

A Bit of Syria Between the Skyscrapers

LOWER NEW YORK'S TOWERS
REPLACE THE CEDARS OF LEBANON

by
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STRAIGHT across the foot of Washington street stretches the Battery. Just a few blocks on to the right Old Trinity rises to face the hellowing challenge from Wall Street. All up and down Washington street itself—the center of New York's 30,000 Syrian colony—lower Manhattan rattles and bangs. Wreckers wrench old, low red-brick buildings from foundations and the shriek of the riveter marks the rise of another trim, towering skyscraper. And out go several hundred Syrians to find homes over in Brooklyn close beside other Syrians, likewise driven by Manhattan's progress to find new habitations.

YET DESPITE the fact that this wholesale migration has been going on intermittently for over ten years, Washington street is still undeniably Syrian. Here any day, any hour, you may meet soft-voiced, olive-skinned men and women who, only a few years ago, had but to look to the east across narrow, steep valleys to see the cedars of Lebanon stretch their century old branches against the soft blue of the Lebanese sky, or to the west to catch the glint of the blue Mediterranean washing the sand alongside old Tyre and Sidon. Small boys looking as if they might have stepped from some fifteenth century painting dash madly in and out of the traffic. Small girls walk by looking sidewise at one with delightful demureness quite ready to direct the stranger with manners refreshingly exquisite. And in the spring of the year peddlers are seen to step forth from old shops, look at the clear sky above, glance down the street to where the sun catches the waves of the bay, sniff the salt air—and start off to the west, the north, the south, shrugging their fascinating bulging packs into place as they go.

TO THE MAN or the woman from America's outlying provinces those peddlers must recall visions of earlier days—days back in some village or farm kitchen, with the spring sun shining across the freshly scrubbed floor where the tramp peddler had heaped up his treasures of linen, embroideries, and gay flowered shawls. How many can remember the shrewd matching of financial wits that followed between the housewife and the wily dark-eyed Oriental? If grandmother happened to be a sturdy Scotch woman—that battle was royal! But no matter how long it raged, when it was over something from that pack was added to grandmother's store of treas-

ures. Something from grandmother's old teapot of carefully hoarded coins had found its way into that peddler's pocket.

And now that mythical peddler is at last tracked to his own treasure trove. For although houses may tumble along Washington street, although brisk office buildings may elbow themselves ostentatiously in, the street still remains the center of New York's Syrian trade. It still is the source of supply for those mysteriously attractive packs. Here are shops hiding priceless old brass from the street called Straight in Damascus. Shops where silks from Beirut glow like dawn in the dull shadows; shops with pottery from old Mount Lebanon's rugged shops; shops filled with Old World colors, jewels, and perfumes waiting to be spread before New World eyes by members of a family whose ancestors once, century upon century ago, sailed forth in Phœnician ships to barter their cargoes in far-flung ports of the Mediterranean.

BESIDES THESE bewildering wares, there are the freshly scoured windows revealing alluring displays of silk lingerie sewed by women whose families through generations have developed a skill which speaks of amazing patience and love of beautiful things. These women sew their seams, trace their embroidery, hour after hour in tiny factories over the shops or at home in the rickety tenements far into the night. Sometimes one is found—at home—weaving tapestry after a pattern handed down through generations by her own village people, most of whom still live quietly remote in some steeply walled Syrian valley. And as the spring days increase in promise, these women too, peddlers like their men folk, go out with their wares from the shops, only limiting their journeys to nearby Long Island or seaside resorts.

Then there are the shops that fill their windows with candy unlike any found elsewhere in New York—candy stuffed full of nuts and fruits. At the restaurants one can dine on strips of lamb broiled on long steel spits, on all sorts of vegetables curiously folded in pastry, on Oriental sweets, and then sip Turkish coffee while visiting with the proprietor, who often appears in his own native dress. The American visiting Washington street gradually becomes aware that the Syrian quarter means to maintain, if possible, its own national characteristics in trade—characteristics that combine clever bargaining with ingratiating manners and tempting wares. No one can wonder with such assets in



RATTOPPO' DELLA BARIÀ

By Giovanni Zannacchini, in *Gli Adornatori del Libro*, Bologna

business that today the Syrian peddler of ten or twenty years ago is often the prosperous shopkeeper of upper New York. As he has grown older, he has gone back to Syria time and again. But never to stay. He long ago decided to remain in America and to bring, if possible, many of his nephews and cousins to help in his business.

NOT THAT the shopkeeper of Washington street—even the one who imports his beautiful copper, brass and pottery from all parts of the world, and ships it out to all parts as well—can restrict the interest of his children to things of the Old World. Fortunately he doesn't want to do that. What the Syrian—whether shopkeeper, poet or philosopher—does want to do is to keep alive a pride in the age-old culture of Syria.

But down in Washington street this generation of young people is growing up in the small three or four room flats of the low, red brick tenements whose fronts are scrawled over with fire escapes and whose rears open down into desolately dark courts. Those crowded rooms are usually filled with cheap American-made furniture, and sometimes the only beauty in them is brought in through old Syrian tales told by the father or mother. What with the street life outside, the goings and comings down along the Battery, and the public schools, this present generation often gets out from under parental authority. For example: What can one expect from an American-born Syrian girl when her parents attempt, according to Syrian customs, to select her future husband for her? Quite naturally she objects. Also, she more and more resents the insistence of those parents that she remain in the background as the women of old Syria—especially previous generations of them—always remained.

These outbreaks, however, are only the natural outbreaks of youth. On the whole, Syrians are, above all else, loyal—loyal to their own kin, their neighbors, their race, and gratefully loyal to the America that has opened to them so great an opportunity.

BEING WHAT THEY ARE—an intensely devoted people to whatever they claim as theirs—these American Syrians could give many native Americans a lesson in obedience to law. Indeed, it is claimed by courts of New York that a notably small number of Syrian immigrants appear for breaking the law.

That obedience, perhaps, has its root deeply buried in a loyalty to their religion. From the first century when the first apostles originated the term Christian in old Antioch, the Syrians have fiercely defended their faith. In the short stretch of Washington street where they now live and work in Manhattan, two churches stand facing the noise and the hurry of a modern city.

To the visitors, sight-seeing in the great cathedrals of upper New York, these tiny

churches of Washington street may be easily missed. But if by chance he should step through the door, like magic all time and distance disappear between this spring of the year 1931 A. D. in the New World of the West and that long-ago spring in the East of which Kabil Gibran, the Syrian poet-artist, tells us:

Upon a day in the spring of the year, Jesus stood in a market place of Jerusalem, and He said unto us: "Let us go into the North Country and meet the spring. Come with me to the hills, for winter is past and the suns of Lebanon are descending into the valleys to sing with the brooks."

And upon the afternoon of the third day we reached the summit of Mount Hermon and there He stood looking down upon the cities of the plains. And His face shone like molten gold, and He outstretched His arms and He said to us: "Behold the earth in her green raiment, and see how the streams have hemmed the edge of her garment with silver."

ALL TIME AND DISTANCE must disappear, for the voice from the altar is speaking in Syriac, the language Christ used when He walked with men upon earth. What matters it that back of the visitor, just beyond that new, proud stone-front, the life of Manhattan thunders along? Inside, in the quiet, facing the altar, hearing the services intoned in those words, distance of time and space dwindles. One finds himself back in old Antioch listening to John the Apostle; finds himself up above on the mountain worshipping with good Saint Maron; finds his rather materialistic American mind slipping back to that first Easter time two thousand years ago. And finds himself marveling reverently on the fierce loyalty that has kept intact the outward symbols of an inward faith through two thousand years.

For this small church at 57 Washington street is the Church of the Maronites, the followers of Saint Maron, the church which the Lebanese Syrians have fought to maintain, as originally organized, through twenty centuries of oppression, invasion and unbelievable sacrifice. If the American visitor hearing the usual week-day service feels himself stirred by a new realization of those ancient scenes, what dramatic fervor must sweep the Lebanese Syrian himself, especially now, with the tragedy of that first Holy Week brought freshly, vividly, back to him by the Lenten devotions!

That is why he forgets all formal Western restraint when on "Sorrowful Friday" he heaps high with flowers the white pall spread in the aisle below the altar rail; heaps them high, until the image of the Crucified Christ lying there is buried deep in color and fragrance. That is also why he returns at midnight as Easter begins, to rejoice in the *Festa Festarum*, that of Resurrection, when the strains of the old Resurrection hymn echo up and down gray, sordid Washington street, to touch it with a bit of that first century glory so real to the Lebanese Syrian kneeling within.



MASS, BY GIUSEPPE TORELLI
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