

THE GOLDEN BOOK MAGAZINE*

for January, 1931

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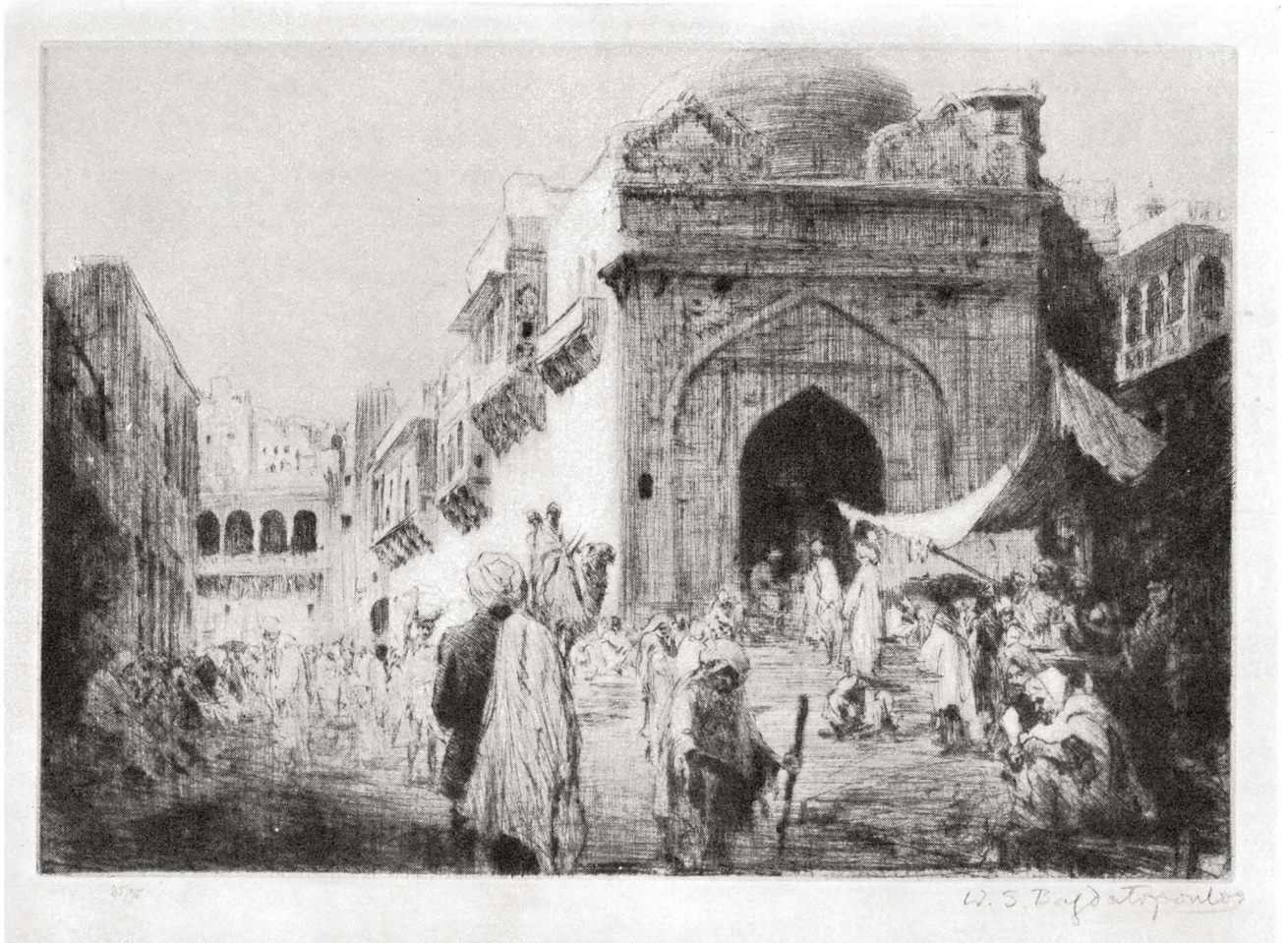
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Faith

THE story of the old woman who questioned Mohammed's right to exclude her from Paradise.



By W. S. Baqdatopoulos. Courtesy Kennedy & Co.

By R. B. CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM

ITOLD YOU," said Hamed-el-Angeri, "of how once on a time all beasts could speak, and of how Allah, in his might, and for his glory, and no doubt for some wise cause, rendered them dumb, or at least caused them to lose their Arabic. Now will I tell you of a legend of the Praised One who sleepeth in Medina, and whom alone Allah has pardoned of all men."

He paused, and the hot sun streamed through the branches of the carob tree, under whose shade we sat upon a rug, during the hottest hours, and threw his shadow on the sandy soil, drawing him, long of limb, and lithe of pose, like John the Baptist revealed by Donatello in red clay.

Our horses hung their heads, and from the plain a mist of heat arose, dancing and shivering in the air, as the flame dances waveringly from a broken gas

A singularly individual writer, Mr. Cunninghame Graham is a Scotchman who spent his youth on Texas and Uruguayan cattle ranches, and in Morocco and Arabia. For many years, men such as W. H. Hudson, Theodore Roosevelt and Conrad have called him an immortal, but the public still resolutely neglects him. He now lives at Ardoch, where he was born 78 years ago.

pipe lighted by workmen in a street. Grasshoppers twittered, raising their pandean pipe of praise to Allah for his heat, and now and then a locust whirred across the sky, falling again into the hard dry grass, just as a flying-fish falls out of sight into the sea. "They say," Hamed again began, "that in Medina, or in Mecca, in the blessed days when God spake to his Prophet, and he composed his book, making his laws, and laying down his rules of conduct for men's lives, that many wondered that no nook or corner in all Paradise was set apart for those who bore us, or

whose milk we sucked, when they had passed their prime."

Besides the Perfect Four, women there were who, with the light that Allah gave them, strove to be faithful, just, and loving, and to do their duty as it seemed to them, throughout their lives.

ONE THERE WAS, Rahma, a widow, who had borne four stalwart sons, all slain in battle, and who, since their deaths, had kept herself in honor and repute, laboring all day with distaff and with loom.

Seated in a lost duar in the hills, she marveled much that the wise son of Amina, he to whom the word of God had been vouchsafed, and who himself had owed his fortune to a woman, could be unjust. Long did she ponder in her hut beyond Medina, and at last resolved to take her ass, and set forth, even to Mecca, and there speak with God's messenger, and hear from him the why and wherefore of the case. She set her house in order, leaving directions to the boy who watched her goats to tend them diligently, and upon the lucky day of all the week, that Friday upon which the faithful all assemble to give praise, she took her way.

The people of the village thought her mad, as men in every age have always thought all those demented who have determined upon any course which has not entered into their own dull brains. Wrinkled and withered like a mummy, draped in her shroud-like haik, she sat upon her ass. A bag of dates, with one of barley, and a small waterskin her luggage, and in her heart that foolish, generous, undoubting Arab faith, powerful enough to move the most stupendous mountain chain of facts which weigh down European souls, she journeyed on.

Rising before the dawn, in the cold chill of desert nights, she fed her beast from her small store of corn, shivering and waiting for the sun to warm the world. Then, as the first faint flush of pink made palm trees look like ghosts and half revealed the mountain tops floating above a sea of mist, she turned towards the town, wherein he dwelt who denied Paradise to all but

girls, and prayed. Then, drawing out her bag of dates, she ate, with the content of those to whom both appetite and food are not perennial gifts.

As the day broke, and the fierce sun rose, as it seemed with his full power, the enemy of those who travel in those wilds, she clambered stiffly to her seat on her straw pillion, and with a suddra thorn urged on her ass to a fast stumbling walk, his feet seeming but scarce to leave the ground as he bent forward his meek head as if he bore the sins of all mankind upon his back.

The dew lay thickly on the scant mimosa scrub and camel-thorn, bringing out aromatic odors, and filling the interstices of spiders' webs as snow fills up the skeletons of leaves. The colocynths growing between the stones seemed frosted with the moisture of the dawn, and for a brief half-hour nature was cool, and the sun shone in vain. Then, as by magic, all the dew disappeared, and the fierce sunlight heated the stones, and turned the sand to fire.

Green lizards, with kaleidoscopic tints, squattered across the track, and hairy spiders waddled in and out the stones. Scorpions and centipedes revived, and prowled about like sharks or tigers looking for their prey, while beetles, rolling balls of camels' dung, strove to as little purpose as do men, who, struggling in the dung of business, pass their lives, like beetles, with their eyes fixed upon the ground.

As the sun gradually gained strength, the pilgrim drew her tattered haik about her face, and sat, a bundle of white rags, head crouched on her breast and motionless, except the hand holding the reins, which half mechanically moved up and down,

as she urged on the ass into a shuffling trot.

The hot hours caught her under a solitary palm tree, by a half-stagnant stream, in which great tortoises put up their heads, and then sank out of sight as noiselessly as they had risen, leaving a trail of bubbles on the slimy pool. Some red flamingoes lazily took flight, and then with outstretched wings descended further off, and stood expectant, patient as fishers, and wrapt in contemplation.

Then the full silence of the desert noontide fell upon the scene, as the old woman, after having tied her ass's feet with a thin goat's-hair cord, sat down to rest. Long did she listen to her ass munching his scanty feed of corn, and then the cricket's chirp and the faint rustling of the lone palm trees' leaves lulled her to sleep.

Slumbering, she dreamed of her past life—for dreams are but the shadow of the past, reflected on the mirror of the brain—and saw herself a girl, watching her goats, happy to lie beneath a bush all day, eating her bread dipped in the brook at noon, and playing on a reed; then, evening come, driving her charges home, to sleep on the hard ground upon a sheepskin, in the corner of the tent. She saw herself a maiden, not wondering overmuch at the new view of life which age had brought, accepting in the same way as did her goats, that she too must come under the law of nature, and in pain bear sons. Next, marriage, with its brief feasting, and eternal round of grinding corn, broken alone by childbirth once a year, during the period of her youth. Then came the one brief day of joy since she kept goats a child upon the hills, the morning which she bore a son, one who would be a man, and ride, and fill his father's place upon the earth.

She saw her sons grow up, her husband die, and then her children follow him, herself once more alone, and keeping goats upon the hill, only brown, bent and wrinkled, instead of round, upright and rosy, as when she was a child. Still, with the resignation of her race, a resignation as of rocks to rain, she did not murmur, but took it all just as her goats bore all things, yielding their necks, almost, as it were, cheerfully, to her blunt knife, upon the rare occasions when she found herself constrained to kill one for her food.

Waking and dozing, she passed through the hottest hours when even palm trees drooped, and the tired earth appears to groan under the fury of the sun.

Then rising up refreshed, she led her ass to water at the stream, watching him drink amongst the stones,

whitened with the salt scum, which in dry seasons floats upon all rivers in that land.

Mounting, she struck into the sandy deep-worn track which, fringed with feathery tamarisks, led out into the plain. Like a faint cloud on the horizon rose the white city where the Prophet dwelt, and as the ass shuffled along, travelers from many paths passed by, and the road grew plainer as she advanced upon her way.

Horsemen, seated high above their horses in their chair saddles, ambled along, their spears held sloping backwards or trailing in the dust. Meeting each other on the way, they whirled and charged, drawing up short when near and going through the evolutions of the "Jerid," and then with a brief "Peace," again becoming grave and silent, they ambled on, their straight sharp spurs pressed to their horses' sides.

Camels with bales of goods, covered with sheepskin or with striped cloth, swayed onward in long lines, their heads moving alternately about, as if they were engaged in some strange dance. Asses, with piles of brushwood covering them to their ears, slid past like animated haystacks, and men on foot veiled to the eyes, bare-footed, with their slippers in their hands, or wearing sandals, tramped along the road. Pack-mules, with bundles of chopped straw packed hard in nets, or carrying loads of fresh-cut barley or of grass, passed by, their riders sitting sideways on the loads, or, running at their tails with one hand on their quarters, seemed to push on their beasts, as with the curses, without which no mule will move, they whiled away the time. A fine red dust enveloped everything as in a sand storm, turning bur-nouses and haiks brown, and caking thickly on the sweaty faces of the men.

Nearing the city gates the crush grew thicker, till at last a constant stream of people blocked the way, jostling and pushing, but good-humoredly, after the way of those to whom time is the chiefest property they own.

Dark rose the crenellated walls, and the white gate

made a strange blot of light in the surrounding brown of plain and roads and mud-built houses of the town.

Entering upon the cobbled causeway, she passed through the gate, and in a corner, squatting on the ground, saw the scribes writing, the spearmen lounging in the twisted passage with their spears stacked against the wall. Then the great rush of travelers bore her as on a wave into the precincts of the town.

She rode by heaps of rubbish, on which lay chickens and dead dogs, with scraps of leather, camels' bones, and all the jetsam of a hundred years, burned by the sun till they became innocuous, but yet sending out odors which are the very perfumes of Araby the blest.

Huts made of canes, near which grew castor-oil plants, fringed the edge of the high dunghill of the town, and round it curs, lean, mangy, and as wild as jackals, slept with a bloodshot eye half open, ready to rush and bark at anyone who ventured to infringe upon the limits of their sphere of influence.

SHE PASSED THE HORSE-MARKET, where auctioneers standing up in their stirrups with a switch between their teeth, circled and wheeled their horses as a seagull turns upon the wing, or, starting them full speed, stopped them with open mouth and foam-flecked bit, turned suddenly to statues, just at the feet of the impassive bystanders, who showed their admiration but by a guttural "Wah," or gravely interjected "Allah," as they endeavored to press home some lie, too gross to pass upon its merits, even in that bright atmosphere of truth which in all lands encompasses the horse.

A second gate she passed, in which more tribesmen lounged, their horses hobbled, and themselves stretched out on mats, and the tired pilgrim found herself in a long cobbled street, on which her ass skated and slipped about, being accustomed to the desert sands. In it the dyers plied their craft, their arms stained blue or red, as they plunged hanks of wool into their vats, from which a thick dark steam rose, filling the air with vapors as from a solfatara, or such as rises from those islands in the west, known to those daring men "who ride that huge unwieldy beast, the sea, like fools, trembling upon its waves in hollow logs," and braving death upon that element which Allah has not given to his faithful to subdue. Smiths and artificers in brass and those who ply the bellows, sweating and keeping up a coil, unfit for council, but by whose labor and the wasting of whose frames cities are rendered stable, and states who cherish them set their foundations like wise builders on a rock, she passed.

Stopping, the pilgrim asked from a white-bearded man where in the city did the Prophet sit, and if the faithful, even the faithful such as she, had easy access to the person of the man whom God had chosen as his viceregent upon earth.

Stroking his beard, the elder made reply: "Praise be to God, the One, our Lord Mohammed keeps no state. He sits within the mosque which we of Mecca call Masjida n'Nabi, with his companions, talking and teaching, and at times is silent, as his friends think, communing with the Lord. All can approach him, and if thou hast anything to ask, tether thine ass at

the mosque door and go in boldly, and thou wilt be received."

The pilgrim gave "the Peace," and passed along in the dense crowd, in which camels and mules, with horses, Negroes, tribesmen, sellers of sweetmeats, beggars, and water-carriers, all swelled the press.

Again she entered into streets, streets, and more streets. She threaded through bazaars where saddle-makers wrought, bending the camels' shoulder bones to form the trees, and stretching unshrunk mare's hide over all. Crouched in their booths, they sat like josses in a Chinese temple, sewing elaborate patterns, plaiting stirrup leathers, and cutting out long Arab reins which dangle almost to the ground. Before their booths stood wild-eyed Bedouins, their hair worn long and greased with mutton fat till it shone glossy as a raven's wing. They chattered long for everything they bought. Spurs, reins, or saddle-cloths were all important to them, therefore they took each piece up separately, appraised it to its disadvantage, and often made pretense to go away calling down maledictions on the head of him who for his goods wished to be paid in life's blood of the poor. Yet they returned, and, after much expenditure of eloquence, bore off their purchase, as if they feared that robbers would deprive them of their prize, hiding it cautiously under the folds of their brown goat's-hair cloaks, or stowed in the recesses of their saddle-bags.

A smell of spices showed the tired wanderer that she approached the Kaiseria, wherein dwell those who deal in saffron, pepper, anise, and cummin, asafœtida, cloves, nutmegs, cinnamon, sugar and all the merchandise which is brought over sea by ship to Yembo, and then conveyed to Mecca and Medina upon camels' backs.

Stopping an instant where a Jaui had his wares displayed, she bought an ounce of semsin, knowing Abdallah's son had three things specially in which he took delight, women, scents, and meat, but not knowing that of the first two, as his wife Ayesha said in years to come, he had his fill, but never of the third. The Kaiseria left behind, she felt her heart beat as she neared the mosque.

Simple it stood on a bare space of sand, all made of palm trees hewn foursquare, the walls of cane and of mud, the roof of palm leaves over the *mihrab*—simple and only seven cubits high, and yet a fane in which the pæan to the God of Battles echoed so loudly that its last blast was heard in Aquitaine, in farthest Hind, Iraq, in China, and by the marshy shores of the Lake Chad.

As she drew near the mosque not knowing (as a woman) how to pray, she yet continued muttering something which, whilst no doubt strengthening her soul, was to the full as acceptable to the One God as if it were framed after the strictest canon of the Moslem law. Then, sliding to the ground, she tied her ass's feet with a palmetto cord, and taking in her hand her ounce of semsin as an offering, passed into the court.

Under the orange trees a marble fountain played, stained here and there by time, murmuring its never-ending prayer, gladdening the souls of men with its faint music, and serving as a drinking-place to

countless birds, who, after drinking, washed, and then, flying back to the trees, chanted their praises to the giver of their lives.

A little while she lingered, and then, after the fashion of her race, which, desert born, cannot pass running water, even if they are being led to death, without a draught, she stopped and drank. Then, lifting up her eyes, she saw a group seated beneath a palm tree, and at once felt her eyes had been considered worthy to behold the man whom, of all men, his Maker in his life had pardoned and set His seal upon his shoulder as a memorial of His grace.

As she drew near she marked the Prophet, the Promised, the Blessed One, who in the middle of his friends sat silently as they discussed or prayed.

Of middle height he was and strongly made, his color fair, his hair worn long and parted, neither exactly curling nor yet smooth, his beard well shaped and flecked with silver here and there, clipped close upon his upper lip; and about the whole man an air of neatness and of cleanliness. His dress was simple, for, hanging to the middle of his calf, appeared his undershirt, and over it he wore, as it fell out upon that day, a fine striped mantle from the Yemen, which he wrapped round about him tightly after the fashion of a coat: his shoes, which lay beside him, were of the fashion of the Hadhramút, with thongs and clouted: his staff lay near to them, and as he spoke, he beat with his left hand upon the right, and often smiled so that his teeth appeared as white as hailstones, new fallen on the grass after an April storm.

Advancing to the group, the pilgrim gave "the Peace," and then tendering her offering, stood silent in the sight of all the company. Fear sealed her lips, and sweat ran down her cheeks as she gazed on the face of him to whom the Lord of Hosts had spoken, giving him power both to unloose and bind.

Gently he spoke, and lifting up his hand, said: "Mother, what is it you seek, and why this offering?"

Then courage came to her, and words which all the Arabs have at their command, and she poured forth her troubles, telling the prophet of her loneliness, her

goats, her hut, of her lost husband and her sons all slain in battle, in the service of the Lord. She asked him why her sex was barred from Paradise, and if the prophet would exclude Ámina, she who bore him, from the regions of the blessed. With the direct and homely logic of her race, she pressed her claims.

Well did she set out woman's life, how she bore children in sore suffering, reared them in trouble and anxiety, molded and formed their minds in childhood, as she had molded and formed their bodies in the womb.

When she had finished she stood silent, anxiously waiting a reply, whilst on the faces of the fellowship there came a look as if they too remembered those who in tents and duars on the plains had nurtured them, but no one spoke, for the respect they bore to him who, simply clad as they, was yet superior to all created men.

Long did he muse, no doubt remembering Kadija, and how she clave to him in evil and in good report, when all men scoffed, and then opening his lips he gave his judgment on the pilgrim's statement of the case.

"Allah," he said, "has willed it that no old woman enter Paradise, therefore depart, and go in peace, and trouble not the prophet of the Lord."

Tears rose to Rahma's eyes, and she stood turned to stone, and through the company there ran a murmur of compassion for her suffering. Then stretching out his hand, Mohammed smiled and said: "Mother, Allah has willed it as I declared to you, but as his power is infinite, at the last day, it may be he will make you young again, and you shall enter into the regions of the blessed, and sit beside the Perfect Ones, the four, who of all women have found favor in his sight."

He ceased, and opening the offered packet, took the semsin in his hand, and eagerly inhaled the scent, and Rahma, having thanked him, stooped down and kissed the fringes of his striped Yemen mantle, then straightening herself as she had been a girl, passed through the courtward, mounted on her ass and struck into the plain.

