

LAVANDERAS OF CURACAO

A Traveler's Experience Among the Washerwomen in the West India Islands.

Their Methods of Seouring Linen and Cleansing it With a Club.

The Coolness of Night Preferable for Their Operations—Seant Investors of Their Person.

[Special Correspondence of THE INDEPENDENT.]

ABOUT the first person the voyager to the West Indies meets as he descends the gang-plank of the steamer is the washerwoman. It might be more correctly stated by saying that she meets the voyager, because she is there for that very purpose, and lies in wait for him with malice prepense. She doesn't carry any extra weight of brain; but she devotes that little to carrying out her scheme of appropriating the traveler's linen, will be, will be.

But, beware! It is impossible to wholly escape her; but, if you have any article of apparel you wish to cherish, hide it before she gets her eye on it.

The modus operandi is the same throughout all tropical countries. The first move in the game is to secure the stranger's linen; and have it she will, even if she imitate the Egyptian woman's method of dealing with Joseph, and strip him of his raiment. Happy then, the washerwoman "totes" her bundle of clothing to the nearest water. It may be fresh water, it may be salt water, it may be clear as crystal, or it may be slimy and foul. It matters not so it be water, for the liquid element plays a small part in the game. Running water seems to be preferred, and in a rapid stream, with current playing about their lower limbs, the washerwomen are in their glory if not in their element.

I have seen the lavanderas of Spain busily at work from daylight till dark, and recall that the river Aragon, that flows through the ancient city of Burgos, is lined with them. In Spain, however, the washerwomen kneel in a kind of washing-board, and scrub the rags (linen) with their hands. It must have been from the coast of Spain, that the fashion was introduced of washing fine linen with a club. From whatever quarter introduced it is now universal throughout the length and breadth of the West Indies, in Mexico and in South America.

As I lay in my bunk one still night, in the Lake of Maracabo, about a mile from the shore, I heard a noise as of the muffled clapping of many hands. It rose and fell, rhythmic undulations, the entire night long, and at daylight it died away with the coming of the sun. It seemed to me as I listened to this strange pounding that all the babies of Venezuela had been brought to the lake shore and were being spanked, spanked, spanked by muscular mothers, though they uttered no sound in remonstrance and took their punishment without a murmur.

When I enquired as to the meaning of those mysterious sounds I was told that the nocturnal revellers were only the lavanderas, who preferred the coolness of night to the heat and glare of the day. But it is in Curacao, a little Dutch island off the coast of Venezuela, that the alleged cleanser of clothing may best be studied. There she disports herself, regardless of the social proprieties and surroundings. Every morning at daylight you may see the washerwomen wending their way to the sea shore, each one with a tub of clothes on her head, and in the hollow of one arm an immense club.

Curacao is as picturesque an island as one may see in a month of travel, even in the Caribbean sea, where every isle is a gem; an emerald in a sea of silver. It lacks only water, fresh water, and running streams; else it would be an Eden. As there is no water here save that caught and stored in cisterns, it is too precious, of course, to be wasted in washing either clothes or person, hence the females who take the contract for the purification of linen make the best of it and dispense with fresh water entirely. Salt water is good enough for them, and there is plenty of it. So they go to the sea shore, a gallant array, every female with her dress girdled tight around her hips, a kerchief on her head and feet and bosom bare.

Arrived at the seaside you find several pools formed inside the barrier reef of coral, where the water is smooth and glassy, and has a nice appearance, if it isn't fresh. Outside the reefs the waves roll up threateningly and break with great force against it, but only to tumble harmlessly into the quiet pool, in little rivulets and foaming streams. Here the woman halts and deposits her tub, or tray, of clothes on the coral beach, and carefully lays the club on top.

Then she gathers up her only skirt very dextrously between her thighs, knots it in front, seizes the club and an inoffensive shirt, and proceeds to business. Another woman soon arrives, another and another, until the pool is as full as it can hold—the choicest collection of black-legs in Curacao.

Every woman has a rock in front of her and upon this she lays the object of her solicitude. She lifts her club, gazes a moment with all the fond yearning of a parent about to punish an erring child, and then brings it down with a crash. The garment wilts at once; in two minutes it is completely knocked out, and in three is so dilapidated its own mother wouldn't know it. After she has finished it a white in one position she lifts it tenderly into the water, soaks it thoroughly and then puts it back on the rock. She has caught her second wind by this time, and wields the club with fresh vigor. If there are any buttons left, she "goes for them" scientifically. It is the proud boast of the most accomplished wash lady here that she can fetch a button at every clip. When the buttons are gone she bestows particular attention upon the button-holes, punching them out, and enlarging them to the capacity of watch-pockets. Then, with a critical poke of the club and a contemptuous frown, the lipp and lifeless shirt is

lashed ashore, where it is taken in hand by an assistant in waiting, who jabs sharp pointed coral into it, in order to pier it down to the sand, or bang it conspicuously over a coquina beach.

It is hardly to be wondered at that, seeing their best shirts treated in this manner, the washerwomen have been known to use, strong language, and divers others have been known to seek to drown their grief in strong drink.

On every side there is a sound of descending clubs, some of them flying so swiftly through the air as to leave a black streak only, and cast a halo of mist about the heads of the negroes. Witnessing this proof of the man's inhumanity to man's most precious article of wearing apparel, one is led to wonder if Tom Hood ever looked upon a similar scene ere he wrote his "Song of the Shirt." And we watch tempted to parody those lines, as we watch these warring workers with their "fingers weary and worn," grasping clubs instead of needles, which fall with their monotonous, "Whack! whack! whack!" upon the heap of clothes before them.

All their thoughts center about their work, and all their energies go into it. When they bring out a garment they seize one end of it between their teeth and pull at the other with both hands until all the salt water is forced out of it. They have no use for soap; the kind they sometimes use is like their character, it will float, but



QUEEN OF THE WASHERS.

it won't wash, that is, they sometimes use the fruit of the soap tree, a vegetable soap that grows in the tropics.

In order to secure photographs of these negroes engaged at their work I thought I should have to use great caution and some strategy. So I crept up quietly with my camera concealed, and had taken several distant shots before they observed what I was doing. At the discovery sheeral made a dash in my direction brandishing their clubs. I thought it was "all up" with me and my photographs, and prepared to flee. But I was mistaken. Instead of being offended, they felt flattered at my attention and welcomed me to take a nearer view of their scantily-draped, though muscular forms. As they spoke the barbarous patois of the island, known as Papiamentu, I could not understand what they said, but their gestures were not to be mistaken.

There happened to be among them an old negro from Jamaica, who, of course, spoke English, or what passed for it, with the Africans of the West Indies. They planted himself in front of me and slapped his heavy breast.

"Look me heah, sah. Heah I is. Want you take um fortygraph ob de ole lady to gib de gubnor."

"Well, gubny, keep your mouth shut, and I'll do it."

"No Massa Buckra (white man), me doan want de pickchew still likeness, me want um speakin' fortygraph, 'cause dat's way I is."

And so, making a virtue of necessity, I took a snap-shot at her with her mouth open, after which she went back to her work contented. FREDERICK A. OBER. Copyright.

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