

Doctor in the Atlas Mountains

*Karel Gunning**

I worked for eight years in Morocco, from 1958 until 1966 as Médecin Chef de Circonscription, for the first five years in a town called Demnate in the Atlas Mountains and then for three years in Casablanca.

When I arrived in the capital city of Rabat, I got a booklet listing those diseases, which were common in Morocco and almost unknown in Europe. One of the chapters dealt with Cannabism, the disease caused by products of the hemp plant, Cannabis Sativa. The Moroccan product is called kif, in Europe known as hasch and marihuana. Cannabism was described as a chronic state of intoxication. The victims show diminished memory, changes in character and conduct, negligence regarding food and clothing and diminished resistance against infections. It was more frequent in the North of Morocco than in the South. And, as I was going to the South, I did not expect to meet many cases.

But after some time the nurses helped me to recognise what they called “fumeurs de kif”. Some of them I remember quite well. One was employed with a government agency. I knew him as a kind and diligent young man. Then one day his mother, a widow, came to me complaining that her son stole her money to buy kif. Some time later, he was sacked by his boss, because he was smoking more and more kif and was working less and less. I found out that he had started using kif about half a year before.

There was also a teacher of French. He too was sacked, because he started to talk nonsense before the class. His brother told me that he too had started to smoke kif.

In a high school in Marrakech there was a boy who had done quite well in his first years, but then he became less and less interested, failed his exams, became negligent, and was ultimately sent away from school for smoking kif. Later he stopped smoking, was allowed back in school and did quite well again.

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These are just a few examples. I read in the Moroccan medical journal about schizophrenia occurring more frequently among kif-users than among the normal population.

At least I went back to Holland, not expecting to hear about Cannabis any more, but shortly after I started practising in Rotterdam, the town organised a three day pop festival, where the participants were allowed to smoke marihuana. In the days after the festival, the newspapers reported quite favourably about this experiment. In their eyes at last the ideal drug was found. The citizens had feared a lot of violence, but in contrast to massive alcohol consumption, the thousands of youngsters had stayed very calm and peaceful.

I wrote to several newspapers to tell them about my Moroccan experience. Nobody in Morocco, neither French nor Moroccan, would ever believe that kif was harmless. Cannabis was a dangerous drug. But it was hard to convince people in the Netherlands.

Besides, there was a conspiracy of marihuana propagandists who tried to prevent me from addressing parents' associations. When parents asked me to speak at their schools, there always was some teacher or the director who tried to stop me.

I began to look for information about Cannabis in the medical press. Quite a bit of knowledge is now available. But even if nothing had been found, that would not have prevented anybody who has lived in Morocco from knowing for sure that Cannabis is a dangerous drug. Long before we ever heard of hash, Egyptians had had experience that made them appeal to the League of Nations to add Cannabis to the list of dangerous drugs. The information provided by laboratory workers has only confirmed what has been known for ages in Northern Africa: if you are an intelligent kid, don't touch Cannabis.