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Alila, Our Little Philippine Cousin



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Preface

On the farther side of the great Pacific Ocean are the Philippine Islands. These form one of the many island groups that hang like a fringe or festoon on the skirt of the continent of Asia. Like most of the islands in the Pacific, the Philippines are inhabited by people belonging to the brown race, one of the great divisions of the family of mankind.

The Philippines are shared by many tribes, all belonging to the same brown race. People of one tribe may be found on one of these islands; those of a different tribe are living on another; or one tribe may live in a valley and its neighbour in the hills; and so on to the number of eighty tribes. Each tribe has its own customs and ways. And yet we shall call these various peoples of the brown race our cousins; for not only are they our kindred by the ties which unite all the races of men in this world; they have been adopted into the family of our own nation, the United States of America.

The people of these islands are many of them wild and distrustful children. They have no faith in us; they do not wish to obey our laws. If we are in earnest in our wish to do them good, and not harm, we must learn to know them better, so that we may understand their needs. That is one reason why we are going to learn about our little Philippine cousin, Alila of Luzon.

CHAPTER I. THE NEW BABY

Alila is such a strong, active boy now, it is hard to imagine him in his babyhood, – he was such a tiny brown tot!

His nose was so flat one would hardly have noticed there was a nose at all, except for the wideness of the nostrils. His big black eyes seemed to be moving around all the time, as much as to say:

"I must find out everything I can, and just as fast as I can, about this queer place in which I find myself."

His hair was straight and coarse and black, even on the day he was born. It was quite warm (in fact, almost all the days are warm in the Philippines), yet the doorway was carefully covered and the windows closed tightly.

Now, why do you suppose Alila found himself shut up in a close room like that when he first entered this big round world of ours, while there was such a soft gentle breeze outside as scarcely to move the tops of the cacao-trees in the garden?

The fact is, Alila's father, who is not afraid of the wild buffalo nor the boa-constrictor, nor even the huge cayman, is constantly dreading the evil that bad spirits may bring to him. And now he had a darling boy of his very own! According to the beliefs of his people, no evil spirit must be allowed to enter a home when a child is born, or the little one might be troubled by the spirit for the rest of his life.

So the loving parent walked back and forth over the roof waving a bolo in his hand, as much as to say:

"Look out, spirits, or you may get your throats cut. Keep away from here. Do not try to get inside to trouble my little one."

He did this very earnestly in the first hour of Alila's life, although he was shown the foolishness of such ideas by the priests the Spaniards sent among his people.

He is a small man, this father of Alila. He has high cheek-bones like the Chinese and Japanese, and no beard upon his face.

When he felt that everything was really safe, he climbed down from the thatched roof, and, opening the door as little as possible, went softly up to the mat where the baby lay and kissed him.

But, dear me! not all persons kiss the way we do, and this father of the Malay race seemed rather to *smell* the baby than anything else we can think of. He placed his own nose and lips on the baby's cheek and drew a long breath. It was done to show his love, and that is what any kiss is given for, is it not?

This baby's bed would not, perhaps, suit all the other babies in the world. Some of those babies we know are cared for on cushions of down and wrapped in soft flannels and delicate muslins. But what did black-eyed Alila care for that? To be sure, he lay on a mat of woven palm leaves, but it was sweet and fresh.

And although the floor his eyes sometimes rested on was not covered with a rich velvet carpet, it was smooth and clean, for it was made of split bamboos flattened and fitted close together. And oh, that floor was beautifully polished by Mother Nature herself, for the bamboos as they grow are covered on the outside with a coating of the finest and hardest varnish.

If Alila could have thought about it at all, he would have considered himself more fortunate than most babies, – for did not his own dear mother, who lay at his side, make every bit of the spread which covered his tiny body? She had taken the fibres of pineapple leaves and hemp and woven them together.

But that alone would not make the spread beautiful enough for her dear one. It must be given a bright colour, so she searched through the woods till she found a sapan-wood tree; then, breaking off some branches and opening them, she took a substance from the heart of each and made a crimson dye.

So you can see that the cover was done entirely by Alila's mother; and you can ask yourself if that wasn't a hundred times better than buying cloth out of a store. That would not have the touch of love in its making.

There was something else in Alila's home one does not see in other lands. Whenever the baby's eyes turned toward the light, they found it very soft and restful, for it came through a window in which were fitted the inner shells of a certain kind of oyster.

It was so pretty! The colours of the rainbow shone there in pale tints, and the flaring sunshine could not enter. The room was kept in a sort of twilight all day long, and made it pleasant for the new-born baby and his mamma to doze and dream.

CHAPTER II. HIS FIRST PARTY

Alila was not two hours old before friends began to arrive to see him. But they did not enter suddenly! That would have been the height of rudeness. As they reached the doorway, each in turn stood for a long time on the outside, making many complimentary remarks to Alila's family. That was their way of showing themselves well-mannered and polite.

The Tagals, for that is the name of this tribe of people, never do anything suddenly. They do not appear to believe in surprise parties.

When all the fine speeches which seemed proper had been made, they entered the little house and came to the side of the new baby. They made the young mother very proud by the praise they gave her tiny son.

But she and her husband were not the only ones pleased. There was Alila's grandmother, who was always the most honoured one in the household; there was also an aunt who made her home here as she was too poor to have one of her own; and beside these, there was a lame old man, a friend of the family, who had come to them for shelter. The Tagals are so hospitable they will never turn any one from their homes.

As one visitor after another arrived, the little house became crowded. If it had not been for the high, dome-shaped roof, the air would have grown heavy and impure. As it was, Alila and his mother soon grew very tired and closed their eyes in sleep.

"That is good," said the grandmother, "we must let her rest. We will go out under the cacao-trees and talk, and I will bring some cocoa wine and betel to you there."

This old woman was certainly not pretty, although good and thoughtful. As she stood talking to the visitors in low tones, one could see how short she was. Her coarse, black hair grew down upon her forehead almost to her eyebrows; her wrinkled skin was dark brown; her eyes were large and round and, like her baby grandchild's, ever turning in a new direction.

She was dressed in a short skirt much like those of the other women of the party; it was of three colours, – green, white, and bright red. Over this she wore a large piece of blue cotton cloth, cut in the shape of an oblong, tucked in at the waist and hanging over her skirt almost down to her knees. No shoes or stockings covered the bare legs or feet, but she did not seem to miss them.

She was as straight as an arrow, even if she were a grandmother. Perhaps it was because she had been used to carrying jars of water and baskets of fruit upon her head ever since she was a little child.

She moved softly about the hut as she got the entertainment ready for the company. From one corner she drew forth a large bamboo with a grass stopple in it. This held the wine the guests would sip so sparingly, for the Tagals are a sober people and seldom drink enough fermented liquor to hurt them. The old woman next got some cocoanut shells together. These were the only drinking-cups the family ever used.

But the betel which she now placed beside the other things, – what is that, you ask? It is not a food, and yet it often takes the place of food; for a Tagal can work a long time without eating if he can chew all of this he wishes. It is prepared from the nut of the areca palm, one of the most beautiful trees in the world. A palm of this kind grows right beside Alila's home, and, now that he is a big boy, he climbs the tall tree himself and brings down the nuts which grow at the top under the tuft of glossy green leaves.

The nuts are cut into thin slices and wrapped in the leaves of a singular plant called buyo. But, before they can be used for this purpose, these leaves are coated with lime made from oyster shells and then folded up.

Alila's grandmother prepared a quantity of betel before the new baby was born.

Just as she was going out to offer refreshments, another visitor arrived. It was a friend who had come from a distance, but the mother and child must not be wakened. Oh, no! that was not to be thought of. The souls of people leave their bodies and go away while they are sleeping, the old woman believes; and if any one should arouse them suddenly, they might never return to their bodies.

So, of course, the visitor, who also had this belief, wouldn't have disturbed the sleepers for anything in the world. She quietly turned away and joined the other guests in the garden.

CHAPTER III. THE CHRISTENING

Alila was christened soon after he was born. Dear me, what a time that was! The festival lasted several days. There was a host of friends and acquaintances around the little home, making merry and admiring the baby.

Alila himself was as clean and sweet as any child in the world could be. His mother had bathed him in the water of the river which flowed down the mountainside near them, while the leaves of the papaw-tree took the place of soap.

The young mother herself was only fifteen years old. She was dressed in her brightest skirt and fairly shone with the abundance of cheap jewelry she wore. Her hair was combed straight back from her forehead. She wore nothing on her feet excepting her queer slippers, of which she seemed very proud. She had herself embroidered them to look like a pair worn by the rich lady whose husband owned the plantation. They were perfectly flat and had only uppers enough to encase two or three toes.

What queer, uncomfortable things to wear on one's feet! Alila will never own such things because he is a boy, and he should be glad of it.

His grandmother and aunt had a fine feast prepared for the visitors. There was a good supply of roasted buffalo and wild boar's meat. There was a salad made from the young green tops of the bamboo; steamed rice and stewed iguana; papaws, which tasted like melons; tamarind sauce and guavas and bananas. And, of course, there was an abundance of betel, cocoa wine and tuba.

But strangest of all the dishes at the Tagal's feast was one prepared from a kind of beetle. The guests relished it greatly and Alila's father was praised very much for surprising them with this dainty.

But the feast was only a small part of the entertainment. A band came from the village to furnish music. Every instrument on which they played was made of bamboo. Then there was dancing and singing under the palm-trees by old and young, and when evening came there were displays of fireworks.

As Alila's father was quite poor, how could he afford such splendour? The fact is, it cost him nothing! It was a free show given by Mother Nature. Her little children, the fireflies, gathered in great numbers and danced in circles around the trees. Any one ought to be satisfied with fireworks like those.

Alila's eyes watched the people eat with their fingers and looked at the lights dancing about; he listened to the odd, sweet music for a little while; and then those black eyes closed tightly and he lay fast asleep in his young mother's arms. Of course, he doesn't remember anything about it now, but his grandmother has told him the story so many times it almost seems as though his own mind had kept the pictures for him.

CHAPTER IV. THE BUILDING OF THE HOUSE

And now he is a big boy, ten years old, and can do so many things to help his parents. He has not always lived in the home where he was born. Last summer a whirlwind destroyed that one, but he helped his father build another just like the first, and he showed himself a very clever worker.

He searched through the forest for bamboos of the right size; he did his share in cutting them down and splitting them for the walls of the hut. When they were ready, he worked each morning in thatching the roof until it grew too warm. Then came dinner and a nap under the trees until the late afternoon, when work began again.

In a few days a new home was ready and the terrible hurricane forgotten by the carefree, happy little boy.

Can you guess what part of the hut took the largest share of Alila's time and attention? It must have been the window-panes, for he was anxious to get the most beautiful mother-of-pearl he could find. He had to take a trip to the seashore ten miles away, and then he spent many hours finding such oyster shells as had a very delicate lining.

"The two windows must be beauties," said the boy to himself, "for that will please my mother so much."

No carpenter's shop nor store was visited during the whole time. It was not needful, for the forest near by stretched its arms toward the workers, as much as to say: "Come to me; I will gladly give you everything you can possibly wish."

"How about nails," you ask, "and stout cord with which to fasten all the parts together?"

Nails, and a bolt in the door? Why, what could be better than a stick of rattan, cut and whittled into shape? Cord? That was obtained very easily, too, from a bushrope-tree growing near Alila's home. It is so stout and strong it is not an easy thing to break it.

When the house was finished, it looked like a great beehive. There was only one room, but what of that? If people are perfectly comfortable they can be as happy in a one-roomed hut as though they lived in a palace.

Alila has so many good times you would almost envy him. In the first place, it takes him only a minute to dress in the morning. A pair of thin trousers and a shirt hanging down outside instead of being tucked in at the waist, and his toilet is made.

When he goes out into the sunlight, he wears an odd-looking hat of rattan. It is made in the shape of a cone, and shields his eyes nicely from the sunshine. He goes to no school, so he does not know how to write to his new American brothers, but that doesn't trouble him in the least.

He always has enough to eat, and is satisfied with a dinner of rice and fish any day. Besides, there is always a bunch of bananas hanging inside the house, and he has sugar-cane in abundance.

He is hardly ever punished and is allowed to do very much as he pleases. It is fortunate that he pleases to do right nearly all the time.

He swims every day in the river; he fishes from his bamboo raft; he hunts in the forest with his father. His chief duty on the sugar plantation is to keep the monkeys out of the cane. It was not long ago that he shot two of the mischievous little fellows with his bow and arrow and hung the poor things on poles like scarecrows to frighten others away.

CHAPTER V. FOUR-FOOTED FRIENDS

Alila has a tame monkey at home now. He has taught him many clever tricks. Every night when he goes to bed, the monkey curls himself up by his side and lies there till morning. He seems to love his little master very dearly and often rides on his shoulder while Alila is working.

Until a few months ago, the boy has lived on a sugar plantation owned by a rich Tagal planter. The plantation is divided up into small farms and rented to different workmen. The planter furnishes one buffalo and all the needed tools to care for each little place.

When the harvest time arrives in December, each tenant carries his crop to the mill for grinding. He is allowed one-third of it for himself, and, whatever price it brings, it must support his family for the next year.

Alila is not the least afraid of his father's buffalo. When he was only three years old the huge creature would obey him and allow him to drive anywhere he pleased. He seemed to know by the tone of the boy's voice just what he wished him to do.

It made an odd picture, – the tiny little fellow, holding a slender rein in his chubby hands as he trotted along by the buffalo's side. The rein was fastened to a piece of split rattan drawn through the animal's nose. Yet somehow every motion of Alila was understood by him. Is it the boy's patience that makes the beast so gentle? We like to think so.

If we should take Alila's place the animal would not stir to obey us. He would at once become stubborn and ugly, because he is not used to our quick, nervous, impatient ways.

He cannot work all day like a horse. After two or three hours, he needs to stop and rest. But that is not enough, – he suffers if he cannot have a bath. Sometimes Alila rides on his back when he plunges into the river, and holds on without fear while the buffalo stretches his head down and holds it under the water for two minutes at a time as he searches for food.

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