

Around the World in New York

II—*The Syrian Quarters*

BY KONRAD BERCOVICI

TO one just come from the Occident, a descent upon the Syrian quarters in New York is like a dream travel. It is as if some undreamed of means of transportation had suddenly been realized, and we could at will, in a few minutes, land across the seas into some remote, outlying district of Damascus—Damascus, referred to by the Syrians of the desert as “the paradise on earth,” the city that has remained as old as it was two thousand years ago.

Take the Sixth Avenue Elevated at Forty-second Street, or wherever you happen to be, and in a few minutes you are in Rector Street; walk a block westward to Washington Street, and you are in Syria.

The street in itself, cut a hundred years ago, is in the same condition that it was at the beginning of the last century, with here and there a wide marble front of a modern-looking banking house that emphasizes the poverty of the adjoining brick dwellings. Squalid, dark hallways lead into still more squalid rear houses where the sun never penetrates. The cobblestoned inner courts are disputed by cats and dogs, conquering them in turn. Looked at from the opening of a hallway, the courts and rear houses are not a pleasant perspec-

tive. Both sides of the street are lined with stores in the windows of which are displayed all kinds of Oriental wares: long amber-piped narghiles, the smoking paraphernalia of the Orientals; heavy, bulging, mandolin-like musical instruments; and, in transparent jars, roots and dried fruits of all kinds that grow one knows not where and are put to one knows not what use.

Every second store is a coffee-house or a restaurant, duplicates of such as are in existence in the Orient, somewhere around Constantinople or Smyrna, Saloniki, or Damascus itself. And in those dimly lighted coffee-houses, around rough pine tables, sit swarthy men drawing the cool smoke from the aromatic *titun* that burns slowly in the brass container over the large jar filled with rose-scented water, through which the smoke passes before it is drawn by the smoker. Small coffee-shells into which the mud-thick coffee is being continually poured are being served all around by the large, majestic, dark-brown owner of the “Khava,” whose bare feet are incased in pointed, heelless slippers (*babbouches*), dragged *flippity, flippity-flop* as he walks around. In some of the cafés large negroid women, Syrians from the inner desert, with

nostrils pierced where the ring had once been, placidly watch the guests, nodding seriously from time to time to an acquaintance, smiling but rarely, yet so languid in their movements that one feels they are as remote from the actual place of existence as if their being here were nothing but a dream within a dream. How have they come here, and why?

A little farther down the street, toward Battery Place, are the small banking houses, so dear and necessary to the Levantines for the exchange of money, the *zarafs* of the Orient, bankers, letter-writers, advisers, partners, financial agents, and heads of everything that is being done in that district. It takes two generations to forget to translate everything one gets or gives in the moneys of one's own country. In the larger and more pretentious stores are exhibited profusions of Oriental laces, those delicately wrought needleworks of which there is no counterpart elsewhere; showers of rugs, rugs from Persia and Turkestan, rugs from Turkey and Syria, rugs on which five generations have worked, and rugs which have been turned out by a mill somewhere in the neighborhood to fool the ignorant who do not know the difference between the real thing and imitation, and come to pick up bargains. Swarthy, tall, well dressed men, mostly Armenians, stand idly fingering these priceless things, their faces responding voluptuously to the feel of some genuine article between their fingers, or screwing up disdainfully when an imitation is shown to them. The signs in the windows, though a few of them are in English, are mostly in that beautifully decorative Arabic script which looks more like a lace

design than a conveyer of sound. Women, thin-boned and oval-faced, olive-brown, with long Semitic noses and fleshy chins, with large black eyes, almond-shaped eyes, under heavy eyebrows, and lustrous hair hanging profusely about their shoulders, walk quietly and somewhat stealthily along the walls. The older ones are not yet accustomed to Occidental ways, as if they still belonged to the harem, to the secluded part of the house, where the women's quarters usually are in the house of the Syrian at home, even if he is a Christian. Their feet, in high-heeled slippers, amble insecurely on the smooth sidewalk, their soles instinctively searching for the cobblestones of the Damascus streets under them, over which they have trod in soft *babbouches* or in their bare feet. Their demure and quiet garb hangs loosely on them, as if they were manikins upon which misfit clothing had been thrown. Even when gowned perfectly, the silver ear-rings dangling from their necks, or the way in which they wear their bracelet on the wrist, or the carmined finger-nails would betray them, wherever they should be, for what they are, Syrians from somewhere in Damascus or the Lebanon Hills.

The men wear their trousers upon their slightly bowed legs as they have worn their wide, homespun *shalvaris*. The stiff derby hat or the soft felt one always sits on the top of their large, egg-shaped heads, somewhat in the manner they have worn their fezzes, or as they still wear their fezzes in the intimacy of their own homes.

That is but a description of the main street of the Syrian quarters. If one were to speak of the side streets going to Greenwich Street,—Morris

and Rector Streets and Carlisle Street, —where, because of the very formation of the street, houses lean on one another as if they were ready to crumble down and fall, with crooked stairways going this way and that, dark in the daytime and ill lit at night, narrow side streets with broken pavements and neglected, sloping sidewalks, and the low lights of the stores and the coffee-houses about them, where most of the Syrian families in that district live, one would still better realize how Oriental the Syrian quarter is.

How people do transform the quarter they live in to suit their national temperament and habits! All these houses had originally been occupied by good Dutch burghers a hundred years ago. It is not only age that has told on the houses, but also a different attitude of the inhabitants toward them. The Dutch looked upon these places as homes, as permanent habitations for themselves and the future generations. The Syrian quite unconsciously considers every abode as a temporary housing tent. Successively these houses have been occupied by many nations. It was an Irish district not very long ago. Some Irish families of longshoremen still live there. Then the Italians followed, and were joined by a number of French families. Greeks, Armenians, always the late-comers, and other Levantine folk from maritime ports, settled upon their arrival here as near the Battery as possible; near the sea, to preserve a semblance of their habitats at home. Within these walls one occasionally sees traces of the different nationalities that have passed through. There is a wide, wooden mantelpiece in one, Dutch as Dutch can be, made of the red pine

which was abundant near New York when these houses were built. In another house I have seen birds molded on the ceiling by some Italian inhabitant who had passed on. A few French verses are carved with a knife on the door-sill of another house. From under the successive paints that have been applied on the walls protrudes the Gothic inscription of "God Save the King," painted in black letters.

There are some three thousand souls living in that cramped little space, within sight of the Statue of Liberty, and deafened by the continual roar and sound and clang of the boats that pass on the harbor. But even those born here, the youngsters, although going to the schools of the neighborhood, are as easily distinguishable from the rest of the population two blocks away as if they had never lived in such proximity.

There are two red brick churches, one the St. George and the other the St. Joseph, belonging to the Ecclesia Maronita Catholica. Within these churches at all hours devotees can be found kneeling and prostrating themselves, very much in Moslem manner, before the candy-white, decorative altars. The decorations and pictures and images, of the crudest kind and in the loudest colors, make one think of the beginning of Christianity some two thousand years ago, when the Copts buried their prayer-houses deep in the ground.

§ 2

One day, walking down Washington Street, a man of unusual appearance attracted my attention. Short and compactly built, he strode down the street with majestic stride. His bare

head was covered by a mass of loosely hanging, long, black hair. The upper part of his body was molded in a military khaki tunic much too narrow for him. From the too short sleeves two beautiful, delicate hands hung out at least six inches below the sleeves. When I had caught up with him, his beautiful brown, ascetic face, illumined by two big black eyes, impressed itself upon me as that of a prophet. Although he must have been aware I had remained standing at a distance to watch him pass by me, he paid no attention to the stranger, and looked steadily ahead above my head until he disappeared into one of the hallways in the middle of the block.

I went up to my friend, the editor of "Al Hoda," the Syrian newspaper published here in the Arabic script, and asked him who the man was. He hesitated for a few minutes, then he dismissed my query with one remark:

"A religious ascetic."

"What more do you know about him?" I asked.

"A philosopher of some sort," the editor answered, "one of those dissatisfied men."

"And from where does he come, and what is he doing?"

But my friend refrained from giving any further information about the man, dismissing the matter again by saying:

"Oh, I don't know, and nobody knows much about him. He has just arrived. He works in the office of some paper, sweeping out, or something like that."

I obtained the same answer from several other Syrian friends of mine of whom I inquired. A few days later I met the same prophetic-looking ascetic again. This time I accosted

him. He brushed past me after having looked at me severely with his condoning eyes, as if he had said, "How dare you disturb me, poor sinner!"

Still I persisted. I greeted him in English, walking after him, trying to catch up with him. He entered his hallway and disappeared without noticing me.

That evening I heard him harangue a few young men who had just stepped out from one of the pool-rooms with which that district had been Americanized. I did not understand what he said, but I watched the effect of his cool stream of words upon his unwilling and rebellious listeners. In a few minutes their arrogant gaze had changed from derision to humility. They lowered their eyes as they listened to what he said. Soon they closed in nearer, the better to absorb his words, oblivious to what was going on on the other side of the street, oblivious to the heavy trucks that were rumbling in the middle of the road, oblivious to the loud calls of their pals from the open windows everywhere. As he spoke, the man seemed to grow in stature until they all looked much smaller than he did, because their knees sagged, their heads bowed. They were still standing that way after he had left them. When I asked one of this group who that man was, one of the young men answered, "A saint."

In a few months, because of lack of business, that pool-room had disappeared from the street. I have never since asked again who this man was, but I see him frequently and greet him humbly as I pass him down the street. Thus I am certain the early apostles lived in the slums of

Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Damascus, talking to the people on the streets, changing, reforming, not by ax and fire, but by word of mouth, by appeals to the soul of man. One can better understand Paul and Peter after a visit to the Syrian quarters of New York.

The editor of "Al Hoda" took me down for dinner to one of the restaurants in the district. The low pine tables, standing one close to the other in a row, three rows one after the other, all covered with colored tablecloths, were set with heavy porcelain. The owner, a thick-set man in shirt-sleeves and clean white apron, stood at the inner end of the long hall, welcoming the guests as they arrived by nodding to them or calling them by name. A young Syrian poet was asked to sit at our table. The menu was printed in Arabic, and as if we were in Arabia, the dinner was started with a cup of sour milk, *yoghurt*, the sour milk, the *leban*, offered to the traveler at a tent in the deserts of Syria. Little pieces of lamb's meat, fried on a spit, were served on wooden plates, and the flat, round, soft biscuits, little leavened and little salted, tasted as if they had been baked in the red-hot sand or a small mud oven, such as is in every household of Arabia, and not in a modern oven.

While we were dining, various people came in, and each seated himself at his place. At that restaurant the same clients came night after night for their dinner. During the meal I gained the acquaintance of another man, Mr. Narian, who spoke French fluently. He had been educated in the French schools of the Orient. When my editor friend and the poet departed, I remained talking with

Mr. Narian. A tall, scholarly man, he was sounding me as to my sympathies about the situation in the Orient. He thought the Arabs had received the short end of the bargain in the Balfour declaration about Palestine, that the Jews had been unduly favored.

"Would you like to have coffee with me in my room?" he asked me later on in the evening.

Upon my willing acquiescence, we mounted two rickety flights of stairs to a top room. When the door of that room opened, I was in one of the most luxurious Oriental chambers I have ever seen. The walls were covered with priceless tapestries. The low, rug-spread divans all around the room, the pieces of silk thrown haphazard here and there, the different sets of narghiles, the hand-beaten copper pots, the ornamental brassware, competed with the numberless incrustated and inlaid firearms and swords that lay in profusion everywhere. We lit our amber-stemmed pipes, sitting on our heels, Moslem fashion, each waiting for the other to begin conversation. I remembered the breach of etiquette of admiring too greatly anything in an Oriental house. Because the host feels obliged to offer as a gift what one admires very much, he resents too high praise of the thing he must then give you.

A few minutes later another gentleman, looking more or less of the same caliber and class as Mr. Narian, entered the room without knocking. That visitor was followed by another and another and another, until there were eight in the room. After every one's pipe had been lit and the coffee was ready, the conversation started in French; but it slipped immediately into Arabic, leaving me out of its

understanding. Only from the few words which were later related to me I discovered that I had unwittingly been present at a meeting at which the policy of the Arabians in Palestine who were opposing the English and Jewish plans there had been settled. The gentlemen were the heads of the Arabian patriotic movement, which later caused much trouble in Palestine.

Feeling myself an intruder, I bowed myself out, back to the rickety stairs and into the street. The political attitude of the Arabians in Syria was being settled on the third floor of a house on a street in New York!

§ 3

Maluf the jeweler, the one who beats out with his small hammer on his little anvil, held between his knees, the most intricate legends on small silverings; Maluf, as dry and parched as a mummy, with dancing eyes and grinning face, whose fingers are so immeasurably long and thin and so brittle, one wonders they do not break like glass—Maluf, from whom I have repeatedly bought rings, asked me whether I should like to accompany him where there was dancing. He had not seen me in many moons, and wanted to celebrate. I did not refuse.

He led the way to an upper floor of a house where coffee was served to a dozen people. They looked to be freshly landed, most of them. Some still wore red-brown fezzes and homespun shirts. Two stout negroid-looking women, dressed very lightly, for it was warm, slowly turned their heads when we came in and greeted Maluf with grins and low laughter. They sipped from a tall glass a reddish drink. Their long hair was woolly and curly. Their eyes, small and

deep-set under penciled brows, were moving rapidly like scared mice. Their noses were flat, and their lips were full. They looked like sisters, twins.

"Who are they?" I asked Maluf.

"The dancers," he replied, his tongue smacking over his lips as he looked at them.

Then he rose from his seat and went over to them. A few minutes later he returned to my table and said:

"They will dance. I have asked them to dance. I have told them you were one of ours. They will dance. They will dance."

From underneath the table one of the women pulled out an instrument which was a cross between a mandolin and a guitar and began to pluck its strings. And then, with eyes fixed on me, the other woman stood up and began to move slowly. Her feet remained in one place. Only her body moved and swayed, at first slowly and languorously, then, as the music became faster and faster, she brought her arms and hands and fingers into the dance. The swaying movement went from hips to breast and from breast to neck and from neck to head. She turned slowly on her heels in a thousand different contortions, her eyes dilating themselves more and more, dancing as much as the body danced, compelling every fiber in her to respond a hundred times to every twang of the guitar. And then when she had reached the heights she suddenly took the guitar from the other woman, sat down, and motioned to her to take up the dance where she had left it. Beginning in as rapid movement as the other had ceased, and rising to greater voluptuous motions, she gradually descended all the range of her emotions until she finished the

dance in exactly the same slow tempo the other one had started with. It was a perfect cycle, a perfect story told in motions.

I looked around. Maluf's eyes were half closed. He had completely relaxed. I looked at the other visitors. They were all dreamy, as if under the power of some narcotic, and I realized then better than ever what the dance of the Orient really is. Not a licentious and lascivious form of movement, but the song of the limbs and the body, through which all the emotions can be expressed. I later asked Maluf what the two women had danced. It was "Going away and Coming Home" they had danced, he told me. It meant perhaps a good deal more than Maluf had expressed, but I was satisfied with that.

§ 4

There are two daily papers printed in Arabic in the city. The better-situated Syrians, the wealthier ones, have long since moved away from Washington Street and its immediate neighborhood, and are now living in Brooklyn, in the Bensonhurst district and on the Park Slope. The youngsters there, most of them born here, for the Syrian colony is forty years old, seldom speak their own language among themselves, using it only when they address their parents. But the English they use has quaint turns, and is phrased like Arabic. The two daily papers combined have a circulation of about a thousand a day.

Another publication, "Al Fanoon" ("The Arts"), is edited by Khalil Gibran, whose beautiful book, "The Madman," written in English, was a literary sensation when it appeared a few years ago. "Al Fanoon" also prints draw-

ings by Khalil Gibran. It would be impudent to praise Khalil Gibran as an artist. His works have a quality so much their own one can neither compare nor classify them. They are as subtle and pervading as the rarest perfumes, religious Oriental perfumes. The colors are so delicately shaded, they are but suggestions of hues. And yet it is vigorous of its own vigor and strong of its own strength. Occasionally "Al Fanoon" also prints articles in English. No other magazine in the country is so beautifully got up as this one.

I have passed many hours with the poet and artist, listening to his musical voice, which makes English as sonorous as if it were Italian, as he read me his poems. Faultlessly attired, Khalil Gibran looks more like a cultivated Frenchman than a Syrian. But at home, in his large studio on Tenth Street, discussing with me the Orient, he instinctively bends his knees under him as he sits down on the divan to sip the thick coffee, the preparation of which is his particular pride when he makes his guests feel at home. Everything Occidental is forgotten on entering his room and facing him. Instantly all feeling of hurry is banished. The day seems to be longer, the hours seem to be slower, even the rumbling below, in the street, the noise coming through the heavily shuttered windows, seems to be more distant than it actually is. And listening to him, I have always felt as though he were a brother to that other man I had met and whom his listeners had called "a saint."

§ 5

The wheels of the city are reaching for the youth of the Syrian district.

Here and there young girls have already been dragged into shops to help turn out the hundreds of thousands of pairs of trousers which New York provides for the rest of the world. Many of the homely arts which the Syrians have practised in New York until a few years ago have slowly been abandoned for more remunerative work in factories and sweat-shops, from which they bring home that brand of Americanism so distasteful to the older generation. Maluf has gone back home. Another silver-smith has taken his place. But this new man, much younger than Maluf, is turning out things much faster and less beautiful, and instead of selling them singly to such as love beautiful things, he sells them dozenwise to wholesalers who retail them as antiques and rare wares on Fifth Avenue. The dancing-place has recently been closed by prohibition agents. Less nasal song is being heard, complaints in old Arabic. The hoarse phonograph grinds out jazz-tunes and ragtime. But after the youngsters have had their share of fun, the older Syrians put on records on which songs of their own people have been matriced.

Among my many friends in the Syrian district there are few I like better than I do Parkyan, the rug-dealer. Parkyan is a man of about fifty. His forefathers have been merchants. One day he showed me a beautiful rug he had just received, which had been made of wool of natural colors from brown-wooled sheep, silver gray, black, reddish, and yellow sheep, such as are bred on the plains of Turkestan. It was a magnificent piece of work, and I admired it greatly. He told me the story of that rug, for every rug has a story.

From time to time Americans come down to Parkyan's store to price and buy rugs. One day while I was there a large automobile slowed up in front of it. An elderly man, accompanied by a lady, evidently his wife, entered, and asked to see Oriental rugs. Parkyan showed them the rug he had highly praised to me, asking for it a hundred dollars, which seemed to me a most ridiculously low sum. Certain the man would buy the rug, I regretted my backwardness in asking the price. The man looked at it, then passed it up with the remark that it was not worth half the amount. He offered fifty dollars for it, and turning around to his wife, he said:

"Do you think, dearest, it would do for the hall?"

The lady hesitated.

"I don't know."

Parkyan rolled the rug away and said:

"No, it won't do. But I 'll show you something much better."

I breathed easier. I wanted that rug.

Then Parkyan produced from his shelves a number of other rugs considerably inferior to the first one, for which he asked five and six hundred dollars apiece. Evidently the gentleman had been told the Orientals generally ask twice as much as the value of the merchandise; for when he had finally picked out three of the rugs shown to him, he offered exactly half of the sum asked. Before a half hour was over, Parkyan had sold him a thousand dollars' worth, and the automobile carrying the precious rugs had departed. I waited until Parkyan had rearranged his shelves, singsonging softly to himself.

"If it is a hundred dollars you are

asking for that rug, I want to buy it, Parkyan."

"I have not offered it to you," he replied, turning around, very much taken aback.

"I cannot see that my money is different from the other man's," I answered.

And then Parkyan explained.

"This rug is my test-stone. With it I test a new customer's knowledge of rugs. If he passes that up after I ask him a hundred dollars, which is not one tenth its value, I know that he does not know rugs. I then offer him anything, and am sure to close a favorable deal. Do you understand now?" I understood.

This happened two years ago. The other day Parkyan showed me that he still had the rug.

A hundred feet from Broadway, a hundred feet from the entrance of the subway which bores itself through the length and breadth of the city, a few minutes' distance only from the city hall, within sight of where once stood the liberty pole, and where the final surrender of the British was effected, between the Hudson River and that other river of steel, the elevated, that flows uptown, there is a separate little world, a world that lives its own life. Hundreds of these people have never gone out of their district, and do not know much about the life that surges about them. People from a different world, Christians with Moslem habits, still feeling that they are the Nasrani of the deserts of Syria, the Kellas and settlements of Arabia, and the lowlands of

Palestine, although they are far away from them now. *Kavas* and bazaars and dancing-houses, *Zarafs* and their own Arabic newspapers, living huddled and crowded in tottering old brick houses, a people of a different seed, of an older civilization that has ever been reluctant to the new, distilling a certain pigment into the dull grayness of our modern lives.

Through the open doors one can see the long wax candles flickering in curved rows right and left of the altar in the church. Through open windows floats the melancholy chant intoned by a nasal voice. And the calls in Arabic of the mothers to their children romping on the street mingle with the jazz screechings from another home and the Homeric curses of the truck-drivers on their way to the wharves. An old Arab sits peacefully on the threshold and grinds coffee in a brass mortar. Within the store his daughter is ringing a cash-register. Suddenly the scene is enlivened by a quarrel of neighbors across the street. Heads appear over window-sills, turbaned heads, fezzed heads, grave, smiling tolerantly with Oriental indifference to women's doings. A large steamer from the Orient has moored to a near-by pier and is discharging its merchandise. In the stillness of the air hover the pleasant flavors of dates and figs, of dry raisins and cinnamon cane, and citrons and lemons. Windows are shut down, and in groups the men and women stand in the middle of the street and breathe in the perfumed greetings from home.

A Mountain Munchhausen

Tales from the Kentucky Mountains

BY PERCY MACKEYE

"**H**E war the tale-tellin'dest deevil-charmer, topground or under, old Sol!"

He had been dead for more than twenty years, but the rumor of him still rose from the creeks like the rumbling of their full tides at the spring equinox, and the glamour of his ancient presence still lit the cabin doors like the afterglow of autumn sunset.

We heard of him in many far-sundered places, from people unknown to one another, united only in the common remembrance of a companionship which had charmed, teased, confounded, or hilariously enchanted them all.

Old God-fearing women, still petulant with dim credulity of his preternatural whoppers, pursed their mouths at his name.

"Lor'!" said one of them, "sech contraptious lie-foolin's! When that old gasher Sol drapped in of a winter evenin', us common-sensers riz up from the fire-log and went in the next house,¹ and jist nacherly left him to the chilluns."

"All the same," retorted her husband, "jist nacherly we 'd come toe-teeterin' back ag'in for to listen at him—behint the bedpost."

Latter-day youngsters, especially small boys, wriggled in wild raptures of

laughter at the traditioned stories still told and mimicked by his oldest son, now up in seventy, echoing the droll art of his sire, like the son of Joe Jefferson simulating his great father in the rôle of *Rip Van Winkle*.

By both parents, Solomon Shell was of Dutch "generation," noted for living to great age. His brother, John Shell, Senior, of Big Laurel, "the oldest man in the world," died in 1922 at the reputed age of 134. His father, who lived to about 115, reared his family in an Indian stockade down in Tennessee. His mother, Polly Ann, who lived past one hundred, was a Fry, daughter of Nicholas Fry of North Carolina. One winter in the eighteenth century the Frys had walked to Kentucky from Carolina barefoot in the snow.

We learned that old Sol himself had died in 1898, just missing his own birth centennial by two years. So for almost the whole of the nineteenth century he had haunted these hills, a living legend, rolling unconsciously under his tongue, as he spat in the wood fire, the cud of an ancient wit and lore which kinned him with the old saga-tellers of the Norse fiords and with charcoal-burning fairy-chroniclers of the German forests.

For he was veritably a Munchhausen

¹ That is, the next room.