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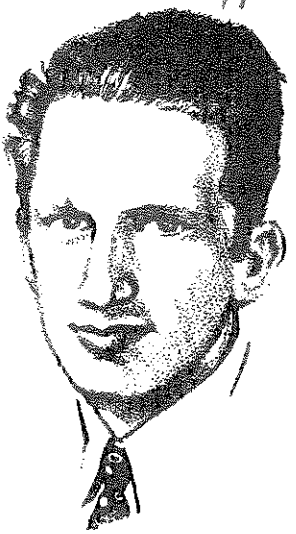

Road to Freedom

Salom Rizk
Author of "Syrian Yankee"‡

THE FIRST duty of a newcomer to America, as I see it, is one of discovery. This is true whether he arrives by boat or by birth. He must try to find, to define, understand and appreciate America's growing inner spirit—to know its history, its people and the great men who have inspired its search for liberty and security, justice and brotherhood.

I did not know this duty when I first came here. I came to know it only slowly. One of my chief handicaps to knowing it sooner than I did was a complete ignorance of the English language.

This did not trouble me at first. I was too dazzled by the outward magnificence of my new country to be worried by a language deficiency. My eyes alone—and my Syrian ears—were enough to drink in all the wonder and meaning of America I wanted.

My first astonishment in America had been the immensity, the size, the scale of everything that existed in this rich and fabulous land—the lofty temples and skyscrapers, the great and sprawling factories, the endless streets of endless magic cities, the huge and opulent farms.

But these, the outside facts of America, as I grew used to them, gave way to a passion to know the inside facts of my country. And here I faced a real difficulty. How could I understand the spirit of America, get at its elusive inner meanings, at its rich and hidden depths, without a knowledge of the language which conveyed these things? Here I was, literally a mental prisoner, held incommunicado behind the mocking bars of a jail worse than jail: illiteracy. And nobody to bail me out. Only I could do that.

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‡ AS A LECTURER on Americanization, Salom Rizk attracted the attention of an editor of *The Reader's Digest*, and was sponsored by that publication on a speaking tour of American colleges and high schools. Mr. Rizk's book, *Syrian Yankee*, has run into eight printings. For a year he was one of the editors in the Office of War Information. Under new auspices, he is again on a lecture junket throughout the United States.

Consider my plight. I could not speak with my American friends, nor ask them even one of the many questions that plagued me. I could not understand the radio before which I sat dumbly while my brothers, relaxing after a day's work, roared at the humor and listened with exasperatingly interested faces to the songs, the speeches and news reports. I could not read the big, fat newspapers nor the books in the great library overlooking the teeming business district from the top of Jones street. All mocked my ignorance.

Burning to learn the language, I was, nevertheless, frustrated at every turn. Because I worked long hours every day, I could not go to school. My Syrian friends found it easier to converse with me in Syrian, and the foreigners who worked beside me at the packing plant spoke in their native tongues. The only time they used English was when they swore at me.

AS IF to fan this burning ambition to learn English into an unquenchable flame, I kept bumping into experiences for which, in my illiterate state, I could find no satisfying explanation. Some of these experiences were happy; some were not. And one of the unhappy ones came one day when I decided to see a new section of the city, by walking home from work over a different route.

Presently I found myself on a street running along the river, a street as dirty and dreary and squalid as anything I had seen in the worst section of Beirut's Mediterranean waterfront. I wondered, "Is this really America?" Here was a wretched, ugly side of America my Syrian schoolmaster had not told me about; a dark nether region of the city my brother had failed to show me in that first sightseeing trip.

I shuffled my tired feet along the ugly street, my mind filled with incredulity. The dirty, paper-strewn spit-flecked pavements; the dark, shabby, huddled houses and vacant store buildings settled askew on their foundations; the putrid smell of things spoiling in a summer swarm of flies and maggots; the beery odor of speakeasies; the long, drab street strewn with tag ends of rags and clothing, old yellowed newspapers, crumpled handbills and posters, loose boards and bricks, empty bottles, tin cans, broken dishes, horse manure; the dusty, grassless yards; the worn, tired look of decrepitude on all the houses; the limp, gray curtains—all these outward intimations of filth, misery and hunger within gave me a feeling of having suddenly stepped out of America in one simple turning of a corner.

Thin, pale, stringy-haired children with smeared faces and ragged clothes played barefoot in the hot streets. Callow youths loitered here, and slovenly old men shuffled along with the stoop of defeat in their shoulders. The people and their houses looked much alike. Broken, dilapidated porches hung precariously from the fronts of rickety, unpainted dwellings, drooping over the dirt-glazed windows like tired eyelids. Drunks sprawled in the doorways of abandoned buildings.

This was my first disenchantment. It was as if all the good things I had known and seen in America had been totally obliterated, suddenly blotted from memory. My mind was filled with the wretched scenes of the long, poor street that stretched before me.

At home I told my brother of this incongruous, unbelievable thing I had found in America. "You were in the slums," he told me. Slums! A new word, an evil word, a word I wanted to forget.

I tried to forget it by thinking of slums as an abomination that could not reach me, a quagmire I could escape by simply staying away. Slums were, after all, isolated poverty—a small, segregated part of a city that was mainly clean and wholesome and prosperous.

Yet I could not help remembering the long days of waiting in line for work before the crowded gates of the packing plant, the happy faces of the men who were called, the dejected look of men turned away.

Did these dejected workers live in the slums? Without brothers to help me, would unemployment finally drive me down into those squalid habitations? Why must rich, powerful, kindly America, the America that had sent money, food, clothing and milk, and Red Cross Angels, to starving Syria after World War I—why must this America suffer the humiliation of poverty and hunger and jobless men in its midst? It was a question that was to repeat itself more and more forcibly later, and in a way that I shall never be able to forget.

TOWARD THIS end I took a job in a hat-cleaning shop. I might learn a little English from the customers. But the only time I met a customer was when he didn't like the job.

Finally, in desperation, I went on the road selling Oriental rugs and tapestries, in the hope of learning a little English from American housewives. I learned other things, too. Every town, no matter how small, had its slum, "the other side of the tracks," where the poorest people lived in shacks and shanties, in appalling poverty.

Queer that I hadn't noticed before this seamy underside of American cities. The retina of my mind, like a camera with a color filter, must have been fixed, by my naive expectations, to catch only the brighter impressions. At any rate, failing to understand this mystifying contrast of misery and magnificence, I accepted it as one of the inevitable visitations of life even in America. I did not then know of the growing literature of social protest which sought to reveal the roots of this paradox and to find a remedy.

After a summer of checkered success, I decided to make my home in Ames, Iowa. I was attracted by the beautiful college campus and the great halls of learning. Finding work as a dishwasher in a Greek restaurant, I enrolled as a special student in the fourth grade, primarily to learn English. I was now almost 20 years of age.

Before long I was telling my life story to my classmates, then to their parents, to church groups, luncheon clubs and college classes. And I was

learning to read. Every night I sat in my room poring over a book, laboriously looking up the words in the dictionary, puzzling my brain to make sense out of the involved sentences. Sometimes I read only a page an hour. This was much too slow, and when I acquired a shoe repair shop I paid one of my shoe shiners so much a page to sit at my elbow and read to me while I cobbled. For every new word he taught me, I gave him a penny. He was underpaid.

Just about this time people were beginning to talk "hard times." At first I could not believe my ears—nor my eyes. Depression? How could that be? Everywhere about me were the same visible signs of wealth. Nothing had burned up or blown away. There were the same fine houses, the stores, the college buildings, the fields of grain beyond the town, everything just as before. What did people mean—a depression?

But after a while the grim truth was borne in on me. College attendance declined, my business fell off. We were asked to give till it hurt to a community fund for helping hungry families whose fathers could not find work. We were urged to burn corn to reduce surpluses, and to vote for higher prices for farmers facing ruin.

Then it was I suffered a black disillusionment worse than when I had seen the slums. The depression meant that the evil things of the slums were spreading, creeping out over the land like a flood. Now my lot looked hopeless. In Syria I had hope because I could escape the everlasting poverty of that land by coming to America. But now, here in America, was poverty. Where could I escape to now? My disillusioned spirit plumbed the depths of despair.

ABOUT THIS time a college instructor gave me a list of books to read. Among them was *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, about which President Roosevelt said "it turned his stomach." It turned mine, too—and pierced my heart. Though *The Jungle* was written about conditions since corrected, it gave me some idea of the tremendous human cost of America's magnificent enterprises and thriving industries.

If *The Jungle* upset my appetite for food, it whetted my appetite for reading Sinclair, and I devoured almost everything he had written. He opened for me a whole new world, revealed to my astonished mind a side of America I had never suspected. It seemed incredible to me that all these injustices, oppressions and glaring inequalities should exist in the land of "liberty, equality and fraternity."

Although I now read many books and papers on the social sciences, they all left me dissatisfied, uneasy with a feeling that somehow none of them was reaching the roots.

Not until several years later, as a lecturer on Americanism, did I stumble onto the writings of one of the world's great original thinkers. In his writings I felt I had found the roots. I found the first satisfying explanation of the paradox that had so puzzled and disillusioned me about Amer-

ica—why vice and crime, unemployment and poverty—yes, even war—could spread and increase and remain unconquered.

In this author I found the discoverer of the folly of man's habitual relationship to the land—a relationship which, for all his deeds of greatness, spells his ultimate doom. And in his writings I found the remedy for the economic trends that are threatening the very foundations of civilization, for the permanent relief of slum conditions, of vice and crime.

I don't think Columbus felt any happier in his discovery of a new hemisphere than I did when I found the plan for a new and sane world in the writings of America's greatest philosopher—Henry George.

Mistakes Make the World Go 'Round

John E. Gibson

A PESSIMIST might be called a fellow who carries a pencil with an eraser on both ends of it. He is afraid of making mistakes. He is too shortsighted to see that mistakes are valuable—that some are actually worth their weight in gold.

For every right way to do a given thing, there are dozens of wrong ways. Obviously the odds are very much against a man doing a given thing right the first time. The more difficult the feat is, the higher the odds. The odds against radium being discovered at the first attempt were possibly a million to one.

No matter how skilled a man may be, or what his objective, he is bound by the law of averages to make a lot of mistakes. But he should be *encouraged* by each one that he makes. For each mistake is a milestone that indicates he is that much closer to his goal.

For weeks the famous scientist, Nikola Tesla, had spent almost every waking hour in his laboratory. He was on the verge of making an important scientific discovery—but so far success had managed to elude him. One day, when one of his few confidants dropped in on Tesla, he found the great inventor jubilant. "Ah," the friend exclaimed, "then you have at last met with success?" Tesla smiled. "Not quite—but it is very close. I have only a few more mistakes to make."

A lot of people think that the more successful a man is, the fewer mistakes he's made. Case histories of leading industrialists prove that the opposite is