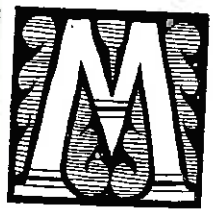


My Syrian Neighbor Tells Me Stories

II.

By MARY JENNESS



Y Syrian neighbor, assisted by four clamorous children, is telling me another old-world story. We are sitting in an American parlor—precisely the New England parlor that your elderly aunt had, or perhaps your grandmother in Vermont—the heavy, flowered carpet, the crayon enlargements, the mantel cluttered with knick-knacks. She is very proud of it, and keeps it tidied nicely. The piano and the Victrola add a modern note, and so do the children in their trim school-dresses. Julia and Ruth and Katharine have brought home an Irish playmate from St. Agnes', and our starting-point this afternoon is the mother's question: "What story you learnin' in school today, now?"

"Tower a' Babel," responds Katharine promptly. "But I knowed that one before," she adds with competent complacency. "All the carpenters in the world buildin' higher an' higher till God stopped 'em."

"You hear 'bout that one, yes?" My neighbor read my face correctly, and cut off the flow of the small daughter's recitation. "All good holy stories, they learn 'em in school, only they not know 'em all. My village know more." Impossible to describe her air of triumph over lesser American memories. "You take that Moses, now, they ain' never hear."

It was the signal for a deluge of pleading in two languages. Nora O'Callaghan's soft brogue was woven like a clue through the unintelligible pattern of Arabic: "Sure, now, Mrs. Cassein, yourself knows we're always afther wantin' to hear 'em again!"

So coaxed into life the tale begins. Printed words can give but the faintest idea of its charm. My friend talks not with the hands only, but with her whole body and spirit. How her swift hands play out the story, how dramatically she is first Moses and then God!

Then, too, words can-

not render the swift chorus of Arabic that pours into the breach if she hesitates for a word. Nor can they express the incongruity, so choice and taking, between Katharine's gay-covered jazz on the piano and the bit of old-world folk-lore that the mother is telling me with the abandon of a child. Moses writing the Ten Commandments (and getting one of them wrong) or Moses persecuting the ol' black dog. They are all the same Moses to her; it is all the same world, and all the same light-hearted God.

Into the storyteller's Eden creeps a critic, the more potent because he never says a word. Midway of the dialogue in heaven enters Paul, the oldest boy, a sophomore in high school. He is Abraham grown ten years older and turned Hamlet, with that within which passes show. He greets me with native courtesy, and effaces himself in a corner whence he casts at me an occasional skeptic glance that is pure American. His manner toward his mother is perfect; he is perhaps the more kind for being less akin; but he has somehow let the daylight into our Paradise.

How God Hate the Old Black Dog

SO Moses when he up with God one day, he ask God:

"My Lord 'n' my God. Ain't there anybody you hate worse of all things on earth? Tell me who you hate worse of all things, and I punish him good!"

So God, a-course he ain't hate nobody, but he hate to hurt Moses' feelin's. Moses good man. He love Moses, and Moses keep at him, all the time tease, tease, tease (Abraham, you shut up! Who tellin' this story?). Till God say, Oh my, how I do hate that ol' black dog! Yes, I hate ol' black dog worse of anything on the earth."

So Moses he go back to the earth, he find ol' black dog, an' he set out to punish 'im good. He take 'im 'way up in the mountains, he make cement floor, flat, so dog can't git no water. He



ain't left no food there, and he chain dog to rock, so dog can't get nothin' to eat or drink nohow. Then he's go 'way.

An' a month later, he go 'long up, see how is ol' black dog. An' he find him tied just the same, but . . . he fat. Must have ate and drank all that time, where could he get it? Moses he no unnerstand. So he's go round the corner, he wait one hour, two hour, three hour, want to see who feedin' that old black dog.

An' what you suppose he see? Comes water out of that cement floor. Comes bones, comes plenty meat. An' that dog he eat an' eat till he have enough. . . . An' Moses he feel real sore about that, 'cause he think God ain't play fair. But he'll have to wait an' fast forty days. No can go up to God without that.

So he's real mad with God, an' he say: "My Lord an' my God! What for you treat me that way? Ain't you tole me you hate ol' black dog worse of all things on the earth? An' ain't I tole you I'm going to punish him good? What for you feedin' him all this time? What for now?"

An' God, he ain't sorry. He jest splain to Moses: "Moses, Moses, don't you see how 'tis? I make 'em all, that's why I can't hate nobody. They all alike to me, 'cause I make 'em all. They all the same mine, even the ol' black dog."

The Tree That Saw Jesus

SO there's 'nother great holiday, my country; that's same like today. It's one day, New Year's come the next (How you say it—day before New Year's?). Yes. All right. You know. . . . That's Holy Night, when Jesus come by. ("Sure, God come by," says Abraham.)

Sure then, Jesus come by just after midnights, go look around all his homes, see all his peoples. Ain't nobody go bed that night, they all watchin' an' prayin'. Everybody have lights, or else he'll say: "You ain't got no lights my night? I wish your light be dark forever!" That's how we believe, my country; I dunno if you believe it. But if he see the lights, then he'll say: "I wish your light burn on forever."

Nobody saw Jesus, you unnerstand, none of those

peoples. Only the trees saw him, and they all lay down when he pass by. All lay down when God pass by. All except that mulberry tree. She's so proud, she bear the silk, she no lay down at all.

What else we do, everybody go down to the river, just midnights, take him a bath, mean he'll be clean the whole year. Now there's one mans, he's go down to the river just one little bit late. Don't know why, just ain't gone down with the others. So he's come down to the river alone and take off all his clothes for a swim. He's put them across one tree

was a-laying there by the banks, and he's go in. Make like this, make like that with his arms, you know go for a swim. He's swim around, and all around. one long time.

But when he's come out, what you think? Can't find his clothes nowhere at all! Somebody have take. Donno who it is. Ain't hear nobody, ain't see nobody go by. . . . (Don't you guess now; I ain't tole you this story yet!)

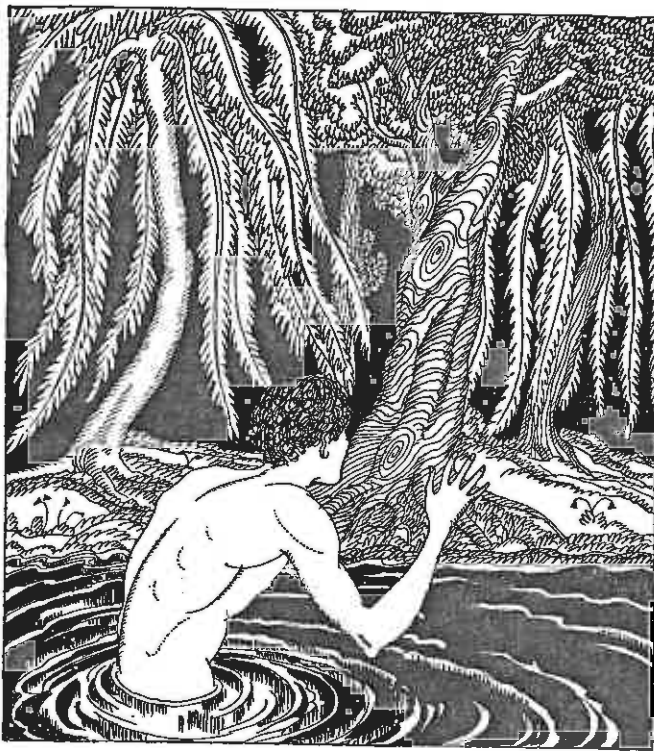
What he's going to do now? He's go home, nothing on him, stiff naked, just like born, you know. And his womens, they think he's gone crazy, they say: "What for you ain't brought your clothes? You crazy? You mad-like?"

"No," he say. "Mama, my wife, what you think now? I'se put all my clothes on a tree was a-lyin' there when I'se go in for swim in the river, and when I came out they ain't there! Somebody take 'em. I donno who. Ain't hear nobody. Ain't see nobody. I have to come home, don't I now?"

So then they'se laff all over him. He's forgot, so ignorant-like, you know. They tell him:

"You don't see nobody! But maybe that tree see somebody, what? Maybe that tree she's a-laying down before the Lord Jesus, when you put your clothes on her. He's gone by and you don't see 'im, but that tree she see him, and she's lay down. Then he go by, tree she's get up, and take your clothes with her! You go back to that tree now, you see if she ain't carry 'em on top of her branches just where you put 'em."

So he's dress again, all nice and proper, all his best clothes you know. He's run back to the river. And before he get there, he see his clothes up tops of that tree! And he's climb that tree and get his clothes and gone home. But he's remember that all



his life, how the tree lay down before the Lord Jesus, and he ain't never get caught that way again.

The Man God Wanted Poor

ONCE there's two brothers: One's rich and have all he want, but his brother he's poor, awful poor. The neighbors they all the time saying to that rich men: "Why you don't give to your brother?"

But that rich man, he's giving, he's giving, all the time giving to his poor brother. He's give him food, he's give him clothes, he's give him money. But his brother he always stay poor. So one day that rich man say to himself: "I always giving my brother something, I'se give him more than I could. . . . I going to give him once time more, and see whether he's stay poor or not. Just this once more now!"

So he's taken some gold, five hundred dollars gold moneys in a little bag, like you've seen them, this country—little cloth bag. He's got up on horseback, and he's say to his brother, "Now you come, follow me."

His brother's follow along on foot. And bimeby that rich's drop that bag of gold moneys right in that path where his brother can't help see 'em. Ain't nobody else coming along that road—he's watch for that. And he's drop that bag so his brother'll pick it up, you unnerstand. . . . (How you say that now? . . . On purpose? Yes.)

And that poor brother, what you believe? He's tired of walking, just walking along. And just before that rich one drop the bag gold moneys, he's think to hisself, "I'se going close my eyes now—see how blind man walk when he's come walking along the road!"

So he's close his eyes. He's go this way and that, feelin' here, feelin' there. And rich brother watch him—watch him pass right by that bag gold moneys and never see. Then he's call out to his brother, "What you doing there now?"

And his brother tell him, "I'se trying to see how is blind man walk along the road. But I ain't like it very well."

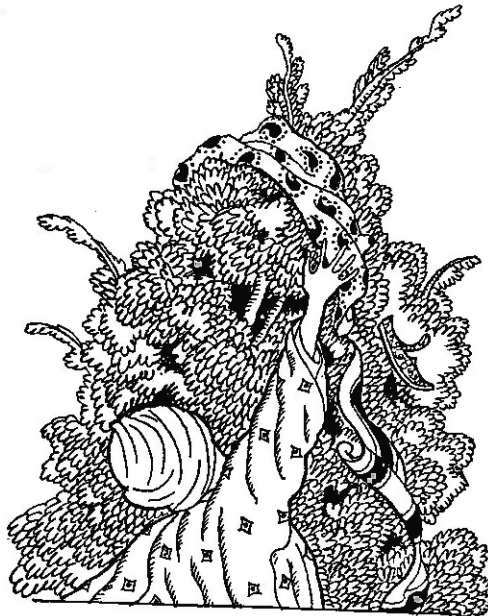
"Ain't you find nothing along this road?"

"No, I ain't find nothing. Is you lost something, brother?"

"I ain't lose nothing; but I drop that bag gold moneys for you right in your path, and you'se gone by like blind man and ain't see it. . . . I ain't going to give you no more. I think God want you to be poor."

So when they's come back home, rich men he's call the neighbors. He's tell 'em all from the begin to the end, and he's say:

"You look, now, how I'se try to give him, and he don't get nothing! His luck ain't come. *God don't want him rich.* I ain't going to go against God no more."



SIGNAL-FIRE

By LEONORA SPEYER

LIKE a slow wave from some reluctant sea,
I lift above the furtive deeps of dreams,
Where deeper wakings are:
Over my dreams dawn hangs a heavy star.

Like a slow wave I lift and sink again,
Sink and lift higher,
Gather strength to be;
Then . . . !
A green-crested flame, with outcry of desire,
I leap my way,
Up, up the silver shores of day,
To spill upon its stones my useless fire!

Useless? Perhaps not so!
Perhaps some following wave will heed
That scattered flood of me,
Burning before;
Heed and draw back . . . remain at safer sea . . .
To dream life's ebb and flow;
For there are waves that never touch the shore!