

R A M A D A N

BY GERTRUDE R. COLBURN and ARABELLA LARABY

I WONDER what delays Alyia," said my hostess, "I sent word last night that I should need her this morning."

At that moment she of whom we spoke entered. Her mistress gave her a searching look, asked a sharp question, received a low answer, and then said, in English, "I might have known it. She will be good for nothing for a month. Doesn't she know that she has no business to do it?" Then, in a softer tone: "Be seated, my poor dear, my Alyia, rest yourself."

"Alyia doesn't understand English," I ventured.

"Eh? Was I speaking in English?" Then in Arabic to Alyia: "*Uqad, ya maskeeny, ya habecbt, ya Alyia,*" guiding her trembling steps to a low seat.

Understanding only that Alyia was to blame for something, I crept out and away. When I returned Alyia was gone. Her mistress had sent her home to rest.

"This is the beginning of Ramadan," said my hostess, the month of fasting. No religion in all the world has such a fast. The Jews fast one day in the year, some Christians abstain from eating flesh one day in the week: but these Moslems go without food or drink from sunrise to sunset, and keep it up for a whole month. Not even a drop of water passes their lips. Alyia has no business to be keeping that fast. It is enough to kill her. Old women are not required . . ."

"Oh!" said I, in great relief. "Is that what Alyia has been doing? I thought she might have been getting drunk."

She laughed immoderately at the idea of Alyia, or any one else in that village getting drunk. "It simply isn't done," she said. "No, my poor Alyia wasn't drinking but fasting. And it would not matter so much if she had enough to eat to fast properly."

"Enough to eat to fast properly?" I queried.

"Yes, Ramadan has its own special food, different from other times, more nourishing, and things that keep one from feeling thirst. Alyia is very poor. When I am here she earns something. I look after her. I had forgotten that it was Ramadan, and had not given her money enough."

"But the village people would not let her suffer, would they?" I asked.

"They are all very poor themselves. She has no relatives left to look after her. They rely upon me for that. Faithful old Alyia would rather die than tell the village that I had not given her enough. Faithful to me, faithful to her religion, she will not eat until tonight, although this is the third day, and she has not had the proper food for fasting."

"Do you know," said I, "that I should like to keep this fast with Alyia?"

"You!" She was horrified. "You never could stand it. Besides, this is the third day. There is no merit unless you fast the whole month. You are in no physical condition. It would not be good for you."

"I am not doing it for merit, I want to see what it is like, I want the experience. Besides it might be very good for me. It would only be missing the mid-day meal. You said yourself that they eat at sunrise and sunset."

"*Before* sunrise, a long time before; and *after* sunset," she corrected. "And when Ramadan falls in summer it is a very long day without water as well as food. That's what makes it so hard—thirst, burning thirst in the long hot days."

I still insisted that I wanted to try it.

"You will probably last about two days," she said. "Most people last one. Lots of them have tried it right out here, and lasted one day. You may last two."

"Why not try it with me?" I suggested.

No, indeed! She was a Christian, the daughter of missionaries. She respected the Moslem religion, and had no objections to my trying the fast if I wished. She would speak to Alyia, and see what she had to say about it.

"Doesn't Ramadan come at the same time every year?" I asked.

"No, their year is twelve lunar months, and not twelve calendar months, so it falls earlier every year. When it falls in winter, and the days are short, it is not so hard, but in summer it is terrible."

When Alyia came, and was told what I wanted to do, she asked where this person was, and turned in my direction her almost sightless eyes. Having heard my voice, and touched my hand, she explained to her mistress that fasting without prayer had no mean-

ing; that I must also perform the ablutions and prayers. I might pray in company with her. Did I know the prayers? No? Then I might follow her motions: bend when she bent, kneel when she knelt, rise when she did, and she would say the words for both. "Improper enunciation vitiates prayer," said my hostess, acting as interpreter. "You are not to try to say the words. You are to listen, only, and little by little you will learn. "It is very important that each word be pronounced correctly." Alyia was not enthusiastic, and my hostess was inclined to be mirthful over my intended attempt to fast and pray with the Moslems. But I was in earnest.

It was time for the afternoon prayer. Alyia asked if I were clean inside and out—clean enough to pray. There would be no harm she said, this first time, if I were what *I* called clean enough, for I would not be saying the words. We went to my room alone, she and I, for I did not wish my awkward first attempts to be laughed at. My head must be covered; Alyia found a towel and draped it upon me. She spread a mat, and stepped out of her shoes upon it. I did the same, standing by her, as she directed, with hands hanging free at the side. Then she lifted hers out in front, and up and around in a great circle till they came to rest with thumbs against the cheeks in front of the ears, uttering at the same time the familiar call to prayer: *Allahu akbar*. I followed the motion as best I could, and all her motions. Then she stepped back into her shoes, rolled up the mat, and went home without looking at me or saying a word.

"Well," laughed my hostess, how did it go?"

I smiled and nodded. There was nothing to say.

"Of course you will eat your supper as usual to-night. Tomorrow will be the test. I will wake you in the morning when I hear the call."

Out of the depths of fathomless sleep the prodding voice of my hostess pulled me.—"Time to get up! Time to get up and get breakfast! The call has sounded. Ali is up. His wife is up. You will be late."

"What — time — is — it?" I managed, thickly.

"Two o'clock in the morning! Time to be up! !"

"It's not *near* sunrise," I objected.

"It will be before you get your breakfast ready, fire made, and everything."

"F-fire made? Breakfast ready? Me?" I had not thought of that part of it.

"Yes, did you not want to be called? Do you not want to keep Ramadan?"

"N-yes. But I can't eat *now*. I will wait until to-night. I can't eat *now*, can I?" I pleaded.

"Of course you can not, dear. Go to sleep again."

The sun was in the sky when I awoke of my own accord. I had missed the time for breakfast that morning, and would wait for sunset. With that resolution I was content. There was a glass of water by my bed. Should I drink it or not? It was irregular to drink now: It was more irregular not to have taken it with food earlier. Although I was not thirsty then, I drank the water as a precaution against the long day until sunset. Then I dressed, and went to find my hostess. She was at the table.

"*Sabak'l khair!*" (Good morning), I greeted her, in Arabic, proud of the few phrases I could utter.

"*Sabak'l khair,*" she returned, smiling, "There is your breakfast waiting for you," and was very much concerned when she found that I intended to wait until sunset. She left her own breakfast unfinished, apologizing for tempting me with the sight of it.

"But it does not tempt me in the least. Having made up my mind to fast, it does not enter my consciousness," I told her.

"That is strange," said she. "It is what Alyia and Sada say, but I never could believe them. And now you say the same. I cannot believe it. It must tempt you."

Strange, but true! It did not tempt me. I told her of my drinking the water beside my bed, and she told me a story of Ramadan in the time of the Prophet. How he came to a cave in which some of his men had been sleeping, and found them at breakfast, how they were for leaving the food because it was already sunrise, and how he had said to them: "Eat, my men, and finish. I will drive the camel into the mouth of the cave, and it will not be sunrise where you are. Eat! Allah is merciful."

Never having made up her own mind to fast, she could not believe that the simple resolution would guard one from a continual struggle, and would not let me see her eat lest it cause me to suffer. So, after a turn or two in the yard, she said: "Go in and sleep the time away, as the Arabs do. For in that lies the cure '*Ramadan'l Hakeem.*' Ramadan is the doctor, they say."

Limp and languid, I lay in a sort of coma all the hot middle of that day. Then, like turning a leaf, I opened my eyes fresh and strong. The sun was nearing the tops of the mountains, and the air was fresh, as I was fresh. It was a pleasant surprise to find myself so in tune simply with the air I breathed.

"*Massak'l khair* (Good evening)," I greeted my hostess.

She smiled and returned my greeting in the same words. "You look better," she said. "Now you can eat. It is all ready."

"Not till sunset," I smiled. "I am keeping the fast."

"But you have eaten nothing since last night, and it will be an hour before sunset. You have tried your experiment. You know what it is like. Is not that enough?"

Finding that I intended to wait, she took me out to walk in pleasant places, especially to a place on the mountain road where we could get a clear view of the "two horizons," which must be watched to determine when the sun is really set at the level of the sea. "Not till the red has left the eastern sky will a Moslem break his fast," said my hostess.

I was impatient of watching in one direction for the sign that the sun had set in the opposite direction. I was hungry with that good hunger which makes the caged lion roar.

My hostess was enjoying my impatience, saying "You *would* fast, and I intend seeing that you do it properly." Then she led me in and fed me. Yum! Did anything ever taste so good?

Next morning it was the same; I simply could not get up at two o'clock, although later I adjusted myself; and the rest of the month, instead of so much food, I took sleep, and profited by it as the Moslems do.

Not only that, but I found their prayer to be a perfect physical culture exercise. For they say that Allah created man in the best possible way, and it is man's sacred duty to keep that mechanism in the best possible working order. So, five times a day, if they have leisure, or morning and evening if they are employed, or, if they are on a journey, whenever opportunity affords, they wash and take this exercise, which adjusts them physically and spiritually to the business of living. Every changed attitude of body is accompanied by a vocal phrase whose rhythm agrees with that motion of the body. That is why "improper enunciation vitiates prayer."

The last attitude is the *salutation*, where the head is turned to

look over the right shoulder, with the words "*Salam alaikum*" (Peace be upon you). The story goes that it is a greeting to the angel on the right, who records all one's good deeds in a book. Then the head is turned to look over the left shoulder, where all one's evil deeds are recorded by another angel, who must be greeted in exactly the same words—"*Salam alaikum.*" For it is a part of the Moslem code of ethics that politeness be extended to all, even to an enemy.

So say the Arabs, the Moslem Arabs.

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