

Neglected Arabia

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The Girls and Women of Arabia as I have seen them

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Since I have been in Arabia, I have seen some peculiar statements in English print about the condition of Moslem women. These articles that I have read were peculiar in the sense that they are misleading to those who have never seen the daily lives of women and children in non-Christian countries. For this reason I should like to give a little of my experience from daily contact with the women and children in Arabia.

I was surprised to find some things written in an article on "What Women Have Done in India," in one of the popular ladies magazines of America. It may sound poetical to some to read the theory of the creation of woman as held by the Hindus, so as to make her equal with man, namely, "Before the creation of the phenomenal universe, the first born Lord of all creatures divided himself into two halves, so that one half should be male and the other half female." The account in Genesis of the creation of woman from the rib of Adam may be sneered at by some but it certainly does not give man the right to domineer over woman. Christ condescended to be born of woman, the seed of Eve, in order to lift her up into a pure, holy and right relationship with her Creator. So that now through Christ there is no difference between male and female. More than this, she is now an heir of God and a joint heir of Jesus Christ. From what higher source than Christian motherhood, could the stream of humanity originate?

There is a big difference in the standing of male and female where I live. I shall never forget the first obstetrical case I attended, when a little girl was born. There had been such a confusion of voices all around, until the moment when this little baby entered the world and they saw it was a girl, there was an instantaneous and simultaneous hush. That silence was so loud that it impressed me for life. Why were they so still all of a sudden? Because a girl had come into that house instead of a boy. No one went to tell the husband. But if the new baby is a boy, there is gladness all over the house and the one who brings the tidings to the father receives a neat sum of money for such a good report. Space and time will not allow me to describe



MRS. VAN ESS, OTHER TEACHERS, AND PUPILS IN THE GIRLS' SCHOOL AT BUSRAH

in detail the dirty ways of keeping the baby, and the charms and customs observed in order to prevent the evil spirits from harming the little one.

The next important event is her education. She is sent to a Koran school where she learns to read only the Koran. The boys have one other branch of study, which is writing. Sometimes the girl learns it also, but this is very seldom because here at Maskat, I am told, the girls are not allowed to learn to write, for their husbands are afraid to trust them with so convenient an accomplishment. A little girl begins her schooling at four years and finishes after four or six months. Of course, some are in school later. I have seen girls in the school at Bahrein until they were twelve years old, but this is not a general rule. When schooling is over they learn to cook, keep house and to sew.

As soon as the parents can find a husband for their daughter, they get her married. There are some who marry as young as eleven years and the most of them marry at thirteen and fourteen years of age. Sometimes it is a cousin whom the girl marries. One thing is certain, she does not know whether she really loves her "intended" or not. This is not considered essential to a successful married life. Even if she does get money from her husband as a dowry, this does not guarantee her happiness in her life with him. If, when her life becomes miserable in living with his other wives, she decides to leave him to be free from the quarrels, she has to surrender her dowry to him.

It would make my article too long to describe the wedding. If she is the first wife, she is rather pleased with her new home and is proud to show her new furnishings. This state does not last long, because the husband takes another wife, and another, if he has money. No one can say that polygamy and concubinage promote peace and harmony in the household.

It makes me feel bad to sit among the women in their houses and listen to the conversations. They talk mostly about how this man divorced his wife and how that one quarrelled, then of their own quarrels, or about how much so-and-so has to pay to get a certain woman for a wife. It sounds as if they put a price on a woman, as we do a horse or a cow. There are cases actually occurring here in Maskat where wives are hired out to meet the man's financial obligations. Awful and constant immorality has blotted out all the sanctity of the home life. I think the only way to sum it up is in the words, "everlasting degeneration."

A few weeks ago, a splendid Arab woman from one of the big houses here called to see me one afternoon. I showed her my books, and my organ. I did some stenciling work with oil paints for her little girl. I showed her how to use the typewriter. She seemed to enjoy it, but I noticed how quiet she was. When she was leaving, I took her into our little chapel and told her how we held our services