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My Syrian Neighbor Tells Me Stories

III

By MARY JENNESS

THE old street is strangely quiet this afternoon as I go down to my Syrian neighbor's. There is not a child in sight, though school was out an hour ago. The towering old houses are forlorn without them; and yet, in the unaccustomed silence, certain original values creep out, and set me musing.

It was once a haven of the finer native-born, a typical elm-shaded New England street. Now every dwelling has two tenements, and the mansions four—alive with the beautiful glowing children of a darker-skinned race. The washing for nine covers this traditional lawn; the family hens scratch their way down that ancestral driveway. Is here gain or loss? At least the hordes of children are ours to make the new America. They have American schools, the Sunday papers—as the Monday morning ash-barrel testifies—and, best of all, they have the Neighborhood House.

I never go down to my Syrian neighbor's without stopping before this gate of Americanization to watch the children coming in and out for classes or games, or swarming over the playground. But today the swings and sand piles are deserted; and as I pause here, it is the house itself that sums the years for me. Here the years have come full circle; a house of parties two generations ago, it is a house of parties again, and can forget the slovenly lives submerged between. The new life revives for some of us that wistful tradition of the long-dead Lydia, once queen of every ball. When disaster came, and the family money flew to the winds, there was one thing that Lydia, the proud and beautiful, could do without losing caste: go into the new mills.

The thin pretense of "pin money" that saved many a more than Cranford pride was never enough for Lydia. She must needs add a fiction of her own. Every morning at seven she marched proudly down the stone steps with a book under her arm, and at noon and closing time there was still the book for all to see. Does that elegant little figure never hasten over the uneven bricks, elm-shaded still, her proud head up and dark curls floating? Surely there is something here, on such quiet afternoons, that is different because of Lydia.

And again the books go out from the Neighborhood House, her home; books I lent to five nations from the Neighborhood Children's Library: Henty and Alger and Kipling. It was with greater than these that Lydia dignified her trip to the mill. I have seen the Just-So Stories in the house of my Syrian neighbor, and I felt a jealous pang. Will she remember her village tales, now that her six American children have always new stories to tell?

But where are the children? When I come to the house of Abraham and John and Paul and Julia and Ruth and Katharine, the mystery of the silent street is explained. The children, and the grown people too, are all gathered here. It is a funeral, explains pretty twelve-year-old Katharine, clothed with dainty importance; her grandfather has died. Oh, but I must come in! Her mother will be hurt if I should go away. She is in the front room with the cousins, but she will come out to me soon. In the meantime Katharine serves me, like the rest, with a glass of golden rose-water. She apologizes with grown-up accent that it is not right, that one cannot get the right things in this country.

"You shut up, Abraham," she answers his begging. "You had four glasses already."

In the front room I can see the priest and the five sons of the patriarch sitting together in silence, gravely smoking their eastern water-pipes. The women chatter softly. Abraham, aged nine, calls my attention proudly to the Victrola doors, closed and tied with black. "There's five Victrolas on this street in mourning for my grandfather," he boasts in an excited whisper. "I guess maybe he was some guy in his day; I guess maybe he was king in the old country. . . . Jule, here, she's awful mad 'cause she can't play the pianner today, though." Eight-year-old Julia of the defiant eyes and crooked pigtails resents betrayal, and her cries bring her mother rapidly out into the dining room. A cuff, and a sharp command in Arabic, and Julia runs off to help Katharine with the next tray of rose-water, for more cousins have come.

My Syrian neighbor's heavy plaits are more elaborate than usual, for this is a great occasion, a gathering of the clan from beyond Boston. For the first time I see her without her apron. Her black silk is modern enough, but plainly her heart is in the old country. The new doors are blocked and the old doors are opening; for when she speaks it is not to ask me with her usual careful courtesy how is my high school, or when do I marry? But she utters abruptly, like one crowded by the rush and stir of old memories, what are doubtless her first words of English that day:

"You ever hear tell 'bout how God got Moses' soul?"

How God Took Moses' Soul

You don't know how God got Moses' soul? You no read that in the Bible? No? I tell you now. (Shut up, Abraham! That other story not so good. The lady want holy story.)

Time come, Moses got to die. He no want to die, same as you and me. But God send angel to tell Moses he got to give up his soul. Moses he say to the angel, "How you going take my soul?"

An' the angel say, "Same as anybody"—you know, through the mouth.

But Moses he say, "No can get my soul that way. My mouth holy. My mouth talk with God."

Angel he say, "Well, can take it through hands."

"No can get it that way," Moses he say. "My hands holy; my hands write the commandments of God."

So angel pretend he's 'fraid, don't know what to do. He go back and tell God what Moses say. God, He know Moses don't want to die, but He know he got to. So He tell angel what to do next. Angel's gone back down to the earth, and commence dig a grave outside the village by the side of the way; and God send Moses along that road. . . . No, Moses don't know God send him, he just think he want to take a walk.

He come down that road and he see the angel digging a grave. "Hello, Moses!" say the angel. "Man die in the village, just 'bout your size. Want to help me make grave to fit him? You good man, all the time helping people, want to help me make it right for him?"

So Moses, sure, *he* always ready to help, so he lie down in the grave and wherever it don't fit him, he say so, like too tight in the chest, too tight in the arms, too tight in the feet, the thigh, *you* know; till the angel get it so it fit just right, and Moses he ain't got no more to say.

"Moses he take one long smell, then let go his breath"

Oh, no, sure he donno it's his own grave, why for should he? Angel have tell him it is for man die in the village, how should he get wise on the angel? So he ain't thinkin' no more 'bout holdin' on to his soul, and he don't think nothin' of it when the angel hold out an apple. . . . Oh, those apple, my country! Got such perfume, . . . it smell up the whole room! . . . And the angel, he hold out such an apple. Moses he take one long smell, then he let go his breath. . . . And the angel take his soul right out through his mouth and take it home up to God.

That how God got Moses' soul!

The Man Who Shot God

Once there was a hunter, great hunter, don't know what you call 'im, my country we call him Nimrud. He was a great hunter, all time off hills and valleys, all the time shootin'; he very great hunter.

An' one day he think sudden, just like that, "What if I shot God? Then nobody be punish any more, everybody do what he liked, nobody ever sorry . . . I going shoot God!"

So he shoot up in the air, one, two, three. Then he make sure he shot God, 'cause he very great hunter, ain' never miss. So he go back to the village, and say: "Everybody be happy now! Everybody do just as you like! I've shot God!"

But God! Oh, He jest listen awhile, and then, what you think He do? He send the smallest animal ever He made, skitter, you know what is skitter, go buzz, buzz, buzz? . . . Yes? Have 'em my country. God He send skitter right up that wicked man's nose. Tell him to stay there and buzz, buzz, buzz—and that all.

So skitter he go right up that hunter man's right nost'il, and he all the time buzz, buzz, buzz. And hunter he go nearly crazy. He go every doctor in town—"Take this skitter out of my nost'il!" He send way off for doctor—"Take this skitter out of my nost'il!" No can help, no can get that skitter out of the nose! What good all that money? What good do him get God out of the way, if can't be happy like he mean to?

Finally he have idea. He take all gold he stole and got. He take it all to the jew'lers and he say:

"You quick now! You look at me, you make me gold head just like me! Take it all, melt it up quick, make me gold head just like me!"

Jew'lers they say: "What for make gold head just like you? No use, no sense in that!" But he say, he insist, "Now you make 'im, or I cut you up with my sword. What good my old head do me, if no can get skitter out of my nose? Have new head; you make it now!"

So they very 'fraid of him; they make it. All gold head just like him. Then he say:

"Now take my sword, cut off my old head quick, put on new one. I say you do!"

They very scared, but they 'fraid of 'im; they take sword an' cut off his head. . . . And his blood jump out. And he fall down dead . . . *And God got 'im.*

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THERE has been a general assumption that the new immigration—Latin and Slav—does not take to American citizenship. As chief of the Division of Naturalization and Political Life of the Carnegie Americanization Study, *Mr. Gavit* went to the heart of this matter. His findings, here first published, will appear as a forthcoming book, Americans by Choice, to be published by Harper and Brothers. The excerpts have been made for this issue not by the author but by the editors of the magazine; and, necessarily, both for elaboration of the argument and for statistics which support it, the reader must be referred to the forthcoming volume. *Mr. Gavit* is of the editorial staff of the New York Evening Post; was for many years chief of staff of the Associated Press at Washington and later superintendent of its Central Division at Chicago.

With a coal strike impending, with bills up in several legislatures and debate in Congress, the actual Kansas plan for a court of industrial relations has become a national issue. We turned to *Mr. Feis* of the Department of Economics of the University of Kansas for a disinterested appraisal of its record for two years.

Mr. Griffith is an associate editor of the New York Herald that became known to our readers when, as Berlin representative of the Foreign Press Service in the period immediately following the war, he interpreted the war life and labor of the Essen steel district—the great German arsenal, and of the cooperative workshop labor scheme of the Zeiss works—perhaps the most famous in Europe—which survived war and revolution. Here is published the first of two articles equally strong and disinterested, on the Petrograd industrial district. He returned from his work in Russia for the New York Herald in January and is already en route to his new headquarters—Rome.

In a charming old house with a rose-arbored garden in Geneva is to be found the office of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. The European women whose hopes center around this office and the things they stand for are described by *Miss Addams*, the first president of the League, in this concluding instalment of her series.

The story of Friends Creek is the result of two visits to a region which shall remain anonymous by *Miss Calkins* of the SURVEY staff.

Mr. Hine has caught the romance as well as the realism of the waterfront. His pictures of longshoremen, tug boat men, and the rest make a luminous setting for the article by *Professor Ripley* of Harvard. This is the first of a series which will tell of his five years in labor arbitration.

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ARTHUR P. KELLOGG, *Business Manager*
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