikh and nearly all of the Arabs belong to the other large class of Mohammedans, the Sunnis. The Sunnis turn Muharrem into a time of feasting and rejoicing, claiming that on the tenth day the Lord created Adam and Eve, Heaven and Hell, the Pen, Fate, Life, and Death.

The tears and sorrow seem real and one would think that, if they could show such sorrow for the suffering of one whom they have never seen, they would be very mindful of the suffering of members of their own household, at least, but they do not put their sentiments into practice. They care more for their donkeys and camels than for the women and old people of their families. Only a few days ago I was called out to see an old woman who had been very badly burned and we have been going each day to treat her. Yesterday when we arrived we found her lying in the middle of the yard, and a neighbor said her people had put her out there to die and had been gone all day to a reading where they were beating their chests and weeping over the suffering of one they had never seen, with never a thought of the terrible suffering of this poor old woman in their own household.