MN FâRIS sat on a stool in the basement doorway staring at nothing at all. She had been sitting there almost every day for a weary month, and she had grown to hate it intensely. At first she had been a little curious about her strange surroundings, the dirty street lined with old flathouses, and the brownstones that sheltered numerous alien hordes; their astounding height bewildered her, the babel of tongues from many nations astounded her, but this bewilderment had vanished as the scene grew more familiar, and now Umn Fâris sat in blank despair, trying not to see it at all.

For years before her coming, Fâris, her son, and his wife Miladeh had denied themselves many things that they might save the passage money to bring her from Syria. It had been hard. When Hanna, the first-born son arrived, the Hanna whose name they proudly bore—for they clung to the pretty custom that made them Abu Hanna and Umn Hanna—they had scarcely allowed themselves a suitable rejoicing.

“We must save this sum for thy mother!” Miladeh had murmured when Fâris would have spent much for the festivities. And each year that followed had made the task of saving Umn Fâris’ passage money harder, for the little family grew more rapidly than their income increased.

But now for many weeks the long-cherished dream had been true. Umn Fâris was within the household of her son. And they who had worked so hard to attain the miracle, shook their heads sadly. For from the evening when Abu Hanna had taken the trembling little woman from the terrors of Ellis Island and had brought her in the extravagant, hired carriage to his humble abode in Brooklyn, it had been quite plain to her self-sacrificing children that Umn Fâris was miserably homesick.

Not even the rollicking grandchildren could rouse her from her brooding despondency. Comfortably fat, ridiculously bow-legged, they frolicked about her, talking in a strange tongue. She hardly realized that they were her grandchildren, so alien they seemed.

From her stool Umn Fâris was supposed to be watching them. But even the two-year-old, wriggling in his go-cart, heeded her little. He had a way of squealing impishly whenever she touched him; Umn Fâris could not remember that her babies ever made such impudent sounds, plainly he must have learned this irreverent sort of thing from the Americans. Moreover, he had a great propensity for crawling out of his go-cart and creeping toward his
brothers who played in the gutter. It was Umn Fâris’ task to rescue him and drag him back, howling, from the longed-for vantage.

Umn Fâris hated the gutter. It seemed to her that nothing was uglier than the gutter and the curbing and the sidewalk and the dingy houses. They had lied to her, Abu and Umn Hanna, they had told her they would bring her to a fair country, and they had brought her to a land of gutters.

It was warm in the doorway, but Umn Fâris shivered and drew her shabby khalah closer about her shoulders. She blinked a little in the sunshine. The sunlight was not kind to her, it showed how shabby and faded were her garments, it brought out all the dinginess of the âka that covered her coarse gray hair, it emphasized the hopeless droop of her tired mouth, the deep lines of her swarthy forehead and the lifeless sag of her heavily ornamented ears. Umn Fâris looked very, very old in the glittering spring sunshine.

The impudent grandson wriggled himself free from the go-cart strap and pulled himself up the three steps to the street level. He wavered on the second step and sat down heavily, but he crowed triumphantly at the top and his dark eyes shone with achievement.

“Up! Up! Up!” he cried.

His next larger brother got out of the gutter and glared at him disapprovingly. And Salome, their sister, with all the authority of her six years, promptly yelled out a delicious jargon of English and Arabic that brought their mother hurrying to the window.

“Umn Hanna—Umn Hanna—Meesis Fâris—mama—thees babee ees run awa-ay—Umn Fâris ees permeet thad he s’all run awa-ay! Shu b’amal fih? (What shall I do about it?)”

The mother laughed, the easy laughter of the indolent.

“Chase heem een thad cart, Sal’me!” she admonished as she ambled out the areaway to fasten the straps. She kissed the baby resoundingly when he whimpered. Then she stopped and patted the old woman’s shoulders.

“He climbs like a goat,” she remarked in Arabic, “but thou must watch more closely—he is the son of thy son!”

Umn Fâris nodded uncomfortably.

“Guard him well, now,” she continued, “I must go to fetch more lentils and some meat.”

Salome drew diplomatically closer to her mother’s skirts and snuggled cunningly against the fat hand.

“I weesh thad I go—me!” she coaxed.

Wee Khalil pulled himself out of the gutter and ran awkwardly.

“Me—I go—” he panted, “Me—I weesh thad I go!”

“Oh—ho!” chuckled his mother teasingly. “When the salt
blossoms thou shalt go but not today—” but they coaxed so prettily that she could not resist them, so presently the three of them were moving down the street toward the greengrocer’s shop, Umn Hanna marching proudly as became the mother of five and her babies strutting so much as their funny bow-legs would allow.

Marketing cannot be accomplished rapidly. The delicate delights of bargaining, the delicious opportunities for gossiping were far too agreeable to be hurried. Umn Hanna was a sociable soul, she had a keen Oriental curiosity about the doings of her neighbors and she loitered along in the afternoon sunlight thoroughly enjoying herself.

It was a long time before she turned homeward, her arms filled with bulky bundles of lentils, onions and cucumbers, with the children trotting obediently behind her, sucking little round mamous she had purchased in the sweet shop.

Agnes O’Brien, aged three, spied wee Khalil’s feast and grasped for it belligerently. The sounds of international strife rose above the incessant clamor of the street.

“Shame on ye! Aggie!” screamed her mother, energetic, wrathful and abusive as she snatched the small marauder’s spoils and restored them to the wide-eyed Khalil, “the divil was grinnin’ when ye was born, ye naughty brat! Shame on ye! A-stealin’ a dago boy’s food!”

Umn Hanna reached good-naturedly into her bundle and pulled forth a little cake which she tucked into Agnes’ sticky fingers.

“Chide her nod,” she pleaded, sweetly, “eet ees impossibl’ thad the young know all theeings. Me, I haf a leetle boy ’ome—hee ees nod know ’ow to stay een hees cart—thad one, but I do nod chide me.”

Mrs. O’Brien unbent a little; few could resist the gentle Oriental courtesy of Umn Hanna.

“Have ye more childer home?” she asked idly.

Umn Hanna’s dark eyes shone with pride.

“Allah haf blessed me mooch,” she declared happily, “me—I haf feeve—Hanna, my first born, ’oo ees the joy of hees fathaire; Asaad—he ees a sly one! Ver’ shair (smart), those ones be ad school—an’ you see weeth me thees leetle Sal’me an’ Khalil—an’ thad babee—ah! He ees a mos’ nice babee! He ees watch over by Umn Fâris, the mothaire of hees fathaire.”

“Ye’ve worse luck nor I,” admitted Mrs. O’Brien condescendingly, “I’ve only three brats to worry on—an’ no mother-in-law—” she added exultantly, “God rest her soul, she’s buried in Ireland!”

“But thees—one thad I tole you ees Umn Fâris, the mothaire
of Fâris, my ’usband,” protested Umn Hanna, a trifle bewildered by so much vernacular and only half comprehending the O’Brien scorn of relatives by marriage. “She haf come ad thee’s land of Br-rooklyn to dwell all her days weeth us—” she sighed, “but she ees ver’ sad. Een the winter she came an’ she was ver’ seeck of seeckness-of-boat—an’ now she ees ver’ lonely, she say thad she long to die. Ver’ nearly she deed die een the month of ole ones (February) an’ thad ees make Abu Hanna ver’ sad—but now she ees well, only thad she weel nod be glad, she weel nod talk, nod even een Ar’beeck!”

“Tis not Christian talk, that Araby,” adjured Mrs. O’Brien solemnly, “I don’t see how ye twist the tongue to it.”

Umn Hanna laughed as she journeyed on.

“Oh ho!” she retorted gleefully, “me—I nod see ’ow you ees tweeest tongue on thee’s Ameer-can En’leesch!”

A moment later she stopped again to chatter with a group of compatriots in the language her alien neighbor scorned. Mrs. O’Brien stared at them distrustfully.

“Must be they’s no good to what they’re jibberin’ if they can’t say it in plain talk,” she said, “’tis a looney way to argy—’tis no place for such talk, this country!”

They were very merry, these Syrian women, as they gossiped together, their children playing at their feet. The land of Brooklyn was a land of peace for them. They were still young, they were free from the old world’s terror of wars and taxes, their husbands were fairly prosperous in the gay little shops that grew more numerous year by year, and so they laughed great laughs of contentment that were good to hear. Just now they were giggling slily as they crowded about Umn Butrus to stare at her gaudy spring hat. Secretly they all longed for it, they knew that they, too, should attain the glory of hats as soon as their fortunes permitted, but they teased the pretty little woman outrageously.

“Is thy head a garden to blossom?” demanded Umn Hanna touching one of the nodding roses.

Umn Fâris, from the doorway, had been watching Umn Hanna’s loitering progress down the street for many moments. She stared at the tittering group of women sullenly. Their happiness hurt her cruelly. She hated this strange land and she hated them for being merry in it.

Was it a decent land where women loitered laughing on the public way? Was it a decent land where a daughter-in-law ruled in the household and bade the honorable mother of the husband to watch the babies? Umn Fâris twisted her colorless lips in deep disgust. She closed her eyes defiantly to shut out the hateful alien
THE HOUSETOP

sights. She swayed mournfully as she brooded over her wrath. Old and unlovely she sat in the spring sunshine and bitterly longed for death to release her from this abhorred country.

Beside her the baby grandson chattered softly—but in English! "'Ello! 'Ello!" he echoed, and then he squirmed restlessly. "Up! Up!" he pleaded.

But Umn Fâris would not even open her eyes. Let that idle woman who was wandering about the streets care for the child, Umn Fâris would not. Presently she became aware without opening her eyes that the baby had freed himself again from the straps. The victorious lilt of his naughty voice sounded much farther away. Umn Fâris sunk like a child.

Let the baby fall if he would! Maybe his cries would bring her careless daughter-in-law away from those laughing women!

But though she waited expectantly she heard no cry. And presently the persistent "up! up!" sounded above her head. This made her open her eyes from curiosity. The rascal was nowhere to be seen. Umn Fâris stood up in dismay. She looked quickly down the street. While she had been sulking the laughing group of women had vanished around the corner.

"Up! Up! Up!" panted the baby sturdily. He had climbed out of the areaway and up the steps to the open door of the house, his fat legs disappearing in the doorway.

Umn Fâris started after him angrily. On the first floor of the old house there dwelt a family her son scorned. He would not want his son to enter their walls. She crawled up the stairs after him as fast as her rheumatic old limbs could follow. But it was not fast enough.

He was already halfway up the dingy stairs to the second floor, clinging to the spindles, chuckling adorably.

"Up! Up!" he laughed and went the faster when she called. He was roguishness incarnate.

Thus they stumbled along, the rollicking baby and the cross old woman, around the hallways and up the worn stairs until the baby disappeared into a square of blue sky and the woman, terror in her heart, crept gropingly after him.

There were smooth little pebbles on the tarred roof and the baby clutched them happily.

"Ah!" he sighed comfortably, "Ah—nice!"

Umn Fâris sighed with relief when she beheld him unhurt. She, too, sat down on the pebbles, utterly weary from her unwonted exertion. She held his garment tight and scolded him in breathless Arabic.
"Thou wicked, wicked little fox!" she muttered.
The baby, fascinated with the pebbles, paid no heed. Umn Fâris at last caught her breath and looked about her. She saw nothing save flapping clothes drying in the April wind. It was the first time she had been from her son's doorway—her daughter-in-law dried their linen in a courtyard—and she wondered idly why clothes were drying in this place. She pulled herself to her feet wearily.
Suddenly the freshening breeze caught a blanket that hung before her and flung it sidewise over the scuttle door.
It left Umn Fâris looking straight across an open space, over the pebbles of the roof, over the flat tops of the next roofs and beyond the great stretches of the warehouses and wharves into the dazzling waters of the bay. A blur of riotous blue, towers rising in mists of smoke, a green island glistening in the midst of the waters and bridges all shadowy in April sunlight.
Umn Fâris lifted her sad old eyes and really saw America for the first time. She walked across the pebbly space like one in a dream, she leaned against the railing and stared.
Her tired soul drank in the wonderful bigness of it all. Her shoulders straightened a little and she breathed deeply.
"Up! Up!" coaxed the baby at her feet.
She lifted him in her arms.
"Up! Up!" he triumphed, waving his fat hands.
And Umn Fâris spoke her first English word.
"Up! Up!" she laughed comprehendingly.
There was a bench by the chimney, she sat down upon it and held the child close to her heart, staring over his dusky little head to feast her tired eyes in the glorious blue of the waters.
And as she looked she swayed to and fro unconsciously and her grandson, sleepy from his climb, crooned contentedly. After a time she began chanting a queer little tune to him, the words came spontaneously from her old lips, she measured rhythmically after the manner of her people.
"In the land of thy fathers," she murmured,
"Have I sat many times on the housetop!
Very often in the evening
Thus have I watched the sunset from the housetop!
Once when I was a maiden I hid myself on the housetop,
I hid myself from an old man—a man they would have me wed!
Then when the stars came forth, there came to me
Over the housetops, my lover!
He was young—he was brave and swept me away with him over the housetops!
THE HOUSTOP

Then there was fighting and strife, but he hid me secure on his housetop!

In Beirut, on the mountainside, on a housetop!"

The baby was asleep. Umn Fâris stared down at him. She was like a woman in a wonderful dream. And she bent more closely over him as she swayed, and her voice was infinitely deep and sweet.

"On a housetop I have cradled in mine arms thy father," she whispered, "thy father, my first-born!" And then she, too, was still.

The wind blew her gray hair in curling strands around her âka, it brought a touch of color to her sallow cheeks, the lovely shimmer of the sunlit waters was reflected in her glowing eyes.

It was sunset when they found her; she looked amazed into her son’s frightened face.

"I thought—I thought—," he stammered, "I thought thou had grown too sad for life—that thou had died, little mother of my heart!"

"Foolish one," she responded serenely, "shall one as old as I die of grief? Life is not all grief."

He stared at her in awe, not comprehending. The baby stirred in his sleep and the man stooped awkwardly to lift him. The touch of his hands brought a smile to the woman’s luminous eyes.

"Son of my youth," she murmured tenderly, "dost thou remember how often on another housetop I have cradled thee thus in my arms?"

She stumbled stiffly to her feet and shaded her eyes from the setting sun. She stood proudly, her head lifted, her gaze serene, there was a newfound healing peace in her bruised old heart.

Suddenly she stretched out her arms to the gleaming bay.

"Thou art right to boast of this land!" she cried. "I, too, shall boast hereafter! It is not like Beirut—that—that will always be mine own, but this is the land that has seemed good to thee and in it—I have found another housetop!"