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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

Fogg, William Perry

London [u.a.], [1875]

Chapter XX. Habits and Customs of the Arabs

CHAPTER XX.

HABITS AND CUSTOMS OF THE ARABS.

Their Courtesy and Politeness—Morning Salutations—Scurrilous Language Very Rare—The Beard Always Worn—Hardy Children—Rite of Circumcision—Hospitality, an Ancient and Hereditary Virtue—Under no Circumstances to be Violated—Robbery no Crime—An Arab's Property—Courtship, and Marriage Ceremonies—The Bride Sometimes to be Caught—She Scratches and Bites like a Vixen—But only for Show—The Husband Pays for the Wife—Widows and Divorced Women Half Price—Song of the Lover, Rather Rough on the Father—Divorce Made Easy—Funeral Ceremonies—Arabian Horses—Their Beauty, Intelligence, and Speed—Description of a Famous Breed—Their Wonderful Endurance—National Dress of the Arabs—Picture of a Bedouin—Characteristics of the Race—Customs Unchanged for a Thousand Years.



THE Arabs who dwell outside the towns, though rude in manners and fierce in general character, are not without civility and politeness. Their usual salutation is, "Peace be with you." When friends meet after a long absence, shaking hands and kissing are the usual custom, and sometimes a passage, returning thanks to Allah, is repeated from the Koran. On entering a house or tent; the pious exclamation, "Bismillah," is rarely omitted. In the towns, where more ceremonious

phrases are current, the morning salutation to an acquaintance is, "May your day be white"—and the reply, "May yours be like milk." I have sometimes seen gray-bearded old patriarchs, meeting in the street, stop and embrace each other, kissing the beard, or if there is much difference in rank, the hand, with every indication of kindness and respect. The women salute each other by kissing the forehead, the chin, and both cheeks. Even in quarreling, the Arabs rarely use the ill names and scurrilous language so often heard among more polished nations. In some interior provinces, and during the pilgrimage to Mecca, the head is closely shaved, but the beard is invariably worn its natural length, and is considered a mark of dignity and honor. In some parts of Arabia it is the fashion to dye the beards a bright red, but this practice is not common.

Among the Arabs the children are brought up in the most hardy manner. The name is given them immediately on their birth, and at the age of six or seven the boys undergo the ceremony of circumcision. This is an occasion of great feasting and rejoicing. The boys are dressed in the richest stuffs, put upon fine horses, highly adorned with trappings, and carried in public procession through the streets with drums and rude music. These celebrations are kept up far into the night at the houses of their parents, but in the absence of all intoxicating drinks, the wild music, and shrill discordant singing are not associated with a disturbance of the peace. Though the revelers may awake the next morning with splitting headaches, they never find themselves in the police station.

Hospitality, the ancient and hereditary virtue of the Arabs, is strictly enforced by the Koran, and one of the most prominent traits of their social life. The tent of the Sheik is always located at the point where the stranger will be most likely to approach, and if seen coming from

afar he is reckoned the guest of the person who first describes him. So long as he remains a guest his life and property is perfectly secure. Should any robbery occur, his host is bound in honor to indemnify him for any loss he may sustain while under his protection. No emergency can be so urgent as to palliate, much less excuse, any violation of the sacred rights of hospitality, after the stranger, whether friend or foe, has put his hand upon the tent pole of a Bedouin, or tasted his bread and salt.

An Arab has been heard to say that if his bitterest enemy should present himself at the door of his tent, carrying the head of his own son, he would still be entitled to a hospitable reception. No greater insult can be offered to an Arab than to tell him that he has not treated his guests with proper civility and attention.

The force of custom and tradition leads to such incongruities, that the defenceless traveler, who is sure to receive every kindness as a guest, is liable a few days after, to be waylaid, seized, and stripped of everything he may possess by his former host. His life is rarely taken, unless he resists to the shedding of the blood of his assailants. With the wild tribes of the desert, robbery is a science, and in their predatory raids it is reduced to a regular system, in which they display great skill and audacity. If detected and captured, the robber is kept in close confinement until ransomed by his relatives and friends. They attach no disgrace or criminality to theft, but if the attempt at robbery proves a failure through bungling or bad management, it reflects discredit upon the whole tribe.

An Arab's property consists in his flocks and herds. No family can subsist without a least one camel; the man who has ten is reckoned poor; thirty or forty place him in easy circumstances; and sixty make him a rich man.

Marriages are generally solemnized on Friday. After the preliminary negotiation with the father, for the Arab husband pays for his wife instead of receiving a marriage portion, the contract is drawn up by the Cadi. The father usually consults the wishes of his daughter, but in some tribes the girl is only made acquainted with the proposed change in her condition, by being waylaid at a short distance from the camp by her future spouse, who seizes her and carries her by force to her father's tent. Though she



BEDOUIN STEALING A BRIDE.

may entertain no dislike to her lover, she defends herself to the best of her ability, and the more she struggles, bites, kicks, and cries, the more she is applauded ever after by her companions.

She is conducted to the women's apartment in her father's tent, where she is decked out in all her finery, the wedding suit being provided by the bridegroom, then

mounted on a camel and escorted by her female relations, she is conducted to the camp of her husband. During these proceedings, etiquette requires that she should sob and cry most bitterly; but as her face is covered with a veil, it is not supposed that her weeping is more than empty sound.

The sum paid to the father depends upon the rank and circumstances of the parties; but if the bride be a widow, or a divorced woman, the price paid is never more than half what is expected for a maiden. These marriages are always reckoned ill-omened, and an occasion of very little ceremony or rejoicing.

Under the Mahometan law divorce is easy, and reflects no discredit or dishonor on the woman or her relatives. If she is turned away without any valid reason, she is entitled to a small sum of money, or some articles of household property. The process of divorce is simple, and cases of this description never cumber the dockets of the courts. The husband has only to pronounce the words, "Thou art divorced," in the presence of a witness, and the deed is done, and cannot be revoked.

But this does not prevent the man from again marrying the same woman, if both parties get over their pet, and consent to be once more united. The wife, too, has a kind of divorce. If ill-used or unhappy, she may fly to her father's house, and her husband has no right to reclaim her against her will.

In courtship the Arab often displays a good deal of gallantry, but owing to the constraint to which the women are subjected, the opportunities of the lover's meeting or seeing the face of the object of his affections are rare. While Europeans merely languish and sigh, and town Arabs compose amorous verses, the Bedouins have been known to cut and slash themselves to show the violence of their affections. In their amatory songs the lover some-

times expresses his passion in language that sounds oddly to western ears:—"O, Ghalia! if my father were a jack-ass I would sell him to purchase thee, my darling Ghalia!"

Funerals in Arabia are attended with some peculiar ceremonies. They usually take place at sunset, and the *Mollahs*, or priests, read passages from the Koran over the grave. Some tribes bury with the dead man his sword, turban and girdle. Women, but not men, wear mourning, and at the houses of the dead and in the processions to the burial place, there are females, hired for the occasion, who howl in the most heart-rending manner, beating their arms, tearing their hair, and behaving like furies.

In saying their prayers for the dead, Mahometans make no prostrations. This omission is considered significant of the coming resurrection. A man expecting shortly to meet a violent death will sometimes recite these same prayers by way of preparation, in anticipation of the event. They always lay the dead body on its side, with its face towards Mecca.

It is an authentic saying of Mahomet that "ghosts, apparitions, and the like, have nothing to do with Islamism." But it is well known that the Prophet himself was not free from superstition, and was especially credulous in regard to omens.

To most people of the West the name of Arabia is associated with the idea of horses of most wonderful beauty, intelligence, and speed. We have all read how they play with the children, eat and drink with their masters, and sleep alongside them on the desert. All the pretty anecdotes of their docility and gentleness may be authentic, but even Palgrave, who is most enthusiastic in praise of Arab horseflesh, thinks that a Bedouin would be quite likely to rap his mare over the nose if she thrust it into his porridge. He describes the famous Nejdean

breed which he saw in the royal stables at Raid, the capital of Wahābees, as the loveliest collection of horses, about three hundred in number, that he had ever seen or imagined. "Their average height was only about fourteen hands, but they were so exquisitely well shaped that want of greater size seemed hardly a defect. They were remarkably full in the haunches, having a shoulder shaped with exquisite elegance, a little saddle-backed, 'just the curve which indicates springiness without any weakness,' a head broad at the top and tapering down to the finest nose, a most intelligent and yet a singularly gentle look, full eye, sharp thorn-like ear, legs fore and hind that seemed as if made of hammered iron, so clean and yet so well twisted with sinew; a neat round hoof, just the requisite for hard ground; the tail set, or rather thrown out at a perfect arch; coat smooth, shining, and light; the mane long, but not overgrown nor heavy; the prevailing color chestnut or gray. Horses of this description are never sold—they only pass by war, legacy, or by free gift. When policy requires a present to Egypt, Persia, or Constantinople, mares are never sent, but the poorest stallions, though deserving to pass elsewhere for real beauties, are picked out for that purpose."

No Arab ever dreams of tying up a horse by the neck; a tether replaces the halter. In Arabia, horses are much less vicious and refractory than in Europe or America. They are brought up in close contact with men, and having the free use of their senses and limbs, the Arab quadruped naturally develops more intelligence and gentleness than the closely stabled, blinkered, harnessed animal of western countries. Of the wonderful endurance of these choicest Arab horses the stories told are most marvelous. Twenty-four hours on the road, without drink and without flagging, under the burning Arabian sky, seems almost in-

credible, but when that period is doubled under the same conditions at a single stretch, no one can be expected to believe it, though vouched for by an authority as good as Palgrave. The exportation of horses is strictly forbidden, both from Egypt and all parts of Arabia.

The peculiar national dress of the Arabs is well worth description. A coarse shirt, on which is a close fitting tunic of silk or cotton, generally striped, and closely belted around the waist,—over this is worn the *abba*, or cloak of camel's hair, black, or with broad white bars, through which the arms are thrust. On their feet are red shoes, pointed and turned up at the toes. The head dress is neither a turban nor a *fez*, but a square, thick handkerchief of silk or part cotton, in yellow or red stripes, the woof of the ends being twisted in cords like a long fringe. This is doubled triangularly, and thrown over the head so that the two long ends hang down before the shoulders and the third hangs down the back. Around the crown of the head is wound a double wisp of brown camel's hair, partially twisted. With this strange head gear and their long, coarse cloaks, they rather resemble witch-like women than men. In very cold weather, they wind the long ends of the *kaffeah* around their chins, leaving only their eyes visible. Silk being a non-conductor, this head dress forms an excellent protection against both heat and cold.

The Bedouins are tanned to an almost sooty blackness, and with this wild head dress, and their black, piercing eyes looking out from under elf-like locks, as they scour along on their blooded horses, their clothes flying wide in the wind, their long spears shaking over their shoulders, they form a picture which must be seen to realize in full its wild effect.

The basis of the Arab character is frank and manly:

the intellect active, the perceptive faculties acute, the judgment sound. Good qualities, but stunted, and often blighted, by the mere savageness of their life: good materials, spoilt or wasted in the using. The cool nights are often spent outside their tents in story telling and poetical recitations. Frequent sleep during the day renders them independent of the prolonged night rest usual among inhabitants of towns and villages.

Away from the large cities, the wild Bedouin tribes are essentially the same now as they were a thousand years ago. Their manners are patriarchal, and their virtues, as well as their vices, are such as naturally result from a nomadic life. Their natural jealousy and fiery temperament have always been the source of implacable enmities and feuds among themselves. Quick to resent an injury and sensitive to the slightest violation of etiquette, quarrels frequently arise which result in bloodshed. These wild tribes would long ago have exterminated each other, but for that provision in the Arab code which permits the shedding of blood to be atoned for, by payment of money or property. Their laws are very full and explicit, regulating the revenge for blood and the right and privilege of asylum.

There are many very curious social customs and traditions which retain their hold with wonderful tenacity among these people, despite their constantly increasing intercourse with foreigners, resulting from more intimate commercial relations, and easier communications with Europe. To my own experience and observation, I have added in the short account above given the results of other writers, whose more extensive travels in the interior and longer residence in the country, render them good authority as to the social manners and habits of the people.