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My Syrian Neighbor Tells Me Stories

V

By MARY JENNESS

Drawings by GWYNETH WAUGH

IT was the morning after a great fire in the countryside back of our New England village—a fire that lasted all night and swept away four farmhouses with all their winter provisions of wood and coal and garnered vegetables. I had heard rumors of it on the street; I came into my Syrian neighbor's house to find her pacing the floor and wringing her hands.

"It's yesterday afternoon I hear 'bout that fire," she plunges in without the usual greetings. "I'm sick on the stomach ever since. Sit down, Mary. There's couch and pillow for you. I say, God bless them, I been in fire myself."

"Was it your own house?" I ask. "Sit down and tell me about your fire."

She dropped heavily beside me and pushed her black sweeping cap back from a pale brow. When the blue scrolls and fishes tattooed on her hands and wrists stand out as they do today, I know that she is nervously worn out.

"Sure, my own house, big like this one, way out in the country," she assented limply. "Three little babies I had, an' come so sudden-like, my husband he's faintin', my gosh, he's faintin' three times. I have it all to do."

Unconsciously she begins to act out the scene as she lives through it again. "There's one big old well there, with pails." She drops in pantomime a heavy bucket that is more real to her than the highly colored rug beneath her feet. "Old well, yes, stones go in here, come out there, so when I'm hauling up the buckets I all the time hit 'em, I'm getting just one little quarts water, see?"

No one could fail to see her pick up the remnant of water and run desperately for the house. "I'm comin', I'm lettin' down and takin' up all one hours." She throws herself upon the imaginary bucket with a force that shakes the couch. "Neighbor she take the babies. I work an' work, my God, how I work! But that house all burn down."

When she sinks back into dreariness and closes her eyes like that, I always beguile her to the road of happier memories.

"But didn't you ever have fires in the old country?"

Instantly she straightens and smiles; with the mention of her beloved "old country" she is young again. "Have 'em," she retorts, "but that don't make nothing. 'Cause why, we build our house so fire don't matter. My father's house, he's take bricks, make one big room. Then he's take big poles, like telegram poles, put 'em across the top and cover 'em with straw. Comes winter, we'll make cements on top, roll 'em down with roller to keep out the rain. Was there a spark, now, just burn one of those poles, neighbors all come and make 'em another."

"Did you and your mother roll the roof down every winter?" I ask. But she has been long enough in America to sense a change of attitude on the woman question.

"Sure, mans'll do it if he's there," she affirms defensively. "If father ain't there, my mother and I'll run up the stairs and go rollin', rollin'." And she rolls with a reminiscent vigor that bounces us both up and down on the springs of the couch. Rapidly I cast about for a question whose answer cannot be so uncomfortably dramatized!

"But weren't you busy about the house?"

"My God, no, not like America busy. Just work hard two-three months in the summer all gather the wheats, the beans, all the rest. No got just backyards land, my country. Got far as you can see. Winters ain't nothin' to do only it's to make the wheats for eatin', shovel the snow off the roof. That's some fun now! All the young folks kickin' an' dancin'! Evenings, sit around, tell stories, play cards, that's all we're doing. Wheats now, my father'll have thousand bushels of wheats one summer."

"Where would you keep it then?"

She rises promptly to show me her father's house. "All along this wall!" And the tawdry green and silver paper vanishes before our eyes, for we are transported to the Lebanon. "All 'long from that front door to Katharine's room, we've make places for the wheats, the beans, the potatoes, all same what you have in this country. Take clay, make 'em forms out of wood, build up closets high as this room and put wheats in at the top."

Up and down the room she walks, proudly indicating one storehouse after another till the tall, dun-colored bins arise before me.

"How we'll get 'em out? We'll cut hole at the bottom, make—what you call it now? What you take out of can of milk? Stopper, yes. We'll cut stopper out at the bottom of 'em all. Was we wanting the wheats, we'll pull out the

"Why you won't get me out of here, Simon Peter?"

stopper an' hold the bowl. Was we wantin' beans—"

Gracefully, with a long-accustomed swing, she goes from one bin to the next, extracting the stopper and holding the bowl. With a sudden change of mood she faces me, hands on hips, face sagging, eyes mournful.

"You ain't wonder I think America hard now?" she demands. "Somethings down cellar, somethings else this closet, somethings that, somethings in the kitchen, somethings in the attic. I think I'm racin' up and down all day. Got no right room here, got too much works, everything harder.

"America, that ain't like my father's house."

The tales she tells today are proof enough that the true home of her heart is alien from America by a thousand years. A final one is set down here and then some reflections on the currency of these legends in different times and countries.

Saint Peter's Mother

SO Simon Peter he's gone, see? And his mother, she's gone, too. But he's up in heaven, you know, and she's in perk-tory like; she's one awful tight one. Always been that skinny, ain't never give nobody nothin'. Now she's sufferin', you know, awful. So she's pray to see her son, Simon Peter, and he's come down to her. She say to him: "Why you won't get me out of here, Simon Peter? You go and ask the Lord God, and get me out of here!"

Simon Peter he go back to heaven, and he say: "My Lord and my God: Why you wouldn't bring my mother up here with me? She suffering down there. I no like to have her down there. Why you wouldn't take her up here with me?"

So then God he tell Peter what to do, and Simon Peter go back to his mother and say: "Mama! Mama now! You tell me whatever good you done in your life? What you give away now?"

She think and she think. Last she think how one day she's out in her garden. Got big garden, bigger than you or me. And one poor man come alone and ask her, won't she give him some onions? He think she'll give him one bunch, you know—do that way, my country, always give more than they ask for one poor mans. But she's hunt and hunt all over her garden, and all she's hand him is one little onions. Seed onions, yes! And that's all she ever give away in her life out of all her gardens and gardens. She's that skinny, you know!

So God he hand Peter that seed onions, and he say to him: "You take that down to her, Simon Peter. That's how you'll get your mother out of perk-tory."

And Peter he's hold her out that one little onions. And she's holding on to it, an' he's pulling her out and up to heaven. Pulling away, and she's going up and up, and up,—like that, you know! But there's lots more poor women in that bad place, like this whole roomful, you know, only lots more. And when they see her goin' up, they hold on to her feets. They hold on to her clothes. They hold on to her everyway. Want to come too!

A-course that's God's power, that ain't her power is bringing 'em up, but she think it's hers, and she's mad! She kick so, and she's knocking 'em off, she say: "Get away from me now! Get off my feets, get off my clothes. . . . Why for you no raising fine family like me? My son, he's good, he's getting me out of perk-tory. But that's my onions he's doing it with. Why for you no raising fine family like me?"

So that little onions broke, and she's fall down, down, down to the cellar-like, down to the bottom, like you was in the attic and fell down to the cellar! They'se all fall down together. Only Simon Peter go back up to God. He ain't like that very well, he say: "My Lord and my God! Why you wouldn't have my mother up here with me?"

But God 'splain to him: "Simon Peter, Simon Peter, behave! You're here, she's there. You're up in heaven, she's down there in perk-tory. That's her place, that's your place. Can do nothing more. Now behave!"

So Simon Peter see that's all right and he ain't try any more.

"My son, he's good, he's getting me out of perk-tory"

VI

Folk-lore of an Ancient Coinage

SINCE last October the SURVEY GRAPHIC has been publishing this set of old-world legends told by "my Syrian neighbor," an immigrant woman who has been in America twenty years, and who can neither read nor write. These striking remnants of eastern folk-lore are redolant of the Arabian Nights or the Talmud rather than of the New England tenement kitchen where she usually tells them.

"I forget," she says wearily when fragments of a score of others pass the edge of her mind. "I forget, I no tell that long time."

Life in America presses hard, and only these remain in memory; a pitiful salvage of more than a thousand years of oral tradition. The loss of the rest is one price we pay for Americanization that ignores the stranger's heritage.

To the story-teller her talks are all alike, all just "stories."

"Sure it's true what I'm tellin' you," she begins the wildest tales. "I don't know if you believe it. We believe it, my country."

Such an attitude is the delight of the friendly listener, but the despair of the collector. I may know what I want never so well, yet nine times out of ten I am handed a stone for bread with the usual naive and wistful demand for my applause. What I want—and simply cannot get—are more of the oldest folk-tales, like the three stories of Moses, How God Make Everybody Rich, How God Hate the Ol' Black Dog, and How God Got Moses' Soul. Next in charm and a trifle more frequent are the "holy stories" that are intrinsically true, like Those

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human progress than the valor of a selected group of young men who display that virtue under carefully guarded circumstances. The significance of Barrie's paper lies to some extent in that he brought out the need for that courage at a time when the people's naturally sound valuations have become somewhat confused by the "morale-making" agencies of war and peace. It is necessary in these days of moral lassitude that we think of a new educational approach for the development of courage—among the young of all ages. But before we can make much progress in that direction, it is necessary that we recognize more clearly the degrees of courage required for various socially desirable forms of behavior. For instance, we are apt to exaggerate the value of physical courage—though this is, of course, impossible without moral courage. But dangers to health and life are not the only ones that count: Some of the most courageous men and women of our time are those who, after due deliberation, risk friendships, reputation, material prosperity, career, family ties, political aims, influence and liberty so they might live up to the dictates of their conscience. It often takes more courage to face life than to face death.

OUR definition of courage is still too narrow if it includes only that of militant attack and repulsion—the valor which consists in "pulling oneself together" for quick action. There is a courage of acceptance also, and without it there could be no saintliness and no perfect love. Perhaps it will be possible some day to measure moral energy as now we measure intelligence; then we shall know better where to look for our great heroes and heroines. In the meantime it is well to remember that moral health, no less than physical health, has laws that are not conditioned upon social sanctions. Society merely registers the impressions of moral qualities upon itself; it sometimes recognizes and even rewards courage; but among the greatest historical displays of that quality are those that have gone unrecognized and unrewarded as such. Indeed, the disquieting truth of Barrie's discourse—disquieting to so many of his contemporaries—was that it faintly suggested the natural relation betweeen courage and revolt. Many of our greatest pioneers have been rebels against the social conventions of their time—one need think no further than the supreme example set the world upon the hill of Golgotha. If the young of all nations must revolt against their elders, it is not because of a special moral necessity of revolt by young people; it is not because the present generation of middle-aged is particularly wicked or foolish, or both, or because the young folks of these days are unusually wise—but it is because after the recent shake-up of social conventions those who were part of the old social life are not safe guides for that which must follow it.

As the world is settling down to the business of peace, many fussy workmen with gray hair are patching up the fissures which the events of the war have cut into the old crust of political, economic and social life. It needs the young and unafraid to examine a little those clefts to see whether these hurried repairs are really worth while, whether they are not merely going to dam up forces that must be set free so that the human spirit may find a living embodiment of its aspirations. The youth movement in many lands is such a going back to the essential experience of the race. It is laughing at many of the things that the older generation revered. It is learning to laugh at its own solemnity; but underneath its laughter there is a great resolve and a great promise.

B. L.

My Syrian Neighbor Tells Me Stories

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Holy Girl Church. Less unique, but very taking for local color, is The Tree That Saw Jesus.

A long way below these in interest comes an inferior crop that is distractingly plentiful—a hundred tales of "de bugger" (bogie?) yarns of giants and goblins, saints' legends that to an American do not always recommend the saints, incidents weird, or horrible, or sometimes foul beyond belief. The story-teller makes very little moral or artistic distinction. It has taken three years to select even from what my Syrian neighbor chooses to call her "holy stories" the small set that would give pleasure to an American magazine audience.

It was easy to begin collecting the stories for their own sake; but presently the SURVEY GRAPHIC discovered that one of them, at least, was already known in other versions. This raised the question, had the tales a historical as well as literary interest? Three interpreters, specialists working from very different points of view, have agreed on one point. The best of the narratives come of honorable Hebrew lineage; they are not Syrian, that is Arabic, but of Jewish origin, and their nearest parallel is the Talmud. Professor Lewis Ginsberg of the Jewish Seminary of New York treats them as Jewish folk-lore, of which he has made especial study. From the moral and typically racial angle, the teacher of the Hebrew school in the New England town where I gathered the stories adds several comments. And Professor Irving F. Wood, head of the Smith College Bible Department, presents the findings of higher criticism.

How God Got Moses' Soul is the only story previously known to all three. Professor Wood thinks that it is the most venerable of the series and that it is in the Talmud. Its modern dress of oddly broken English cannot hide from him certain accuracies characteristic of oral tradition; for example, the phrase about the smell of the apple appears in the earliest records of the tale.

Professor Ginsberg, analyzing more at length, finds that three Semitic sources have somehow grown together into one plot. The inability of the angel to take Moses' soul is a very old Jewish legend of which there are so many versions. (He himself has treated them in Volume 5 of his book, Jewish Legends, soon to be published.) The second element is the story of Moses digging his own grave. By a queer freak of distribution, this appears among the Falashas, the black Jews of Abysinnia. The Arabs also tell it, as seems more reasonable, and their version has already been collected by a scholar. (See Jacques Faitlovitch,

THE SERIES AS PUBLISHED IN SURVEY GRAPHIC

How God Make Everybody Rich
Those Holy Girl Church
November

How God Hate the Old Black Dog
The Tree that Saw Jesus
The Man God Wanted Poor
January

How God Took Moses' Soul
The Man Who Shot God
March

The Village that Wanted Rain
The Farmer Who Was Holy Man
August

Saint Peter's Mother
September

Mota Mosu [Death of Moses] texte ethiopen, traduit en hébreu et en français, Paris, 1906.) Professor Ginsberg hazards the attractive guess that the death caused by smelling the apple may be connected with the legend, widely prevailing, though not accepted in the Biblical book of Genesis, that the forbidden fruit was an apple.

The comment of our local guardian of Hebrew tradition had a taking literalness. "I know the first part of that," he nodded, confirming the analysis that splits the story. "That belongs to us. God takes the soul of a holy man easily, but to get the soul of a wicked man, it's like pulling a heavy cord through a small hole. It was not an apple, though," he denies, frowning. "Your friend is wrong about that. I know how God took Moses' soul; through the mouth, yes, but it was with a holy kiss."

This and the two other tales of Moses are "of the genuine hero-tale kind," according to Professor Wood, "for the basis is the greatness of Moses." What fantastic embroidery they all weave on the familiar theme (to Old Testament students) that Moses talked with God! The story of the old black dog was recognized by my Hebrew teacher as one of very many Jewish legends of kindness to animals.

"But that is ours!" he protested jealously. "You say she is Syrian? How could she get it? The rabbis always teach kindness to all that God has made."

Another example of the accidental collision of sources is The Man Who Shot God. Historically, says Professor Ginsberg, this is the legend of the gnat of Titus whom God thus punished for destroying the Temple of Jerusalem. (See the Talmud, Treatise of Gittin 56:6.) Of course the Hebrew teacher was familiar with the story and eager to supply it. The Roman general, flushed with triumph, proudly defied God himself, successfully up to a certain point. Vengeance came, as stated in the identical phrase by educated Jew and illiterate Syrian, when "God sent the smallest thing ever he made up that wicked man's nostril." In the teacher's version God concludes the story—tamely enough without the Syrian story-teller's dialect:

"I don't want to punish your body anyway. I'm going to punish your soul."

With all the agreement, there are two alien flavors in this story. Professor Ginsberg declares that the head of gold which appears in my Syrian neighbor's version was no part of the Titus legend. And not even the Encyclopedia Brittanica can help to account entirely for the story-teller's breath-taking reference to Nimrod, the founder of Nineveh, though it does blacken Nimrod's reputation to correspond somewhat with that other hunter who "shot God." To be sure, Nimrod enjoys a certain respectability as a Biblical character, but the encyclopedia suggests grimly that the one reference to him in Genesis as a "mighty hunter before the Lord" may be translated "against the Lord." It was he whose officers raised the Tower of Babel, so one Assyrian tablet records, in order to shoot at God with their arrows and kill Him!

Epic hate is immortal. The black breath of this tale that is three thousand years older than the first settlements on the Nile has floated intangibly down to an uncritical old-world story-teller in an American mill-town of the Twentieth Century.

Also of Jewish origin is The Man God Wanted Poor. Stamped with the fatalism of an oppressed race, small wonder that, as Professor Ginsberg notes, this is very popular among the Jews of Germany.

This is another tale that may perhaps be pre-Christian. At least, observes Professor Wood, "It hardly began with Peter. It was an independent story which got attached to Peter popularly. The point does not depend on its having Peter for the hero." Indeed, it seems to be also in circulation, told simply as the fate of a "stingy old woman." So Jacob Riis found it and collected it in his book, Neighbors, with the onion transformed to a carrot. Selma Lagerlöf, who brought the story back from Palestine, will have none of any vegetable aid! In her highly literary version, the mother rises on an angel's wing. Madame Lagerlöf ignores the folk-lore interest to concentrate in modern fashion on the social moral: if each of us loved his neighbor, there would be no need of a place for lost souls.

Our local Hebrew teacher, himself a European Jew, threw an unexpected light on the significance of this story. "That writes the truth!" he declared earnestly. "You know how we Jews reverence our old people, and especially the mother of a great man. Yet even the mother of a great man must save herself. That is daring, it is the extreme case; yet each of us must save his own soul."

So the expert of one kind or another helps us to delight in the stories quite apart from their intrinsic merits, by suggesting endless room for the imagination to work about in. For instance, some of them he finds in the Talmud. Since the story-teller cannot read, how else can she have them except from the common source, by oral tradition? Again, here and there he points out a haunting phrase or idea that is nobody knows how old; one at least in The Man Who Shot God echoes back far beyond the Biblical Flood. Perhaps another, How God Got Moses' Soul, has one root in the Garden of Eden. The stream of uncharted centuries has indeed swept down strange freightage into the story-teller's ocean. There are occasional monstrous creatures out of dim sub-human depths, and much froth of legend thrust upward now and again. Here and there floats a branch of rare wood that bears testimony to a priceless lost forest far up stream beyond the ken of modern man.

According to temperament, one's interest dwells on such points in the tales themselves, or on the amazing proof that they are indeed a spoil of the ancient East. There is still another consideration: the best of the legends will stand on their own merits by reason of sheer folk-wisdom. Exactly like the allegories of the Hebrew prophets or the parable of the "Syrian Christ," they are told to convey a point, and some of the morals are unshakably true. Those two poor girls who helped to build the church by "givin' what they oughter kep' for themself" are worthy of divine honor. The root of man's kindness to animals is truly his view that these are lesser children of God. (Compare the Ancient Mariner.) It is often enough the humble soul that has the slightest interference between itself and God, as in The Farmer Who Was Holy Man. Here the peasant's imagined blankets make the same symbol for sin that Hawthorne has developed in The Minister's Black Veil.

And yet, what grips the imagination most is not the moral quality of the stories themselves, nor their oral preservation through the unlettered centuries, nor their strange transmission to modern America. It is the evidence that such a body of folk-lore still exists, the common heritage of a people once rooted in Asia Minor but now scattered all over the world. With sheer wonder we touch a limb of that World Tree of Norse legend: Igdrasil whose roots are wrapped about the center of our earth. We are burrowing

down into the spiritual origins of a race; whether we like to acknowledge it or not, we are coming close to one of the sources of our English Bible.

Here in this Syrian kitchen is one of the elements of the atmosphere that the Messiah breathed, himself by rich inheritance a born teller of tales. Neither Uncle Remus nor Hiawatha, our only similar collections, can touch us so nearly. As we know the mind of the Indian and the mind of the Negro from the tales they have chosen to tell, we are doubly bound to know the mind of the Syrian. For one part of his heritage is ours already as it has come down to us in the life-blood of the Pilgrims.