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Our Little Cuban Cousin



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Preface

Largest of all the fair West Indian Islands which lie in our open doorway is Cuba. The great south doorway to the United States and all North America, you know, is the Gulf of Mexico.

But recently, as we all remember, we have had war and bloodshed at this doorway. The Spanish government, in trying to subdue its rebellious province of Cuba, brought great hardship and suffering upon the Cuban people, our neighbours, and our government at last decided that such things must not be at our very doorway. So to-day Cuba is free, and the great trouble of war is over and past for her.

Yet, though war no longer troubles the Cuban people, they have many new hardships and difficulties to contend with, and need the friendly help of their more fortunate neighbours scarcely less than before. Now, in order that we may be able to help our friends and neighbours, the Cubans, we must know them better, and surely we shall all feel a stronger interest than ever before in their welfare. So we shall be glad to meet and know our little Cuban neighbour, Maria.

We shall ask to have what Maria says translated for us, for most of us do not understand the Spanish language, which Maria speaks. We must remember, too, to pronounce her name as if it were spelled Mahreeah, for that is the way she and her family pronounce it. Our Cuban cousins, you know, like our cousins in Porto Rico, are descended from the dark-eyed, dark-haired Spanish people. Their forefathers came over seas from Spain to Cuba, as the English colonists came across the ocean to our country, which is now the United States.

Yet we must remember that the Spanish people and the English people are near akin in the great human family. They both belong to the white race; and so we shall call our black-eyed little neighbour our near cousin. Welcome, then, to our little Cuban cousin!

CHAPTER I. DANGER

"Maria! Maria! Maria!" was the low call from some unknown direction. It sounded like a whisper, yet it must have travelled from a distance. Low as it was, the little girl dozing in the hammock in the lemon grove was awake in an instant. She sprang out and stood with hands shading her eyes, looking for the owner of the voice.

She well knew what it meant. Ramon was the only one who had agreed to call in this way. It was a sign of danger! It meant, "The enemy are coming. Look out and get ready." Shouldn't you think our little Cuban cousin would have trembled and cried, or at least run for protection to her mother?

Maria was only nine years old. She was a perfect fairy of a child, with tiny hands and feet and soft black eyes. But she was used to war by this time. She never knew when she went to sleep at night but that her home would be burnt down by the cruel Spaniards before the end of another day.

Ramon got up before sunrise this morning. He had been away from home for several hours. He had gone out in the country "to look around," as he said. From his own front door the burning roofs of the houses of old friends not a mile distant could be seen the night before. The Spanish troops must be near. Who could say but that the boy's own home would suffer next?

He was tall and active, and he longed very much to help his people. They had suffered much from their Spanish rulers and now they were working hard for freedom. But Ramon's father had been ill for a long time. He was growing weaker every day. The boy's mother looked very sad at times. Her eyes filled with tears when she said:

"My dear boy, you must not leave us now. Your duty lies at home. You must be your father's right hand and protect your little sisters and myself."

The Diaz children lived in a cosy little home in the country. It was only a few miles from Havana. Their father had a small sugar plantation. He had been able to raise enough sugar to buy everything the family needed until lately. But now times were very hard. It was not easy to sell the sugar; besides this, the good man and his family were in constant danger.

What had they done? you ask. Nothing. They did not love their Spanish rulers, to be sure, and they believed their countrymen were fighting justly to free their beautiful island home. They would help these countrymen, or insurgents, as they were called, if they had a chance.

But Maria's father had never, himself, fought against the Spaniards. He was a quiet, kindly gentleman, and he had no love for war. What did the Spaniards care for that? They might say to themselves:

"This man has a pleasant home. He raises sugar. He may give food and shelter to those daring Cuban soldiers. Then they can keep up their strength and be able to keep up the fight against us all the longer."

So far Maria's home had been spared. Although many other houses near her had been burned, hers stood safe and unharmed yet. But "To-morrow is another day," the child often repeated to herself, after the manner of her people. That meant, "Although I am safe now, no one knows what will come next." Then Maria would sigh for a moment and look sad. But she was naturally merry and gay, and the next moment would be dancing about and humming a lively tune.

What news was her brave brother bringing this morning? As soon as he came in sight, Maria ran to meet him. The sun was very hot and the little girl's head was bare, but she did not think of these things. The Spaniards! The Spaniards! made the only picture she could see.

As soon as she was within easy call, Ramon told her that a company of the enemy was only two miles away. He had been very close to them. He had even heard them talking together while he hid in the bushes.

"Just think, Maria," he exclaimed, "they were laughing at the easy time they would have in breaking our spirit. They said that before long they would starve us into giving up. I rather think they won't. Do you know, Maria, I believe God will send us help if we are only patient. The Americans live so near us, I don't see how they can help taking our part, when they know the way we are treated. But come, we must hurry and tell father the news. He will know what we ought to do to get ready for a visit to-day."

The children hurried to the house, and soon every one was in a state of the greatest excitement. When Señor Diaz was told of the approach of the Spaniards, he said, in his gentle voice, "We would best have a picnic."

The children looked greatly astonished at the idea of a picnic at such a time, but their father went on to explain. He had often thought of the coming of the Spanish troops. He had made a plan in case he should hear of their approach. The house should be locked up; all the family should go down to the shore of a small lake a quarter of a mile back in the woods. The path that led to this lake was so hidden that a stranger would not know it was there. Ramon could lead the oxen; the father thought that he was strong enough to guide the horse to the picnic-ground.

If the Spaniards found no one about the house, and no animals worth capturing, they might possibly pass by without doing any harm.

Señora Diaz and old black Paulina got a hasty luncheon ready. Maria said she must certainly take her sewing materials, for she was going to embroider some insurgent emblems. Her little sister, Isabella, carried her pet kitten in her arms, and cried because the parrot must be left behind.

"He'll be so lonesome," she said; "and I just know he'll call 'Isabella' all day long."

The dear little girl cried hard, but everybody's hands were so full that Mr. Poll was left in the house. A big linen cloth was stretched over the cage. If kept in the dark, he would probably be still, and not attract the attention of the soldiers, if they stopped and looked in. The black man servant, Miguel, stayed behind to shut up the chickens in barrels, but would follow the rest of the party in a few moments.

The path led in and out through the beautiful southern woods. There were cocoanut-palms and ebony and mahogany trees, while underneath were creeping vines and bushes, making a close thicket of underbrush. There was no talking. The family crept along as quietly as possible, lest they should be heard and followed. For by this time the enemy must be very near.

CHAPTER II. THE PICNIC

In a few minutes the lake was in sight. It was a very pretty sheet of water. A tiny boat rocked to and fro close to the shore, for Ramon and Maria often came here to row about the quiet lake.

Ramon soon had two hammocks swinging between the trees for his father and mother. The lunch was spread out on the ground, as it was already past the time for the noonday meal.

"What did they have to eat?" you ask. There were some delicate white rolls, that Paulina knew how to make so nicely. There was guava jelly to eat on the rolls; fresh lemons and newly made sugar from which to make a refreshing drink. Besides these, there was plenty of cold fried chicken. Could any children have a nicer picnic lunch than this, even if a long time had been spent in getting ready for it?

The guava jelly looked just as clear and beautiful as that which is brought to America, and sold here at such a high price. Did you ever see it in the stores of Boston or New York, and think how nice it must taste? Perhaps your mother has bought it for you when you were getting well after a long illness, and wished to tempt your appetite by some new dainty. Maria has several guava-trees near her home. Paulina makes so much jelly from the ripe fruit that perhaps the little girl does not realise how nice it is.

After the lunch, Señor Diaz stretched himself in one of the hammocks for a quiet rest. He was very tired after his walk through the woods. He was also troubled over the sad state of things in his country, and was worried that he was not strong enough to take a more active part against the enemy. His wife lay down in the other hammock for a noonday nap, after which she promised to help Maria in her sewing.

Paulina gathered the remains of the lunch and put things in order, while the three children rowed around the lake.

"Won't you hear me read out of my primer, Maria?" said Isabella. "Ramon, dear, give your oars a rest, and float for a little while. You can listen, too, and I know you'll like my lesson to-day."

The little girl was just learning to read, and she had a book printed by the insurgents. No one had to urge her to study, for even her own little primer was made up of stories about the war. She had tucked her loved book in the loose waist of her dress when she left the house. No one had noticed it before.

"Why, yes, my darling sister, certainly I will listen, and help you with the big words, too," answered Maria, while Ramon drew in his oars, and lay back in the boat with a pleasant smile. Of course the words were all Spanish, because that was the only language the children had ever learned. Isabella read:

"My papa is in the army of the Cubans. He fights to make us free. Do you hear the cannon roar? Our men will bring victory. Long live Cuba!"

When Isabella came to the word "victory," Maria had to help her. It was such a big word for the six-year-old child to pronounce. She looked at it again and again, repeating it slowly to herself. Then she said:

"I'll never fail on that word again, Maria, no matter where it is. How I would like to see it in great big letters on a silk banner! I'd wave it all day long."

This was a good deal for such a little girl to say, but then, you know, she was living in the midst of war.

"Good for you," said her brother; "we'll all live yet to see the words of your primer come true. Long live free Cuba! I say. But come, let's go on shore, and play war. You and Maria can be the

Spaniards, and I'll be the insurgent army. You just see how I will make short work of taking you prisoners."

The children landed under a big cotton-tree. They made a fort out of dead branches which they gathered. This fort was to belong to the Spanish troops. The two girls placed themselves behind it, and stood ready to defend themselves. It was not many minutes before Ramon took them by surprise, and dragged them to the boat, which stood for the Cuban headquarters.

"Do you know," said the boy, when they stopped to rest a few minutes from their sport, "I counted three different forts of the enemy during my tramp this morning. The cowardly Spaniards don't dare to march very far away from those forts. They really don't give our men a chance to have a good fair battle. They think by having plenty of forts they can keep our soldiers from getting into the cities. Then they will scare the rest of us who live in the country from feeding them. In that way we will be starved into giving in. We'll see, that's all."

By this time Maria could see that her mother had waked up and left the hammock.

"She will be ready to help me with my work now," said Maria. "Don't you want to come and watch me embroider, Isabella?"

The two girls were soon sitting beside their mother, while Ramon went with Miguel on a hunt for birds. The insurgent emblems which Maria was so eager to make were to be given to the Cuban soldiers. They were to wear beneath their coats. Suppose that an insurgent should stop at any place, and ask for food and rest; how would the people know that he was true to his country, and not a friend of the Spaniards? He could show his little piece of flannel with the watchword of the Cubans embroidered upon it. That was the only thing needed. The people would be safe now in giving him help.

Maria did her work very nicely. She made a scalloped edge with red silk all around the white cloth. A crimson heart on a green cross must then be made, with underneath these words:

"Be of good cheer. The heart of Jesus is with me."

Two hours went by before Ramon came back. Miguel and he were bringing a large net full of birds. Of course, they had done no shooting. That would not have been wise when Spanish soldiers might be near to hear the noise. No, they had searched through the woods till they found some sour orange trees. The fruit was ripe now and there were sure to be numbers of parrots around. They could be caught in the net that Miguel had brought from the house that morning. They had to creep along very quietly so as to take the birds by surprise.

They had great success, it seemed; but what would the family do with a dozen dead parrots? Eat them, to be sure. Paulina would make a fine stew for dinner that very night. That is, of course, if they were fortunate enough to find the house still standing when they reached home. The flesh of this bird is tough, and one wonders that Ramon and Maria are so fond of parrot stew. In Cuba there are many nicer birds for eating. But each one has his own tastes. No two people are alike, we have found out long ago.

"I discovered something in the woods that I want to show you girls," said Ramon. "It's only a little ways off. Won't you come, too, mamma? It's the dearest little nest I ever saw in my life. It must belong to a humming-bird."

Ramon's mother and the children followed him till the boy stopped in front of a low bush. Hidden away under the leaves was the tiny nest. It was no bigger than a large thimble. It was made of cotton, bound together with two or three horse-hairs.

"I'm sure I couldn't have sewed it as well as that," said Maria. "See how the threads are woven in and out. It's wonderful what birds can do. But look at the eggs, mamma dear. See! there are two of them. They aren't any bigger than peas."

Just then the children heard a fluttering of tiny wings. It was Mrs. Humming-Bird who had come home. She was troubled at the sight of the strangers.

"Did you ever before see such a small bird?" whispered Isabella. "She looks like a butterfly, and a small one, too. Aren't her colours beautiful?"

"We would best let her go back to her nest, now, my dears," said Señora Diaz. "You can watch, Ramon, and find out when the baby birds hatch. We shall all like to see them, I'm sure."

They left the bush and turned back toward the lake. Ramon stopped again, however, when they came to a small lace-wood tree.

"You know you asked me to get you some of the wood to trim your doll's dress, Isabella. Here is a good chance to get it. I'll follow you in a few minutes."

Ramon took out his knife, and soon the young tree was cut away from the roots. It would take some time to strip off the bark. It must be done carefully and peeled off in one piece, so as to leave the pith of the tree quite smooth and whole. Several strips of delicate lace could be obtained from this pith. Now Isabella would be able to dress her doll in great elegance. She could ruffle the lace on the waist and flounces of the doll's skirt and make it look as beautiful as though it cost a good deal of money. Isabella herself has a dress trimmed with the lace, but Paulina needs to be very careful when she irons it. It was growing dark when Ramon arrived at the shore with his tree.

"We will go back now," said Señor Diaz, "and see if the soldiers have left us our home."

All were soon making their way back to the house, which they found unharmed. Nothing had been touched by the enemy. Perhaps they had not thought it worth while to stop. At any rate, there was great joy in the Diaz family that evening as they sat on the balcony, sipping cups of hot sweetened water. The times were so hard they could not buy coffee, and *guaraba*, as they called it, was the next best thing. Maria is very fond of it.

The children were so tired from the day's excitement that by eight o'clock they were quite ready to go to dreamland. Isabella started first. She went up to her father and, placing her tiny hands across her breast, looked up into his eyes with a sweet, solemn look. He knew at once what it meant. She was asking an evening blessing before leaving him for the night. Every one in the room stopped talking; all bowed their heads while the kind father said:

"May God bless my darling child, and all others of this household."

Maria and Ramon followed Isabella's example, and soon the children were sound asleep. Isabella dreamed that she taught her loved parrot to say "Liberty," and was delighted at her success.

CHAPTER III. LEGENDS

The next morning it rained quite hard, so the children had to stay in the house.

"What shall we do with ourselves?" said Maria. "Oh, I know. We'll ask father to tell us stories."

"What shall it be to-day?" he asked. "Do you want a tale of old Spain, or shall it be the life of Columbus; or maybe you would like a fairy story?"

"A fairy story! A fairy story!" all cried together.

"Very well, then, this shall be a tale that our people heard in Europe a thousand years ago.

"It was long before Columbus dreamed of his wonderful voyages across the Atlantic. It was before people had even thought of the idea of the roundness of the earth. They had such queer fancies in those days. Few men dared to sail far into the West. They believed that if they did so they would come into a place of perfect darkness.

"Still they had one legend of a land across the Atlantic that was very beautiful. Many of our greatest men believed in it. It was called the Island of Youth, and people who reached it could live for ever, and never grow old."

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