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The Women of Arabia

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The story of the Egyptian slave-woman, Hagar, and her son, Ishmael, is more or less familiar; how the woman was despised by Sarah, and how Abraham sent her and the young boy out to wander in the wilderness. In the 21st chapter of Genesis we read this piteous account, coupled with the promise, "I will make him a great nation." When almost perishing from thirst this lonely mother turned her

back upon her child, lest she should see him die, when, lo! she discovered a well. The Arabs believe this was their sacred well, Zemzem, and that the precincts of the Kaaba, or "house of God," at Mecca, are the scene of Hagar's crucial experience. This Egyptian mother took an Egyptian wife for her son, Ishmael, and from them has descended the Arab race, a race than whom there is none more picturesque and pathetic. Ishmael had twelve sons—princes—who were the leaders of tribes, and built towns and castles. Their hands have ever been "against every man"; and, although Jews and Christians traded in the land and traversed it on the way to Egypt, little of their religions had penetrated the pagan darkness of Arabia, when Mohammed came upon the scene, about 600 A. D.

Before the time of Mohammed the freedom and legal status of woman was superior to what it has been ever since. The immorality and sensuality of Islam has brought women to a lower plane than any other faith in the world. It is recorded that Mohammed had thirteen wives. His first wife, Khadijah, was a widow when he was married to her. She was a woman of wealth and character, and her strong influence seems to have kept him from taking any other wives in her lifetime. But two months after her death he married another widow.

Soon afterward he was betrothed to Ayesha, a child of seven years, and married to her when she was only ten. She was his favorite wife, and it is perhaps due to his jealousy of her that he instituted the custom of the veiling and seclusion of women. Following Mohammed's example in the case of Ayesha, his followers often marry young girls of seven or nine. A veiled girl is a most appealing little figure.

Arabia is on a fearfully low plane of morality. Polygamy is common; slavery and concubinage are practiced everywhere. A man may easily divorce his wife for many reasons, or rather without reason. A few steps from the Kaaba, the great central place of worship in Mecca, is the slave-market, where human beings are bid for; men, women, and oftener young girls.

Students have found that Mohammedan literature is disgustingly indecent; educated Moslem men read the lives of the prophet, which recount his immoral doings, and take him as their standard of morality. The women are not usually taught to read, but the language of the harem is frequently indecent. Only the old and wrinkled women ever appear in the main part of the mosque; women are expected to enter only a small, separate apartment. High-bred women seldom appear on the streets. Merchants bring their wares to the homes, and the women do their buying there. The rich Ori-

ental fabrics and brilliant gems can scarcely compensate for the lack of fresh air and sunshine, of which they are deprived by custom. And no race can be strong in virtue and truth while its women are shut away from contact with air and sunlight.

The lower classes of women are seen on the street, but so much veiled that one cannot be distinguished from another. In the Koran there is a chapter which deals with the legal status of women; it is very significant that the title of this chapter is "The Cow." This well describes the position of women in the Moslem world. Slave, drudge, cow; any name that is low and degraded suits for a woman.

The Arabs are a very superstitious people; and much of the medical practice among them to-day rests wholly on superstition. Cautery and burning the skin with a red-hot iron are practiced, even with infants. In Eastern Arabia blind women act as midwives; nothing of surgery is known. Bad-smelling mixtures are burned near the sick person to drive away the devil. Amulets are worn by all ages and classes to protect themselves from what is known as the evil eye. Often amulets are even put on animals and inanimate things. Tree-worship and stone-worship still exist in many parts of Arabia. These are relics of the ancient idolatry.

Arabia has long been neglected as a

mission field; it would seem as if Christianity had overlooked her nearest neighbors; her next of kin. No women in the world are so burdened and oppressed as the Moslem women; sad and sorrowful as are their countenances, their hearts must be even sadder. Their own religion never can bring any joy into the women's lives, it debases them inherently, and by degrading the women makes each generation of men lower and more cruel than the last. The Arab loves his camel far more than his wife, and will sell his daughter for less than his beloved animal, which he makes more of a companion than any woman of his family.

Only a few missionaries are at work in Arabia up to the present time; about thirty for a population of 8,000,000 people. These missionaries reside near the coast, and not one has been able to see his way clear to start inland work. Arabia is responding to the awakening that is taking place all over Asia. These Moslem sisters have suffered so long and so piteously. Can we not hear their cry and turn our eyes to this land that lies mostly within a thousand miles of the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of women?

"ARABIA THE LOVED."

J. G. LANSING.

There's a land since long neglected,
There's a people still rejected,
But of truth and grace elected,
In His love for them.

Softer than their night wind's fleeting,
Richer than their starry tenting,
Stronger than their sands protecting,
Is His love for them.

To the host of Islam's leading,
To the slave in bondage bleeding,
To the desert dweller pleading,
Bring His love to them.

Through the promise on God's pages,
Through His work in history's stages,
Through the cross that crowns the ages,
Show His love to them.

With the prayer that still availeth,
With the power that prevaileth,
With the love that never faileth,
Tell His love to them.

Till the desert's sons now aliens,
Till its tribes and their dominions,
Till Arabia's raptured millions,
Praise His love of them.

—*From Neglected Arabia.*



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