

Street Scene in Sheikh Othman
Alumnus Adel Aulaqi, Form V Medicine
Aden College Journal, 1960

A person sometimes, when having nothing to do, seems to think of a place where he can spend a few hours seeing interesting things occurring actually in front of his eyes. Many certain things amuse a person while others force him to reflect upon them.

One of those days, a Sunday, I thought I had nothing to do and I decided to spend a few hours watching crowds of people in a well-known street in Sheikh Othman.

As I was going, enthusiastically, towards that street I met Ahmed, a friend of mine. Ahmed, with a smile, agreed to such an idea.

From quite a distance we could see the street crowded with cars, camels, people walking and riding bicycles. It is Sunday, the most lively day of the week. The street is not a large one, only about eight yards long and six yards wide. Yet it is the most used street in Sheikh Othman.

The nearer we went the higher the incoherent hubbub incoming from the street, was. 'Bang, Bang, Bang.' the blacksmith was hard at work. This was the first coherent sound welcoming us to the street. I have known this blacksmith since I was a small boy, and now I can see the result of the years on his face and clearly so on his back. Years have left their mark and he is now a hunchback. The second thing which makes a person feel like running from the street is the loudspeakers. There are two coffee-shops each having, presumably, a new loud-speaker since there appears to be a competition between them as to can produce the loudest sound-certainly at the expense of the listeners if there are any

Should I describe how long it took us to reach the coffee-shop? I will have to rack my brain to remember each step I made. A little exaggeration but at practically every step there seemed to be something waiting either to amuse us or to set us aback with fear or astonishment. As I was looking at someone with a dress that attracted my attention, I felt myself being dragged back. It is always the same thing the camel; it was walking ahead bothering about nothing and had it not been for Ahmed, I would have been kicked by it.

I forgot the most essential feature in that street, the people. Here you would find the Arabs, Africans mainly Somalis, Indians, mainly Pakistanis, a few Italians and I saw, many times, one or two Jews. Here you would see the workers, buying their goods, and many soldiers enjoying their leave in the coffee-shop, and small

boys chasing a dog or riding a donkey.

The first thing we did when we entered the coffee-shop was to choose the point from which we could see most of the street. But we had to change that vantage point because the voice of the waiter was a nuisance to us there. He shouts 'Two cups of tea, three bottles of AI Kawther-and-prepare a hubble! It seems that his tongue never took a rest.

"Ha-Ha-Ha !" and I looked to see Ahmed laughing heartily. I turned my eyes toward something shining. It is someone's head, the barber had not left a single hair on the man's head ! The barber had a chair in one corner of a shop in front of us and there he enjoyed his profession, throwing the hair in the street, and, apparently, with no right to stay at that place. Nevertheless he has now someone's head under the mercy of his knife which no one of his customers ever bothered to look at. He is an Indian barber. a tall black man, with two beautifully curved whiskers and with satanic eyebrows covering, almost hiding, his small black eyes.

Another Indian is just sitting beside his friend's chair surrounded by old shoes. He was hard at work mending an old worn shoe.

The parade is being performed!, or what is it? Yes its the parade. There they come, everyone is moving out of the way and they enjoy their victory over these people. These are the cows and sheep. An ox is leading this band, and it deserves the leadership because of its two big horns and his big red eyes. But look. what is it doing ? It has dashed right through a shop and everyone is shouting. Having frightened everyone, I saw Ahmed's mouth, it was wide open, and I realized mine too was agape, it now retreats and continues its walk leaving the shopkeeper paralyzed, dropping what he had in his hands. My laughter at this was cut by a hand stretching out and a voice saying. 'Five cents please?' I really do not know what to say, this was perhaps the tenth beggar which has stretched his or her hand asking for something. I looked up to see a dirty nose, yellow teeth, drooping eyes in an act of sickness. What a typical beggar. He has barely the strength with which to walk and buy his living. 'Go and work man' I said, and I did not bother to listen to his answer, because I knew it -'There is no work.'

As the beggar was moving away from me towards Ahmed a sharp cry came up. "Carrier, Carrier," and suddenly the beggar forgot all about his sickness and turned quickly towards the voice. Alas, he arrived a bit too late, two carriers had already answered the cry. Ahmed was saved from a nuisance only to receive another, not a beggar this time, but a gentle little boy with a mile showing teeth very much in

need of a dentist. he offered to polish Ahmed's shoes. Having received a blunt answer from Ahmed, because he was tired of such boys, he turned to me. I was about to refuse his offer, because I too had the same experience as Ahmed had from such boys. One offers to polish your shoes, you refuse and he leaves you only to leave space for another boy who might only leave you when you shout at him. But the different thing in that boy which aroused my interest was that he did not look like those small naughty ones. He had some weariness and pain hidden under his two little dark eyes. You could almost see that his tears were about to come out. I noticed that although his dress was ragged yet it was clean. His hair was long and dirty yet it seemed that he had tried hard to comb it. I asked him since when he had started this profession. With a low voice and tearful eyes, he said, "It is only for a week, I have to do it." "But don't you go to school?" I asked him. "School! there is no school for me, because I am only six months older than what I should be to enter the Intermediate School; and I have not a father to help me, yet I have to help my mother and little sister, and this is the only job I managed to find." This was his answer, he said it and crept away with his head high up as if he would defy the whole world with his two little hands, and he disappeared in the crowds.

" Bani-ice, bani-ice, drink from my cold bani-ice", and there appeared a tall man whose cries were coming out continuously. He had a big blue kettle in his right hand and a bucket of water and glasses in the other hand. Someone stopped him and here he takes out a glass, fills it with water from the kettle and gives it to the man. It is interesting to know that this word " Bani-ice" is actually a combination of two words from two different languages, neither of the people who speak these two languages use it yet it was introduced into the colloquial Arabic, only in Aden. The word is made up of "Bani" an Indian word meaning water and "ice, the English word. I can assure you that this man's activity is a good method of spreading disease between people drinking of the same unchanged uncleaned glasses. After someone drinks, he only immerses the glass in the water contained in the bucket.

It is now about twelve o'clock, and the street is still full of people. We left the coffee-shop and continued our journey in the street to the other end. The things which we could not see from our seats were the cars, camel-carts and camels being loaded. One can hear the camels crying when being loaded with sacks of sugar or flour or with tins of kerosene, the cars blowing their horns, the riders of bicycles ringing their bells, the people shouting and, among all this there stood the poor little policeman trying hard to keep order. As he speaks to a driver, there peers at him a camel, and he is almost knocked down by a small boy on a bicycle.

We could hardly reach the end of the street. When we were really out of it, I felt as if I had been in a prison from which I had just escaped.

Yes, yes it was twelve o'clock, time for Qat to come, and here we can see people waiting under the blazing sun. They would not bother about their lunch as long as they can have their green leaves. There was an expression of pity on Ahmed's face as if saying "God alone can help these people to realize their mistake. They are slaves to it".

We left the place and as we were some distance away we heard joyful cries. We turned to see some cars coming very fast towards the main market and I could see some hands appearing from a car waving a wrapped bundle. It was Qat!