

AMULETS IN EGYPT

THE religion of the Moslem woman in Egypt is centered in superstition. Its creed is a maze of folk-lore almost impossible for an enlightened mind to understand. However, it seems really necessary that we should make some attempt to investigate this folk-lore in order to get some conception of the things the Moslem woman thinks about.

A Christian woman approaches her God in prayer and praise. A Moslem woman because she cannot be ceremonially clean has no right to pray and knows no reason for praise. She, in common with all humanity, craves an approach to the supernatural Being. Although she knows there is a God to whom men pray yet the supernatural she most often appeals to is evil spirits. These evil spirits are the heroes of all her folk-lore which she cons over with her friends. The amulet which she invariably wears and loads upon her children is her prayer for help—not to God but to the spirits of evil. Her notion of a prayer for help is to offer something which will appease the particular evil spirit which is causing her all her trouble, or to offer him something which will curry favor with him.

Because of this religious craze for amulets and charms a very flourishing trade is carried on in them in Egypt. Moslem fakirs and Sheikhs (holy men and priests) earn an honest penny by preparing these amulets for the poor deluded people, especially the women, who are blindly groping for help.

There is an endless variety of amulets and charms, and it is entirely impossible to classify them as far as I have discovered. I was rather accidentally led into knowing the reason for their great variety by a little incident which happened while I was helping Mrs. Pollock with the

evangelistic work on the "Allegheny" (the mission evangelistic medical boat). I was seated at the door of the evangelistic tent with a group of women and in my efforts to better understand the trend of their minds so as to be the better able to present Christian truth to them, I was trying to find out something about the various amulets they and their children were wearing. An old man passing by heard the talk and said in a very condescending tone of voice, "O lady, if you want an amulet for yourself, make it from anything you wish or happen to think of and it will be quite acceptable." It struck me that his remark sounded very similar (yet what a different meaning!) to the teaching that I had been trying to give these poor ignorant women on prayer. I had been telling them to present their needs to God in their own words and He would hear them. The old man's inadvertent remark impressed upon me the pernicious influence of the amulet upon the mind of the Moslem woman, taking the place, as it most assuredly does, of our precious privilege of prayer because it is her only expression of need.

It is a curious coincidence that the word in Arabic for amulet (*hegab*) is the very same word that is used for the "veil" of the temple, the real meaning of which is "to hide," "to prevent," "to intervene." The amulet does all those things for the Moslem woman, throwing up a barrier between her and God. As the veil of the temple was rent in twain on Crucifixion Day so these heathenish tributes of the Moslem woman, to the devils she worships can be rent from her only as she learns of Christ and Him crucified. One day a young mother with a pretty baby in her arms, the wife of a Moslem convert, was spending the day with me and she had an innocent looking charm tied to the baby's forelock. I asked her about it and another woman present hastened to explain that it was an amulet to keep away evil. When I said, "Christians have nothing to do with such things," the young mother quickly took it off and threw it out of the window. The action was a very real testimony that she understood salvation through Christ for usually the women cling very tenaciously to their amulets.

The amulets we most frequently see are leather bags hung to a string around the neck or across the shoulder. They are supposed to contain all sorts of potent charms against any evil liable to befall the wearer, although the wearer is most often in entire ignorance of what is in the bag as it has been securely sewed up by the sheikh from whom she has bought it. Enterprizing missionaries have been known to open these bags (a great sacrilege) to satisfy curiosity and have sometimes been rewarded by finding nothing at all except a good proof that the Moslem holy men and priests have been deceiving their credulous followers, and a further proof that these religious leaders have no faith in the amulet except as a source of livelihood for themselves.

I have in my possession an amulet, a leather bag, for which the owners paid six pounds. They gave it to me very reluctantly; they could not refuse me because I asked for it, but they charged me not to open it. However, I did and found a beautifully hand-painted sheet, twenty by thirty inches in size. The names written in various curious ways were Allah, Mohammed, and the four Guardian Angels. They told me that the man who wrote the amulet was a noted character, and that it took him forty days to do it, spending this time being entertained in the house of a wealthy relative of the girl for whom the amulet was being prepared. This girl had been in a Christian school and had professed belief in Christ. This was one of the methods they used to shake her belief. It seems that the writer of the amulet was a ventriloquist and that every evening he would use this power to make the demons and devils say things to the mother and her possessed daughter seated in the middle of the darkened room, on the floor. Sometimes the devil would chide her for knowing English and for believing in Christ, speaking to her in the most terrifying tones from all corners of the darkened room. In the daytime when she and her mother were busy preparing a meal the voice of a demon would suddenly shout to them from beneath the boiling kettle. Although the girl did not understand all these performances, yet her simple faith was not shaken.

These leather bags are found to contain all sorts of things. A very common thing is a paper on which are written the names and attributes of God. Mixtures of a certain number of spices with salt, and grains of wheat is a great favorite. Parts of the body, such as a tooth, fallen hair, nails, or anything the evil spirit may choose to request is sewed up in these bags. The evil spirit of a jealous woman who has no baby of her own has caused her sister's baby to become ill. This evil spirit is appealed to and his demands have to be satisfied or the baby will surely die. Sometimes it is a tiny silver fish, or a tiny silver hand, or a coin tied to the baby's forelock, or to the mother's head kerchief or her braid. Strange to say a small wooden or metal cross or crucifix is a favorite amulet; also portions of Scripture or anything written by a Christian are in great demand to put into these leather bags. Sometimes a guileless missionary is thrilled because of the eagerness with which his portions of Scripture or tracts are grabbed for by the ignorant who have no idea other than that they are something pertaining to Christianity and so want them for amulets. The underlying principle is that Christianity is an evil and that the Christian devils will be appeased by these Christian words. Patients come to the hospital decorated with many curious amulets. A sickly child was brought to the doctor. A leather bag larger than usual was suspended from the little chap's shoulder. The doctor, curious as to its contents, opened it and found a large dead chameleon. It had been sewed up alive in the bag and the child had worn it for quite a while. A friend of mine was describing to me the other day an amulet which her sister had worn before the birth of her last child. A large eel was cut into two parts, the tail part was put into an ordinary milk jar, salt sprinkled over it and sealed up by the tinsmith so that the bad odour could not escape. This jar was kept under her bed till the time of delivery. The head of the eel was wrapped up with the *hebash-el-hegab* and sewed up in the usual leather bag and suspended under the arm of the expectant mother till delivery and after delivery the child wears it. In the first place when

the eel was killed it was held over two shirts to be spattered with the blood. One was worn by the mother, then afterwards used to stuff a pillow for the child's head. The other was the first garment to be put on the child. The knife which had been used to kill the eel was carefully saved and was the instrument used to sever the cord and then taken together with a piece of salt and a piece of bread, put in a bag and kept under the pillow of the child. This was to keep him from being afraid of the dark. The *hebash-el-hegab* mentioned above is a collection of spices and other things used to make up the amulet in connection with the special feature such as the eel. It seems that there must be seven of certain kinds of seeds, seven eyeless needles, seven strands of different colored silk threads, each strand the length of the woman for whom the amulet is intended. My friend tells me that instead of the eel any small animal can be used. She knew of amulets being made containing the head of a serpent, a rat, a newly born puppy, or *fissikh* (rotten fish). The head of a puppy makes a very potent amulet. Her sister's sister-in-law boasted of the "puppy amulet." The *Khamasa* (five-fingers) of blue beads of or silver, or gold, or tin is a favorite charm for a child. Hand prints of the *Khamasa* are often found on the walls of the house of a bride. These prints are made with the blood of the sheep which has been slaughtered on the threshold as the bride entered. Also the doors and furniture and even the slippers of a newly married pair are smeared with a mixture supposed to be a love potion.

Any abnormal formation is seized upon as an amulet. The idea is that anything abnormal is caused by an evil spirit and so will appease an evil spirit. Some time ago I visited in the harem of a wealthy vey, the Omdah of his village. His palatial country house was furnished with gorgeous things from Paris. His wee daughter had on a beautiful dress but she was loaded down with amulets. One of them was a large metal ring around her neck. It was made from piastres (nickel coins) which had been begged. This was to appease the evil spirit which might envy them their wealth.

There is no end to the variety of amulets and to the reasons for the wearing of them. The universal use of the amulet by the Moslem woman has tied her down to an elaborate system of devil-worship deadening her spiritual perception and rendering it a difficult task, indeed, to bring her into the light and life of Gospel truth. But with God all things are possible. We need a mighty and steady impact of prayer for a work of the Holy Spirit among our Moslem sisters to free them from the spiritual bondage in which they are held.

MINNEHAHA FINNEY.

Tanta, Egypt.