

## BEAUTY FOR ASHES \*

While Christian missionaries are bringing the Gospel of Christ to the people of the Moslem world, Mohammedan missionaries are taking the Koran and the religion of Islam to Christian nations. It is said that in England a number of people have embraced the faith of Mohammed and that the teaching appeals especially to women. These western women are led to believe, we read, that Mohammedanism exalts womanhood.

To one who lives in the midst of down-trodden Moslem women, this statement is the height of absurdity. would that those who hear and believe such a claim could visit Arabia and see for themselves a little of the heartache and despair brought about in the lives of Arab women by the very religion which is said to exalt them. Polygamy, concubinage, easy divorce and the teaching that women are inferior to men and were created for their usage, all these things make misery the most common feature in the experience of Arab women.

The evils of the system of Islam are not unknown to the readers of *Neglected Arabia* and the denial of the statement that womanhood is exalted by Islam needs no defense. Nevertheless, it is true that the Moslem woman's religion means much to her. It is dear to her. She loves the very hand that buries her. Why? There must be good in Mohammedanism. Let us look for the good, for the best that Islam has to offer. What is it that makes the Moslem woman love her religion?

It is difficult to analyze the soul's experience. Suppose an Arab women should attempt to analyze the inner spiritual life of her Christian neighbor. The result would be interesting, no doubt, but how near would it come to the whole truth? The converse proposition, however, is not quite so difficult, for there is no injunction in the Koran similar to the command "Let not thy

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left hand know what thy right hand doeth." Nor is there any instruction to "Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father in secret". Prayer, reading of the Koran, and all the observances of the Moslem religion are enacted with great ostentation. Moreover, the natural reserve of the western woman is unknown to the daughter of the Orient. She talks freely on all subjects, no matter how sacred or intimate. The name of God and His attributes are an essential part of her speech. She can hardly express any idea, whether of surprise, admiration, desire, contempt, or kindly feeling without inserting some phrase of a religious nature. The more frequently she mentions God's name, the more merit she acquires. Consequently, with so much of her religion on the surface, she is not so hard to study as her western sister.

On the other hand, as with Christians, so with Moslems, natures vary. How impossible it would be to generalize about the faith of the Mennonite, the Salvation Army lassie, and the society woman of high church connections. Yet all these are Christians. Things that could truthfully be said about one would have absolutely no application to either of the others. So also with the Shiah who beats her chest until she dies of exhaustion, weeping for the sorrows of her ancient hero Husain, is looked upon with scorn by her Mohammedan neighbors of the Sunnite sect. Nor is there any great similarity between the Moslem woman of devout religious nature and her more frivolous sister with whom the things of this world weigh more heavily than those of the next.

Our present effort at analysis claims neither to be complete nor exhaustive. Rather it is the idea to put together some of the observations we have made while associating with our friends in the harems and to deduct from them what a woman who wanted to become a Moslem might expect to gain, of hope, of comfort and of courage from the religion of Mohammed.

I have never seen an atheist nor an agnostic among the women of Arabia. Great and small, good and bad, they all believe with unswerving faith in Allah, the "Creator

of the universe, and in Mohammed His messenger." Their belief is also in a way, an affectionate one. Not that they would think of God as heavenly Father, but it is not uncommon to hear an unfortunate person exclaim: "I have no one left to me but Allah!" Not only have they faith in Allah, but they believe also in jinns, in demon possession, in enchantments, and all kinds of charms and magic. It seems never to occur to them to doubt the truth of the supernatural. Everything that falls to the lot of man is "from Allah." Everything which may or may not happen depends "upon Allah." Man cannot in any way escape what is written on his forehead, his fate. There is a certain amount of comfort in fatalism, for it leaves no room for regret or remorse. It takes away something of the agony of responsibility. "What is to be, will be." What has happened was ordered by Allah. What use to chafe or fret? Allah is merciful and kind, no matter how cruel His decrees. He has sent evil or good according to His desire. What is left to the believer but to submit to the inevitable? In spite of this fatalism does not, it can not, prevent worry and mental pain.

To us the desire for reward is a mean and selfish motive. Not so to the Moslem. A higher motive seems not to be desired. One's reward in Paradise may be increased, in much the same way as one would augment his bank account. Almost daily some one of the patients in the dispensary is heard to explain to another that the missionaries treat poor people free in order to secure merit for so doing. Sometimes blind women are led to the dispensary for treatment by neighbors who desire the reward for this act of kindness. Many kind deeds are performed in this way. Strangely enough, in emergencies, when pressing need arises for someone to render real, self-sacrificing service to a fellow Moslem, no one seems to be ambitious to increase his heavenly account in just that particular way. How frequently do we hear the comment from Mohammedans themselves: "You Christians are merciful; mercy is unknown to Moslems."

Merit may be gained by giving alms, and almsgiving is very generally practiced by the rich. Even in the homes of slender means the remains of the Arabs' meals are regularly handed out to the hungry beggar who brings his bowl to the gate of the courtyard. It is seldom necessary for the poor to suffer from hunger. "Give me," they call out at the doorways, "of what belongs to God." I have never heard to such an appeal a harsh or unkind answer.

The sacred book of the Moslems is the Koran, but the reading of this book does not resemble our own study of the Bible. The reading is done in a loud and chanting tone, paying more attention to the rhythm of the words than to the meaning. The woman who can read the Koran, and the majority of women never learn to read, gains great merit by each completion of the recitation from cover to cover. She can divert this merit to the account of some departed loved one or she may sell it to another person who is willing to pay for the act of reading. So far as I know, the Moslem woman never goes to her book, as we do to the Bible, for comfort, instruction, or guidance.

Prayer is an important part of the Moslem's life. Yet their prayers do not correspond to the Christian's prayer life. Five times in twenty-four hours the prayer-crier climbs to the top of his minaret and gives the call to worship for the faithful. Prayer must not be undertaken unless the body is ceremonially clean. Some sicknesses are considered defiling, and until the patient recovers he is not allowed to pray. A bandage is often the object of much concern to a devout woman. "How can I pray?" she will ask. "Can I pour the water for my ablutions over the bandage, or will you allow me to take the bandage off?" She could not pray at all unless she had made the prescribed ablutions. The prayer itself is a state formula, accompanied by various changes in posture—erect, kneeling, prostrating. It is performed slowly and with great dignity, facing toward Mecca, the holy city. The worshipper stands, if possible, upon a choice rug, or at least in a clean place. At sunset, one

comes across praying Moslems on the seashore, on the sail-boats beached along the water's edge, on the verandahs of the hospital, and in almost every conceivable place. In the midst of a social call upon the missionaries Moslem ladies will excuse themselves, and, selecting a rug in the room, will perform their prayers in quietness and solemnity while their hostess waits.

Prayer seems to be looked upon as a duty. It is Allah's right to be worshipped by those He has created. Those who fulfill this duty acquire merit; those who do not are laying up trouble for themselves in the future. There is an approach to our idea of prayer in the ejaculatory supplications used so commonly by Moslems at all times. "May Allah give you strength!" "May Allah prolong your life!" Grateful patients sometimes exclaim: "Since you have relieved me of my sufferings, I have not ceased from asking blessing for you day or night." Such statements refer to these ejaculatory appeals or to petitions offered at the close of the formal worship. It seems that the person needing guidance or wisdom would not think of going apart to seek it from the heavenly source. But one who is in need of help really appreciates the spoken supplication of his friends and thinks they may be answered in his behalf.

In times of pain the Moslem sufferer calls loudly upon the name of Allah. "O Allah," she implores, "have mercy upon Thy creature. O my Lord, my dear Lord, my Beloved, deliver me from this pain!" "O Mohammed! O Allah! Thou Merciful One! Thou Most Merciful of the merciful! Look upon my plight!" And so, hour after hour. Those about respond at intervals, "He is faithful! He is merciful! He will help those who trust in Him!"

If relief delays, portions of the Koran, tied up in little bundles, and covered with leather, are hung about the patient's neck. She is brought a staff upon which some one, while praying in a mosque, has leaned, and told to grasp it in her hands, that virtue may come out of it to her. Some one comes in bearing a cup containing a contribution of saliva from the mouth

of a man who has just finished worshipping in a mosque. This saliva, they say, has great healing power, and it is to be swallowed by the one in pain. This failing, a paper, on which verses from the Koran are written, is washed in water and the inky fluid is given to the sufferer to drink. A reader is secured who reads the sacred book in low and mumbling tones above the patient's head. A Moslem friend of mine who had a headache once asked me if I would not read my book above her head to cure her pain.

Prayer in the mosque or public place of worship is said to bring twenty-seven times more merit to the believer than prayer in other places. Yet Arab women are not allowed to pray within the mosque.

How great is the gulf between the Moslem woman's prayer life and our own! Still, Moslem women seem to get real comfort from the performance of their acts of worship.

God's favor toward an individual is said to be greatly increased when that person has performed the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca, or, in the case of the Shiah sect, to Kerbela as well. This means the endurance of hardships, of dangers of robbers, or of perils of the sea. It is the dearest desire of many a woman's heart to visit her sacred shrine before she dies. One day we were called to see a woman who was dying. "How fortunate!" rejoiced her friends, "that she is dying now, for she has just returned from Mecca, and her immediate entrance into Paradise is sure!"

So also during the fast month of Ramadhan, the doors of heaven are said to be wide open, and all those true believers who die during this month pass directly into Paradise, without having first to go into purgatory, as other Moslems must. Many Moslem women fast willingly, because they believe it to be the command of their Lord. Others fast perforce, because they would be punished if they did not. From earliest dawn until sunset not a particle of food, nor a drop of water, must pass their lips. They will not even allow medicine to be dropped into their eyes, for this might find its way

into the throat, and so be swallowed. Some people practice deceit and eat or drink when no one is looking. For years the month of Ramadhan has fallen in the summer time, so that those who fast suffer most from thirst. The month is a trial to all, and some become ill. But the merit for such self-denial is believed to be great. In the evenings great feasts are held and lights are kept burning and merriment continues until the morning. In the daytime several hours are passed in sleep. Children are given simple meals, for they are not expected to abstain from food. During our first year of language study, at Bahrein, we witnessed for the first time the Moslem fast of Ramadhan. At last the time for the great final feast was at hand, and one evening expert eyes, strained in watching, detected the faintest crescent of a silvery moon in the dying glory of the sunset sky. At once a great commotion began. Guns were fired, men and boys shouted, and women lifted up their voices in loud trills of exultation. The long and difficult days of fasting were at an end.

The next morning we were awakened from our slumbers by a sound of wondrous melody. The dawn had hardly broken. In the cool of the early morning, a tenor voice was raised in rapturous chant. On and on it went, in thrilling, melting sweetness. We lay enchanted, fearing lest we miss one single note of beauty. And then the voice sank in silence. Had it been a dream? We hurried to the window and there another surprise waited us. In the courtyard of the mosque across the road, were gathered hundreds and hundreds of Moslem men, gay in their brilliant, festive headgear, embracing one another, kissing one another, and rejoicing in the advent of the greatest Moslem holiday of all the year. Is it wrong, this religion in which exists such real aesthetic beauty? "By their fruits ye shall know them," and even beauty has no power to change the blackness of the sinful heart.

Another element in the Moslem religion, as it affects the women, is the spirit of fanaticism or intolerance.

When one has seen the curl of scorn on the lips of the

Mohammedan woman, dirty and ignorant though she may be, as she listens to the Gospel preached by a Christian missionary, one begins to suspect the depths of hatred and conceit in the Moslem heart. That the Christian has education, skill, or a position demanding respect, has no weight with her. An infidel is an infidel and cursed forever. Let not his shadow fall on a true believer. Better die of thirst than drink from a cup polluted by unbelieving lips. True, years of work and the ministry of friendship, on the part of the missionaries, have softened this feeling of hatred until, in some places, we think it has almost disappeared. It is there, though, underneath the surface, for it is the essential spirit of Islam, the spirit without which Islam would be a leopard without spots.

To the Christian women death hath no sting, the grave no victory, because Christ has assured her, "I go to prepare a place for you." Earth's sorrows will be forgotten when she sees His face. "For the Lamb that is in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them unto fountains of waters of life: And God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes." Has the Moslem woman any comfort such as this? Alas, the Moslem paradise is pictured as a place of sensual pleasure, for people there are not to be as the angels of God in heaven, and the Mohammedan woman expects to take her place beside the Houries, fair maidens, ever virgins. The Koran reads: "And theirs (the men's) shall be the Houries, with large dark eyes, like pearls hidden in their shell, in recompense for their labors past." One of the traditions relates: "The Apostle of God said, 'Verily, verily there is a tent for every Moslem in Paradise; it is made of one pearl, and in every corner of it will be his wives, and they shall not see one another.'" Another tradition declares: "The Apostle of God saith, 'He who is least among the people of Paradise shall have eighty thousand slaves and seventy-two women, and has a tent pitched for him of pearls, rubies and emeralds.'" Thus are women exalted in the Paradise of Islam.



A Moslem friend of ours is dying. She is a reader, of the Shiah sect. She has made the pilgrimage to Kerbela. She has reason to be assured of merit awaiting her in the other world. And yet, I cannot forget the look of terror upon this woman's face. Most Moslem women are afraid of death, but there are exceptions.

One of the sources of the strength of Islam seems to be in the simplicity of its creed. "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is Allah's Messenger." Should anyone pronounce these words with his dying breath, he is considered a true Moslem, and his entrance into Paradise is sure. "Witness, witness!" urge the friends around the bedside of a dying man or woman. Then come the gasping words, "*La ilaha il' Allah, wa Moham-med rasul Allah,*" and the spirit takes its flight.

A few days ago some of us were talking about our Shiah friend who is approaching death. "Have you ever seen a Moslem woman face death with a look of joy upon her face?" I asked one of the other missionary ladies. "No," she replied, "I have not seen any appearance of joy, but I have witnessed the death of one Arab woman who seemed to find comfort in her creed. It was the poor woman," she continued, "whose back was broken by a falling wall. She had suffered pitifully but patiently and with resignation. She was more helpless in her sickness than the youngest infant, and entirely dependent upon the missionaries in whose hospital she died. Tenderly her Christian friends had cared for her, considering no service too menial or dishonorable to perform. 'Not one of my Moslem friends would do these things for me,' the patient would exclaim during these labors of love, as she drew down the missionary's head and kissed her on the hair. 'They would not defile themselves for me, no matter how I suffered.' Her gratitude was touching, and yet, when she was about to die, she motioned desperately for us to leave the bedside. We were infidels to her, and our presence was to be feared at so critical a time. Then fellow Moslems took their place beside her bed and one began to wave protecting fingers over the pain-racked body, as she recited

the all-potent words of the Moslem creed. It made us sick at heart," said the speaker, "for her faith was pinned unwaveringly to those vain words, while bravely and unflinchingly her spirit went out into the darkness."

Has it power, the religion of Mohammed, has it power over sin? Can it cleanse the human heart? No, my friends, I have never heard a Moslem claim that it could. "You are good," they tell us. "You do not understand the work of the devil, as we Moslems do. We are not afraid of you. You would not harm us. We are afraid of one another. We are afraid of one another's envy, and of our rivals' hatred. You do not understand. It is from the devil. You don't know anything about it." They mean it, too. They are sincere. The vileness of the sin that lurks in the heart of the Moslem woman is beyond our comprehension. The speech that often issues from behind the jealous veil would make you blush for shame. Ah! Mohammed, you can cleanse the outside of the platter, but you cannot take away the corruption that lies within.

Have we anything to offer our Moslem sisters, anything better than what they have? Listen a minute! There is music. A group of Arab women are visiting the missionaries. One of the hostesses is playing the baby organ, while the others sing in Arabic. The Moslem guests pay rapt attention. This is something new, it gives them pleasure; and the words, what do they mean?—

"What a friend we have in Jesus,  
Can we find a Friend so faithful,  
Who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness,  
Take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Are we weak and heavy laden,  
Cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Saviour, still our refuge,  
Take it to the Lord in prayer  
In His arms He'll take and shield thee,  
Thou wilt find a solace there."

It is very new to the Arab guests, and very different from anything they have ever heard before. We have an Arab friend who used to be a Moslem. I wish you could hear her sing those words in Arabic. She knows what they mean, and she loves them. She knows Christ Himself. He is her Saviour. It is He who has put the look of joy upon her face and the song upon her lips. Ask her what Christ has to offer the women of Islam, what He has given her. She will tell you He has given her the beauty of His living Presence, for the ashes of a dead and powerless faith.

MRS. ELEANOR J. CALVERLEY, M. D.

*Kuweit, Arabia*