



# Rodha

A  
Child  
of the  
Desert



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**I***N this true story of Nodha, Dr. Calverley has given us a picture in vivid black and white of Arabia's neglected women. In its unrelieved tragedy we see in deepest shadow their unutterable need. In the unrewarded faithfulness of nurse and doctor we catch a glimpse of the high white light of unselfish missionary service.*

## NODHA

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**R**AG and a bone and a hank of hair; such was Nodha when she came to us. Such are many of our patients, but I can remember none more ragged nor more bony nor more dishevelled as to hair than Nodha. She was brought to the dispensary on a donkey, for she could not walk. One of her knees was swollen to twice its normal size from that dread disease, tuberculosis, so prevalent among the half-starved Bedouins.

What is one to do with such cases? As I looked down into the half-frightened, half-eager face of the woman, with the skin drawn taut over the prominent cheek bones, the face almost that of a skeleton, the question had to be answered once more. She was suffering intensely from her knee. It needed an operation badly. Would she survive the anesthetic? After the operation there would be daily, painful dressings of the wound. There was little hope of recovery in this advanced stage of emaciation. What was the use of all this expenditure of work and suffering and expensive surgical dressings with so little hope of success? And yet, there she was—a homeless outcast. She was begging for an operation. She had nowhere else to go and the throbbing tenseness of her knee could be relieved. Her mother was the spokesman, an active little old woman,

shrewd, but friendly. "Let her stay," was the verdict. "We will do what we can."

And so it happened that Nodha and her household goods moved into the ward. Her household goods consisted of a filthy quilt, an old enameled bowl used in begging food, and a few mysterious bundles of dirty rags. She had brought her lunch, we found:—a mass of crushed and sticky dates.

Nodha did live through the operation, which she faced with the courage of Moslem fatalism. The Sewing Guild boxes worked their usual miracle and lo! you might have seen a new Nodha in the ward, a Nodha clad in a clean red calico gown and with a shaven head and a clean head-cloth in place of the mass of matted hair with its thousands of vermin. A clean white sheet covered her mattress on the black iron hospital cot. The kind-hearted India nurse delighted in giving this suffering wisp of a woman a daily bath and massage. As for diet, we arranged for the patient to have nourishing food such as she had perhaps never known in her lifetime. She should have her chance!

The next day after the operation there was no Nodha on the bed. Where was she? On the floor, where her mother had spread a layer of sand. This child of the desert could not be happy without her sand. When we compromised by letting her have her mattress on the floor, she repeatedly induced her mother to smuggle in sand to cover the clean, white sheet and make it less offensive to her taste!

As for food, we found her hard to please. Of the well-cooked rice and Arab stew we furnished, she would have none. Instead, she watched greedily for the return of her mother from the castle of the *sheikh*. Here, at every mealtime, the waiting crowd of beggars is rewarded with a distribution of rice and a revolting stew of the entrails and other undesirable parts of sheep cooked together with hair and dirt, an unthinkable mess. Between meals, Nodha's mother would take out one of the mysterious bundles among their possessions and unwrap some pieces of dried buttermilk, like putty-colored rocks. These she softened in a bowl of water to tempt the appetite of the invalid. Grapes were in season just then and someone gave Nodha a beautiful bunch of white ones, firm and sweet. There were a few decaying ones in the cluster; these she ate, but the good ones she rejected.

The weeks wore on. Day after day the aching bone was dressed with tender care, and it became wonderfully improved, but Nodha was getting steadily thinner and weaker. Daily she became more fretful and cross. To our services her reply was curses, and during her dressings the nurse was likely to receive a sharp pinch on her arm from the patient, or if the doctor's head bent too close, the claw-like fingers had to be forcibly disengaged from her hair. The mother begged us to forgive her daughter and indeed, she, too, received more than her share of curses.

Several times on visiting the patient

we found her stripped and wrapped in a sheet. In answer to our protests, the mother told us confidentially that her daughter was about to die and that she wanted her to be ready. Nodha co-operated quite willingly in these arrangements. We heard the mother telling her that this was the best possible time to die since it was Ramedhan, the Moslem fast month, during which period the gates of Heaven are supposed to be open wide for all Mohammedans.

Of the Saviour who was ready to open wide to her the gates of Heaven at any time, Nodha and her mother heard. Each day the dispensary Gospel service was held near this patient's bed. How much impression the teaching made it was impossible to estimate. One day Miss Schafheitlin carried the phonograph down to the hospital to give the patients an hour of entertainment. Nodha's mother was one of the most appreciative listeners. She could not understand the machine at all. "It must be an angel speaking," she said. "Can you understand what he says?" she asked one of the patients. "Yes, indeed," lied the woman, laughingly. "Well, ask him then," said Nodha's mother, "whether my daughter is going to get well, and whether my camels are safe in the desert where I left them." "The angel says," replied the woman, "that your daughter will get well and be able to leave the hospital next Friday, and that your camels are all safe." So the mother was made happy.

Nodha did not get well, and it was on a Sunday morning when she left the hospital. Her mother came to the house early that morning and quite cheerfully announced that Nodha had almost breathed her last. "I must get her away from the hospital before she dies," she said, "or the Moslems will not help me bury her." "But how," we asked, "can you take her away; will you bring a stretcher?" "No," replied the mother, "a donkey is waiting we will take her on the beast." It seemed cruel to put the unconscious woman on a donkey, but she was beyond suffering, so we let her go. It was a pathetic leavetaking, but the mother did not seem to care. To her it was essential that her daughter die in the house of true believers and not in the hospital of "infidels." The next day she came to say goodbye, and to ask for *baksheesh* to help her on the way to join her camels in the desert. She seemed quite excited, almost happy to be relieved of her burden. "Yes," she replied to our inquiries, "Nodha died just after we reached the Bedouin tent and they prepared her for burial and then stopped at a mosque on the way to the graveyard, so that worshipping Moslems might say a prayer over her corpse." She felt quite confident that her daughter had thus gained an abundant entrance into Paradise.

If this had been a novel and not a true story, it would have had a different ending. "What is the use?" the enemies of missions might ask. "What had you to show for all your trouble?" We had nothing to

show, nor do we know what was the use. Sometimes we have something to show and sometimes we understand what is the use. Why God sent us this particular woman, or let her come to us, we cannot understand. Perhaps her mother will remember what she learned in the hospital about the Saviour. Perhaps it was worth while to have the other patients shown an example of the love of Christ in the face of ingratitude. Perhaps, but what does it matter? "We walk by faith, not by sight." "Sometime, sometime, we'll understand."

