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Our Little Porto Rican Cousin



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Preface

The beautiful island of Porto Rico lies, as you will see by looking at the map, near that great open doorway to North America and the United States which we call the Gulf of Mexico. Very near it looks, does it not?

So the little cousin with whom we are going to become acquainted to-day is our near neighbour as well. To be sure, a schoolboy or girl from Massachusetts would have to travel a thousand miles or so to see his Porto Rican cousin; and even a child from Florida could not say good morning to his Porto Rican neighbour unless he were to take a sail of several hundred miles.

However, we, who are used to taking little excursions over the world (between the covers of a book), so that we may learn to know our tiny Eskimo cousins who live near the icy pole, and our little African cousins south of the equator, as well as our Japanese cousins on the other side of the globe, think nothing of the distance between here and Porto Rico. We should expect to feel very much at home after we arrived there, especially now that Porto Rico has become part of our own country.

We shall find our Porto Rican cousins and neighbours, with

their dark skins, black hair, and soft black eyes, somewhat different in appearance, indeed, from ourselves; and we shall not be able to understand what they say unless we have learned the Spanish language; for, as we know, the parents or forefathers of our Porto Rican cousins came from Spain to Porto Rico, just as the parents and forefathers of most of us who speak English came from England.

However, these are slight differences; and the Spanish people, from whom our black-eyed Porto Rican cousin is descended, belong to the same branch of the great human family as we do, who are descended, most of us, from English people. That is, the Spanish people and their descendants, the Porto Ricans, belong to the white race. Manuel is thus a nearer relative than the little black cousin, who belongs to the negro race; or the little Japanese cousin, who belongs to the yellow or Mongolian race; or the little Indian cousin, who belongs to the red race; or the little Malayan cousin, who belongs to the brown race. So we shall welcome the Porto Rican neighbours near our doorway into our nation's family. They were already our cousins by descent; they have become our adopted brothers in our nation.

CHAPTER I.

MANUEL

It is a beautiful May day. The air is still, yet clear; the sun is shining brightly, but it is not too warm for comfort. There is not a cloud in the sky.

And yet lazy little Manuel lies curled up in his comfortable bed, sound asleep at eight o'clock in the morning. See! A smile lights up his face. Perhaps he is dreaming of his newly adopted American brothers.

Of the things he has read about, he longs to see a real New England snow-storm most of all. To build a snow fort, to make balls of snow and have a mock battle, what fun it must be! To slide down the icy hills, to ride over the snowy roads to the jingle of the sleigh-bells, – surely there is nothing in his island home to equal sport like that. And so in his dreams our little Manuel takes part in games he cannot play while awake, until they at last become quite real to him.

But now the door opens, and old black Juana, Manuel's nurse ever since he was born, comes softly into the dark room, bringing a tray in her hand. She steps toward a little stand beside the bed, and sets down the tray. Then she goes to the casement and opens wide the wooden shutter. The sunlight pours into the room, and Manuel slowly opens his big black eyes.

"Oh, it is you, mammy dear, is it?" he says, sleepily, and slowly stretches himself and sits up in bed.

Juana brings a basin of fresh water and a towel for the boy to bathe his hands and face, then draws the stand closer to his side and hands him a cup of steaming chocolate and a roll. What thick, rich chocolate it is, and what a dainty little roll! This is all the boy ever cares to eat in the morning, for he is seldom hungry when first roused. His father and mother are having coffee in their own bedroom at the same time Manuel is drinking his chocolate. This is the way every one in the family takes the first meal of the day.

Manuel is a creole. Many, many years ago his great-great-great (indeed I cannot tell you how many times great) grandfather left Spain and crossed the wide Atlantic Ocean. He came to this beautiful island of Porto Rico to live, and his children and grandchildren liked the place so well they never cared to go back to the mother country. Such people are called creoles; that is, people born in the West Indies of European parents. They set out great plantations of tobacco and sugar and became very rich.

Manuel's father has many acres of their land still, but the fortune of the family has been slowly lost; and, although there are many servants, and a large, comfortable home, there is not much money to spend.

The house is at least a hundred years old. It is made of blocks of stone, built around the four sides of a square courtyard, where orange-trees and magnolias stand in immense pots. A fountain is

playing in the centre of the paved yard and making soft music as the spray falls upon the stones. There is a large aquarium at one side, where Manuel's mother cares for many beautiful fishes.

Vines climb up over the wide verandas; the stone work is nearly hidden by mosses which have made their home here; and, over all, the tall, graceful trees of the tropics sway gently to and fro.

There are water-lemon and banana, cocoanut and tamarind trees growing close to the house, and underneath in the rose-bushes and acacias hundreds of brilliant humming-birds are glancing in and out.

At first thought, it may seem strange to us that there are no windows fitted with glass in this old mansion. Our window is an opening in the wall of a building to let in or keep out light and air, as needed. In Porto Rico, where it is summer all the time, people need to have all the air possible in the house; they have no use for panes of glass such as we use. These are rarely seen anywhere in the island, but instead of them bars of iron are fastened across the casements, or else there are wooden shutters, as in Manuel's home. The slats of these shutters can be set open as much as one likes, or closed tightly when the heavy rains come.

When Manuel has finished drinking his chocolate, old Juana prepares a bath for him. She does not bring any soap, for his mother believes it spoils the skin; but the bath is scented with Florida-water, and the sweet perfume fills the room.

Manuel is soon dressed, for he wears only a little shirt and

loose white trousers during the daytime at home. His feet are left bare, so he may be as cool as possible.

What a handsome fellow he is now that he is wide awake! He is a little smaller than his American brothers of his own age, but he is well-shaped and graceful. People say he looks very much like his beautiful mother. His black eyes are tender and loving, his hair is black, but fine and soft; his skin is dark, yet clear; and his teeth are even and white. Yes, he is not only good-looking, but kind and lovable, we feel sure.

CHAPTER II.

DOLORES

And now he goes from his room out into the courtyard, for the house is only one story high. His sister Dolores is there already, and runs to kiss him good morning.

"Oh, Dolores," says Manuel, "do you think we have time before our lessons begin to go over to Salvador's and see if he got those fireflies yet? He was to bring them to me last night."

"It's only nine o'clock now, we have an hour yet," answers Dolores, in her sweet voice. "I'm all ready, so let's go."

Both children put on their broad white hats and take a shady path through the fields. They soon reach the huts of the coloured workmen, clustered together in a grove of pimento-trees. A "pimento-walk" such a grove is sometimes called, and it would be hard to find anything more beautiful. The trees are of nearly the same height, reaching up about thirty feet from the ground. The branches are covered with glossy green leaves. The berries are not yet ready to pick, but when they are still green the coloured boys on the place must climb the trees and break off the twigs; they will throw them down to their sisters on the ground, who will pick off the berries and store them in bags for their master to send to the United States mainland. We call these berries "allspice," and after they have been dried we buy them under that name.

The huts of the workmen are scarcely more than sheds with roofs of thatched palm leaves. Some have sides and doorways, while others are quite open. What do these poor people care for that in this land of summer? If they have plantains enough to satisfy their hunger, plenty of cigars to smoke, and hammocks of the bark of the palm-tree to swing in, they are happy and contented.

Within the huts one can see a few earthen pots and gourds; that is all that is needed in their simple housekeeping, whether they belong to the black race or are "jibaros," as the poor whites are called. And most of the people are poor in this beautiful land, although Mother Nature is so generous here in her gifts to men.

But we must go back to Manuel and Dolores, who are quickly surrounded by a group of little children. They are of all colours: some black as jet, the whites of their eyes looking like windows; others of shades running from dark brown to pale yellow. But they are all noisy, all happy, all talking at the same time, and all naked.

As for Dolores, herself, the dainty little maiden wears only a cotton slip at her play. Many another white child on the island goes about her home with no clothing, and feels very comfortable, too. It is only when the children get to be nine or ten years old that their parents make them dress; and that is a sad time for them, you may be sure.

But Dolores lives in quite a grand way, you know, so she and Manuel were never allowed to go about naked since they were

old enough to walk.

But look! one of the little black boys is handing something to Manuel. It is a net filled with the fireflies or beetles he wished to get.

"Come to the house to-night, Salvador," says Manuel, as he takes his treasures, "and I will pay you."

Now what do you suppose Manuel cares for these beetles? They are not beautiful in the daytime. We would far rather watch those lovely green and blue butterflies flitting among the bushes. But Manuel is going to make pets of them. He will put them in a little wicker cage, feed them with sugar, and they will grow quite tame. At night they will be more beautiful than any precious gems owned by his mother.

Let us examine them. They are of a dull drab colour, except around the eyes and underneath, where there are rings or bands that glow brightly in the dark, giving forth red and green lights. They gleam like diamonds. Manuel can read by their light, should he choose to do so. The fireflies of Porto Rico are the largest and most brilliant in the whole world.

After the children have finished their lessons to-day, perhaps they will take some calabashes and bore holes in them. Then when night comes they can put the beetles inside and play outdoors with them for lanterns. Some of the poor people in Porto Rico use no other light at night, except these little creatures.

Manuel carries the net very carefully as he and his sister return to the house. He does not wish a single beetle to be injured or

frightened.

"Mamma dear!" he calls as he sees his mother on the veranda, "you shall wear the most beautiful one I have in your lace dress to-night."

What a strange idea this seems to us! but the smiling lady in her white wrapper does not seem at all surprised. She often fastens the living gems under the thin net of her evening gown; perhaps they will glisten on her shoulders, perhaps at her throat, or in her hair. She certainly could not wear more beautiful jewels than these.

"Thank you, my precious child," she answers, "you are very thoughtful; but now your teacher is waiting for you in the schoolroom. Go to her, and give your studies good attention this morning."

CHAPTER III.

LESSONS

Dolores and Manuel are soon busy with their lessons. Although Manuel is twelve years old and his sister ten, they are both learning to speak French and a little Italian. I fear you would think them rather backward in arithmetic and other grammar-school studies, but their parents do not see the need of knowing as much of such things as do American fathers and mothers.

The children have always had a governess, and have never been in a public schoolroom in their lives. In fact, these are only now becoming common since our people have taken Porto Rico under their care. Think of it, children! In this beautiful island, only one person out of five can read and write at present. Most of these have been brought up in the towns and cities. Those who live out in the country seldom have had a chance to go to school. If they were too poor to hire a governess or study with the nuns in the convents, they grew up ignorant indeed.

Dolores is taught to embroider and to play a little on the guitar, so her mother thinks her daughter is quite accomplished. Besides, both Manuel and his sister are very graceful dancers and can sing well. These are quite important studies, for wherever one goes in Porto Rico, there he will find music and dancing.

At half-past eleven the books are closed, and the children join

their parents for the first regular meal of the day. This is the real breakfast.

It is served in the large, low dining-room, where for the first time we see the children's grown-up sister, Teresa. She is a lovely young lady of sixteen, slight and graceful. She has the same black eyes as Manuel and Dolores, soft and beautiful.

She wears no stockings, but her feet are encased in dainty blue kid slippers. They are embroidered with pearl beads, and, no doubt, came from Paris.

An ugly-looking woman takes her place beside Teresa at the table. This is her "duenna." It is her duty to go everywhere with the young girl. It would not be considered at all proper for Teresa to go driving, or even walking, alone. It would not do for her to go shopping to the town only three miles away unless her duenna were with her; and as for a party or any evening entertainment whatever, if Teresa were to go without her parents or this same duenna, every one in the country around would be terribly shocked.

But now all are busy eating the breakfast the coloured waiter is serving. First, there is a nice omelet, cooked in olive oil. Then come pineapple jam, fish fried a delicate brown, fried bananas, fried chicken, and a salad made of many kinds of vegetables. We must not forget to mention the apricots stewed in honey, nor the tea steeped with the leaves of lemon verbena. It has a delicious odour, and Manuel's father and mother are very fond of it.

There is no butter to eat on the rolls, but the fact is, almost all

the butter in Porto Rico comes in tin cans from other countries. On account of the hot climate, it is often rancid, so it is seldom used in Manuel's home. The cooking is done with olive oil. Nearly everything is fried, instead of being broiled or roasted, and no one feels the need of butter.

Manuel and Dolores, like some other boys and girls we know, are very fond of sweet things, so they eat a great deal of the cooked fruits on the table. But they also seem to like the salad very much, even though it is so hot with Cayenne pepper as to burn the mouth of any one not used to it. But the children are accustomed to highly spiced dishes. Our cooking would seem tasteless to them. Perhaps it is the hot climate all the year round that makes it necessary to have strongly flavoured foods to excite the appetite.

After this second breakfast is over, cigarettes are served, and, would you believe it! our little Manuel, as well as his mother and older sister, joins in a smoke. Such is the custom of his country that even children of three or four years use tobacco. It is no wonder, then, that as the boys and girls grow up, they have so little strength. We are no longer surprised that Manuel does not care much for active play.

It is now the hottest part of the day. The boy and his sister play a few games of dominoes and cards out on the veranda, and then sleepily stretch themselves in hammocks under the palms for an afternoon nap. Manuel's little dog, Ponce, lies on the ground by his side, ready to bark if any stranger should come near his

master.

But what do the poor children of Porto Rico do, while Manuel is taking his "siesta," as the afternoon nap is called? They, too, are probably having their siestas, for all classes of people rest during the hottest part of the day. Very little business is done in the cities; the time for work is in the early morning and late afternoon.

The coloured children of the plantation would think it a perfect feast to have a breakfast like Manuel's. A bit of salt fish, with some breadfruit, plantains, and coffee, – these satisfy their hunger day after day. But in the sugar season, when the canes are ripe and full of juice, then indeed it is hard to make the people work, whether they are white or black. Oh, the delicious sugar-cane! there is nothing like the pleasure of sucking it. Here and there, in every nook and corner, one sees boys and girls, men and women, with joints of the cane in their hands, sucking away for dear life. Then is the time to stop all worry and grow fat.

CHAPTER IV.

THROUGH THE WOODS

When Manuel and Dolores finish their siesta, it is nearly three o'clock. Old Juana appears on the veranda with a pitcher of limeade, made with fresh limes, and Manuel drinks glass after glass. It is very refreshing, and he begins to feel like moving about, so he orders his pet donkey to be brought. He says to Dolores:

"I think I will ride through the woods and around the plantation. I will take my gun, as we may see some rabbits. Please come with me, Dolores."

The little girl is always ready to oblige her brother, so she sends for her own donkey, and the children start for the woods, with Ponce following close behind.

Dear little patient, long-eared donkeys! Just as slow and stupid and stubborn as other donkeys in other parts of the world. Manuel loves his Pedro, as he is called. Pedro has been his friend and companion ever since the boy was big enough to sit up straight.

Pedro is not obliged to work very hard, and is now quite willing to set off on a gentle trot.

Dolores holds a dainty little parasol over her head, but as they reach the deep shadow of the woods, she shuts it down; then in

some magical way changes it into a fan, with which she brushes away the mosquitoes.

What beautiful woods these are! Cocconut, banana, sago, and palmetto trees grow here, as well as cedar, India-rubber, guava, and many other tall and stately trees belonging to the tropics. More than five hundred different kinds of trees are found on the one island of Porto Rico, every one of them growing over fifteen feet high.

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