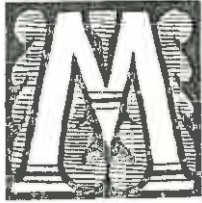


My Syrian Neighbor Tells Me Stories

By MARY JENNESS



My Syrian neighbor greeted me with delighted inquiries after every member of my family, including myself. Was I not married yet? She drew me past the ironing-board, set me hospitably down at the red-covered kitchen table, and went to make tea.

Of course we would have our visit in the kitchen, for the best room was not heated, except on Sundays for the gatherings of the clan.

It was a pleasant kitchen, immaculately clean, and full of unexpected color. The bright green-and-gold wall paper made a pulsing background that was certainly cozier than my grandmother's grey plaster walls. Two or three advertising calendars displayed blooming children dressed in frank reds and blues like the Apostles on a Sunday-school card. In the place of honor was tacked up a thrilling patent-medicine beauty with enormous dark eyes.

"My son Paul, he get it," commented his mother. "He say like American girl, but I don't guess he go to high school with 'em like-a that!"

Her ear-rings shook with her laughter. How pretty she was, how witching when she smiled! Mothering six children had not put one grey hair in her thick curly crop, nor withered the sparkle of her black eyes, nor added an unnecessary line to a face compact of wisdom and shrewdness. Twenty years in America, she could neither read nor write in English. The care of her brood was her alibi.

She placed the tea before me in its heavy china cup. Then with a characteristic quick change of mood, she dropped wearily down opposite me, her dark hands relaxing on the red table-cloth. The blue tattooing stood out as it al-

ways does when she is tired; but well as I know her, I do not ask what the symbols may mean.

"Iron all day," she explained simply. "My Kat's reem, she over at the Neighborhood House making a play, she no help me any more. You go some other Neighborhood House, maybe?" She takes for granted that every district must have ward houses for its men and Neighborhood Houses for the women.



Rich Man Say, "Who Is Azeeya and Sufeea — What for Your N— Rich Man's Church?"

A rush and a bang outside, catapult hurled against the door, a small-boy invasion that all but upset the ironing-board, and Abraham had swallowed up my answer. Name of a patriarch, eyes of an Arabian prince, shrewd twisting mouth of an American newsboy, nine-year-old Abraham links the generations in a weird fashion of his own.

"Look whatta I got!" he demanded, thrusting a hard brown paw across the table at me. "What you guess that's worth, now?"

"That" was a wrist-watch of the Woolworth breed, but it was the apple of Abraham's gloating eye. His apples change rapidly. Last time it was a collection of rings from candy sticks, and the time before that . . . but in his growing impatience he burst forth again appropriating both my cue and his own:

"That don't look like no ten-center, does it? Sure it'll go . . . kin make it! Aw gee, ain't I the rich guy?"

He tore round the kitchen in a plunder-dance, interrupted once by a sharp command in Syrian when he veered too near the ironing-board.

"Be rich, that don't do no good," admonished his mother indulgently, and in a flash he wheeled upon her. "Aw, tell it, maw, tell it!" he demanded hungrily, "how when God made 'em all rich and

gin 'em all everything they wanted!" His darting eye implied that God must have given them all wrist-watches.

"You don't want to hear 'bout that," teased his mother after the manner of story-tellers, well satisfied when I added my plea to his, and the lovely small Ruth, suddenly appearing, added hers to mine. My Syrian neighbor's eyes grew dreamy; she clasped her stained hands together, and began:

How God Make Everybody Rich

YOU hear 'bout Moses? Yes? You know 'bout when Moses got God make everybody rich? No? All the people of my village know that story! I tell you now!

You know Moses, he good man, he talk with God. Every time he want something, he fast forty days and then go talk with God about it. So one day, he get think, why somebody rich, somebody poor? That no fair, he say, I go ask God about it. So he fast forty days an' go up to God.

An' he say, "My Lord 'n' my God! Tell me why somebody rich, most everybody poor? That ain' right. Why not make everybody rich, they be all alike an' all be happy? Tell me now!"

But God he jest laff. "Aw, Moses—behave!" he say. "Ain' I make 'em that way? Don' I know? Some rich, some poor, all mix' in together help each other that way. That's the way I like 'em."

But Moses he kep' on teasin', you know, like Abraham here tease for a story, an' he cry, an' God not like to hurt Moses, Moses good man, he love Moses, so he say, "Oh—all right, Moses! You go back down home. I make everybody rich, then you see how you like 'em."

So Moses he go back down home happy. . . . So everybody wake up an' find hisself rich! Oh, no, they not know why, just think cause they so smart, you understand. They not know Moses talk with God about it. . . . That all right for one while. Then all one side of Moses' house fall down one day—all clay, my country, not strong like your wall . . . and he go out get help put back his wall.

He go to his nearest neighbor and he say, "My wall fall down, you come help me build up my wall!" But, his neighbor rich; he no need any money; he jest laff at Moses. "Mend your own wall," he say. "I ain' got no time, I rich!" So Moses he go to another, an' 'nother an' 'nother. They all rich. No got any time to help. Nobody help Moses mend his wall.

Moses he have to wait and fast forty days, and then he go up to God, he say,

"My Lord an' my God! My wall fall down, nobody help me build up my wall! What I goin' to do? Everybody rich, nobody help anybody any more. . . . Oh, my Lord 'n' my God, can you change 'em back the way they was before?"

An' God, he jest laff and laff, 'cause a-course he know how it's going to come out. But he change 'em back all right, cause he do love Moses. But he say,

"Law, Moses, dinna I tole you behave?"

Those Holy Girl Church

YOU like some more holy story? You greatest girl for holy stories! . . . You remember those I tole you last time? . . . All right. I ain' tole you about those holy-girl church yet? Them nice story; show God He watch! I tell you now.

Once was very rich man. He's going to build a church for his town. There ain' no stone in that village, so he have to send camels out to bring stone, way out beyond. He have 'em going an' coming twice a day—back and forth, back and forth—bring more stone to build his church. . . . Oh, he don't know nothing 'bout those camel, you unnerstand, no have anything to do with them. He leave all that to the driver, he only know he's payin' for his church.

Every day, twice a day, those camel go out past one little house in the country, way outside the town; and every day they go past it coming back. Such a poor little house! There was two poor girls living there, ain' got father or mother, just living there alone. Don't know how you call 'em names—call 'em Azeeya and Sufeea, my country. They very poor, have to work awful hard all the time, like



An' God He Jest Laff and Laff,
But He Say "Law, Moses,
Dinna I Tole You Behave?"

no 'merican girl ever work; but very good girl, you know Holy girl, yes. They see camel go by every day, out and back, out and back, working to help bring stone for that church? And one day they begin to feed 'em.

They ain' got no money for themself, they'se work hard all the time, and ain' hardly got enough to eat—but they feed camel out of they own mouth, you might say. . . . What they give 'em? . . . I don't know! Same as what camel want, like horse have what he want, you know. When Sufeea see camel coming, she's make up ball that kind of food and run out of the house and give 'em quick. And Azeeya, she's do just the same like her sister. Ain' got no money, you unnerstand, that's all they can do to help build the church.

So one day, that stone all brought, and that new church all finish. And rich man, he feel mighty please, to think he have build that church! So he's goin' to have 'em name after him then everybody 'll know he build it. He say to the builders:

"Now you write my name up over that door, where all can see him. They read him, they know I give this church!"

So they write him name. Just like you have plate on your door, show 'em all who live there, see? . . . So they'se grave it in. And when the people all come for worship in that new church they see rich man's name up over the door where they all go in by.

But God Helive there, and God He no like! So the next day when that rich man come to look his church, he look up over the door, want to see he build it, you know! . . . An' name ain' there! God have erased it in the night, and have wrote two other name there . . . whose you think now? . . . Yes, Azeeya and Sufeea! Rich man he stamp so, he awful mad. Who is Azeeya and Sufeea? He ain' never heard of them. He's call all his workmen and he ask 'em every one:

"Who dare change my name? Who is this Azeeya and Sufeea, have wrote their name on my church?"

Workmens they ain' know nothing' 'bout it, and they ain' know who is Azeeya and Sufeea. (A-course they ain' know, 'cause God He done it.) So rich man, he have them erase those name, have his name

put back on; but next morning, it gone again! He's come, he's look up, he's read those two name, Azeeya and Sufeea. This time he know what he's going to do. He call all those workmen again and he say:

"You go to every house in this town, you find out who is that Azeeya and Sufeea have 'rase my name and put their name on my church. You find 'em, you 'rest 'em and bring 'em to me!"

So workmens go out, go every house in town. They ask: "Who live here? Is this Azeeya and Sufeea?"

A-course they no find any such, and they come back and tell rich man. But those name still on his church, and he send 'em out again. They go out along the road outside town, and bimeby they come to one little house, one poor little house. They ask:

"Is Azeeya and Sufeea live here?"

And Azeeya say, "Yes, what you want of me?"

"What for you put your name on that rich man's church he built?"

But Azeeya she say: "I ain' know nothing 'bout it. I ain' had time to go in to see that new church, I working so hard on the farm." Sufeea she say just the same like her sister. So men, they 'rest 'em, bring 'em in to that rich man. He ask 'em:

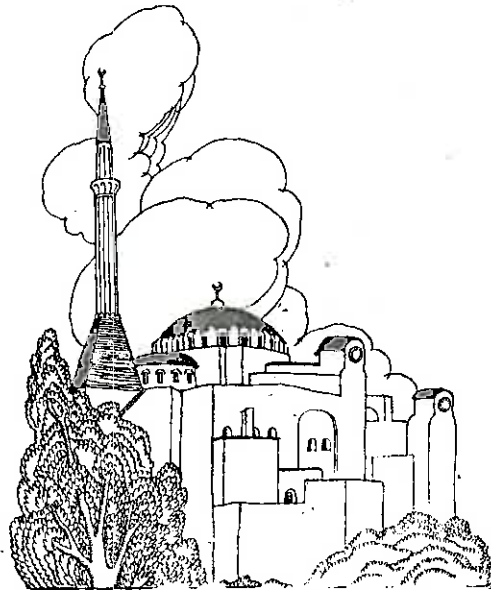
"What for you've put your name on my church I build?"

They not know anything at all about it. He 'splain 'em, he keep asking, "What you doin' to my church, anyhow?" Till Azeeya she say:

"I shame to tole you, I ain' done 'nothings; I shame to tole you, but that's all I could."

She don't want to tole him how she's poor, see? But he's asking again, till she's tell him 'bout feeding those camel when they go by on the road. He's got sense, that rich man; he see God He done it. They help build that church more than he did, a-cause they'se feed those camel out of they own mouth. He ain' miss the money he give; but they give to God what they oughter kept for themself. So they really build that church, not that rich man!

So he's leave 'em name there. That is Santa Sophia church in Constantinople, my country—you hear 'bout Constantinople? . . . got those name two holy girl on it today!



Holy Girl Church (St. Sophia)