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My Syrian Neighbor Tells Me Stories

IV

By MARY JENNESS

Drawings by GWYNETH WAUGH

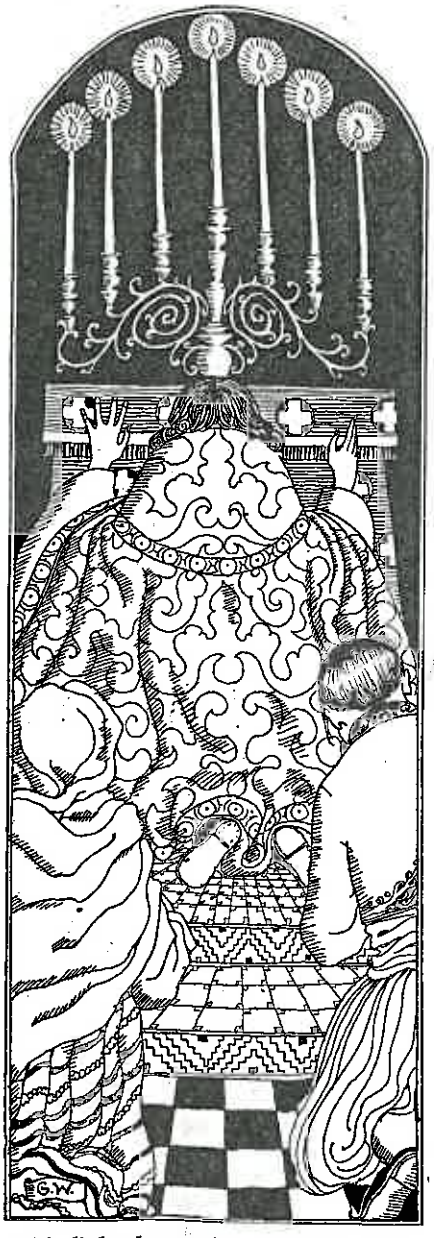
"SURE she'll see you," announced Julia, with a confident toss of her bobbed curls. "She's up in the attic making the wheat. Been up there all day. Come on, I'll show you!" Behind Julia's straight ten-year-old back, I meditated on the changes of two years. Gone were the twisted pigtails, gone the defiant eyes—for Julia has discovered the American ways of getting what she wants! No longer are there scenes of tears and blows when Julia would go to the second picture with her "friend." She simply goes "like all American girls do" and there's an end of it.

It was hot on the street, but the temperature seems to rise five degrees with every flight of stairs. Up past a string of empty rooms where the transient lodgers sleep to a small sweltering hive under the eaves. Here my Syrian friend and her oldest daughter are sitting on the floor, pale and drooping in the hot, moist air, "making the wheats." Julia yells my name and vanishes, followed by a torrent of protesting Arabic.

"Sit down now, Mary, sit down!" comes the chorus. Declining a chair I sit down on the floor at the edge of the wheat-filled sheet. Father has the dignity of chair and table near the window where he grinds a few handfuls in his hopper now and then. The real work proceeds on the lower level.

In the center of the sheet is a great pile of cracked wheat from the hopper. Two pairs of dark hands pick up great handfuls and rub them through window-screens till the coarse remnants that will not sift go back to father to be put through the hopper again. The fine white dust that falls on the sheet is carefully scraped up.

I pick up a screen and go at it. The air is stifling. Already I feel bathed in perspiration. My steady rubbing for several minutes produces but a tablespoonful of siftings. For their united efforts, working here all day, there are two dishpans, not quite full.



He's light the candles an' kneel down an' pray for rain

"'Merican womens have awful easy time maki the food," my Syrian neighbor declares with a sig "Just take a bit of steak now, fry it on the stove eat the dinner. 'Merican way cost too much fo us. My country, womens work all the time makin the wheats. You look here now, I get forty t fifty pounds of wheats from New York for m family this winter. They eats and eats, all the tim say, 'Mamma, mamma now! Ain't you making some more wheats?' "

"That's right," affirms Katharine, rather surpri-ingly for a young lady who ow a piano and a victrola and kno the latest steps in the fox-tr "Seems like I don't get nothin to eat when I don't have th wheats."

"I been most two week at it," continues her mother. "Have to soak 'em ten days in good milk, good yes! Cream in it, now. Then we spread 'em out on the flat roof to dry. That's so hot we most die, I tell you. Then we take 'em in, grind 'em and sift 'em all day like. Put 'em out on the roof tomorrow if it's hot. Then we'll sift 'em again."

"But what do you put with it?" I inquire. "It is like oatmeal?"

"Well yes, oatmeals, may you call 'em that. Cook up for breakfast with meats and onions."

"Not Fridays," interrupts Katharine virtuously. She has made her first communion.

"Sure then, Mary'll kn that," her mother defends me. "Cook 'em up soft, not stiff li you know. Maybe cook 'em for dinner for gravies-like with the meats. You come in some da you stay all day. I give you so now. . . . Maybe I'll tell you story about some wheats, ho that, Mary?" she cunningly ad the last inducement.

"But that would make extra work for you," I protest. "Or would Julia and Ruth help out?"

Immediately I wish I had suggested that. "My God no declares their mother bitte drooping back against the sla ing wall. "Help nobody. They racing the streets all the ti

like 'Merican girl do." "Mary ain't racing," Katharine defends me promptly. Her mother throws me a glance in which admission and bewilderment mingle.

"No, Mary ain't racing. . . . But they always say, like 'Merican girl do." She knows herself helpless to control her seven- and ten-year-old daughters in an American factory town.

"But that story about the wheats," I hasten to change the subject. With a sudden change to animation, shot through with gleams of fun, she begins the tale:

The Village That Wanted Rain

ONCE there's little village, they don't get no priest; they send to bishop and ask him to send 'em priest; an' he's send 'em. That's summertimes when they ain't got much rains, my country. Peoples plants wheats an' such, and they all the time wantin' rains, make things grow like. So that priest ain't been there long, they come to 'im an' they say, "Father now! We mind you, you mind us! You pray the Lord for us, make us rain! We want rain, you pray for it now!"

So he's go into the church, he's lighted the candles, he's kneel down and he's pray for rain. An' there's one day gone, two day gone, three day gone, and rain ain't come. So those peoples they mad on him. They fighting, they chewin' the rag, you know! They come to that priest and they say, "Father, you ain't no good to us! We mind you, why you don't mind us? You pray for rain, you ain't got us no rain, you beat it now!" So they've chased 'im.

And the bishop send 'nother priest, an' 'nother, an' 'nother, an' they all pray for rain an' there ain't no rain. (A-course the Lord make the rain an' He don't have to if He don't want to. Ain't no blame to the priest if the Lord don't want it to rain, you know!) But those peoples, they're crazy like, all the time blame the priest, fightin' to 'em all, chase 'em all till there's been seven priest there. An' then they say, "All priests ain't no good. We don't want priests no more!"

So that whole winter they ain't got no priests. But there's one other priest, he's good-hearted, he's wise-like, more than the rest. He hear about that village. An' he go to the bishop an' he say, "You let me go down to that village, I'll fix 'em good!"

"But they'se had seven priests and chased 'em. Say they don't want no priest. What you goin' do if they chase you?"

"Scoose me, Father, I ain't tellin' that. But . . . can fix 'em. You let me go now!"

So that priest he's gone into that village. Come summer again by that time, and they'se crowdin' round him, all saying: "Now, Father, you go pray, you make us some rain!"

"All right, all right, my friends," he say, an' he's light the candles an' kneel down an' pray for rain . . . But there's gone one day, two day, three day, and no rain. Then they all come round 'im quarrelling, tryin' to fight 'im. They say, "We mind you, why you don't mind us? You ain't got no rain, you can beat it too!"

Look how he's dress for come to church!

But that priest, don't I tell you he's wise-like? He says: "You get out now, my children. What for you come fighting on me? I tell you, you ain't done the right way about it. Now, same as like you put president in the chair, you go get all the votes. You want rain, you go around and ask everybody does he want rain? And when you get all the votes, then the Lord he'll know what to do."

So they'se send out two-three men, go every street in town, ask everybody, "You want rain?"

An' there's poor widow on one street, she's makin' jugs outside her house, she don't want rain. "Oh my Lord," she cry, "don' you gimme no rain, spoil my business!"

An' there's man on 'nother street, he make bricks, he say, "Oh Lord, I don' want no rain, spoil my business!"

An' there's merchants, they dont want no rain. Some here, some there, do one thing, do another, they say, "Don't gimme no rain. Spoil my business!"

Bimeby those two-three men they've gone back to the priest, don't know what to say. So he's ask 'em, "Well now! How you makin' out? Suppose you've got all those votes? Everybody want rain, now the Lord he'll know what to do!"

They tell him, no, there's poor widow don't want rain, there's brick man, he don't want rain, there's merchant, he don't want rain. And the priest, he's jes laff, and he say, "Then how's the Lord going to give you rain

when you don' want rain? Who's to blame now, when you don't know what you want your own self? What for you fighting on me when you ain't know your own wantings?"

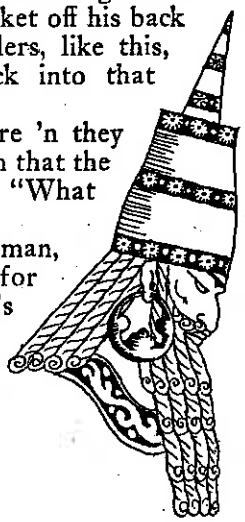
So that priest he's stay on and stay on. He's outstay his time, and his bishop want to know why. He's send for priest, ask him how he's doin'. Priest tell him all, and bishop he's laff and laff!

"You're good man," he say. "You done all right, my son. You stay in that village as long as you want to—you ain't got to make 'em no rain!"

The Farmer Who Was Holy Man

ONCE was a farmer come way out in the country to go to church. Didn't have much money, didn't dress nice. Great rough boots an' heavy cloth. But that's all he's got, you understand, an' he's come in to go to church. So he's left his mule outside an' he's gone in.

And what you think? . . . all those folks left off listening to the priest and began laffing at him! Jest laffing cause he ain't dressed like they do when they go to church. Farmer he can't see why they's laffing for; but all off a sudden he see every one of 'em in that church, they'se got blanket on! Everybody got a blanket on but him, maybe that's why they laffing. So he goes out to his mule, he takes horseblanket off his back an' wraps it round his shoulders, like this, you know—an' he come back into that church.



An' they laffing at him more 'n they was before! They laff so much that the priest he turn round an' say, "What you laffing at, my children?"

An' they tell him, "That man, father. Look how he's dress for come to church. An' now he's gone out an' got horse blanket an' he's wore that blanket in on his shoulders."

An' the priest he say to that farmer, "You tell me what you mean by that, my son? Why you wore horse blanket into the church, you tole me now?"

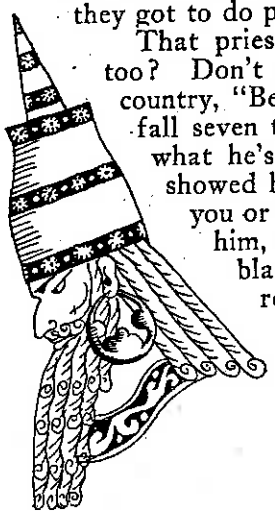
Farmer he's tell him. "Father, when I come in, I see they all wore blanket. They all laffing at me cause I ain't got one. So I go out an' get one off my mule-back and wear it, but now they laffing some more, father! I done all I could, I donno why they laffing, father."

That priest, he's wise man, all of sudden he see. He say, "Was I got a blanket on, too, my son?"

"Oh yes, father, you'se got blanket on, bigger then all the rest."

So then that priest he's know for sure what it means. He's say to the farmer, "You're holy, my son, you're holy. You're the only one in this church is holy . . . All the rest of you, you got blankets on, like sin, you know, between your soul and God. You all do penance, my children. I going do penance too."

Why that farmer he's holy man? He's out there in the country where he don't see no bad ways, he don't hear no bad language, he don't swear none, don't think nothing wrong. And come to church not to see what folks got on, not for look around none, you know; but he's come for see God. So he's holy. But they all of 'em that was laffing they got to do penance.



That priest, why he's got blanket on, too? Don't you know how they say, my country, "Best man ever was, he's got to fall seven times a day?" Sure I donno what he's done. God he know; God showed him. Priest bigger man than you or me, he's got more devil after him, see? So that's why he's got blanket on, bigger than all the rest. Only that farmer 'mong 'em all, he's holy man.

The Clock Will Strike

By CLEMENT WOOD

HOW petty, then, the me above the you,
The birthmark moles of race and shade and breed.
There is no sacred watermark of hue
Between us, when the skin is pricked to bleed.
One may be branded with a younger face,
Closer to tree-tribes out of yesterday;
Today, for all the strut of strength and place,
They shall like brothers form tomorrow's clay.

Men slowly learn it is a twisted pleasure
To feed and drink upon another's loss;
Nor can man build again one breathing treasure
Shattered on scaffold, battlefield or cross.
The clock will strike the hour when we may slay
When lips learn to blow life within the clay.