

HOUSEKEEPING IN CUBA

By
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A MERICAN women are adaptable, and the American woman who keeps house in Cuba, on account of the peculiar conditions there has daily need of all the adaptability of which she is mistress.

Brave in her ignorance, she decides to "make a home for Tom" after the fashion of the one they left behind in Virginia, Dakota or Massachusetts. Thereupon she enters upon a series of experiences exasperating, amusing as well as instructive, which culminate in her firm determination to learn Spanish and in a compromise between her own domestic opinions and those prevailing in the beautiful island in which Tom is to

make his fortune. Whether the new tent is pitched in Havana, Santiago or in some newly opened district "fifty miles from anywhere," the American woman will find at least one of her own sex and nationality who has preceded her. If she is wise, she will listen to her counsel and give heed to it. She will learn that her bovine-eyed Cuban maid has certain rules which are to her as the laws of the Medes and Persians, and that if compelled to depart from them, she will yield heartbroken compliance to the new ones which replace them—for a brief period. Then will come sudden departure and domestic chaos.

Logic does not affect this meek-faced handmaiden, entreaties find her politely unresponsive, and diplomacy wins her for only a brief period. Into the wide breach left in the domestic machinery by her departure may step a brown-skinned Jamaican. Then is the mistress of that mansion a person to be envied; for the Jamaican is biddable, willing to learn, and—crowning virtue—speaks English. To be sure, after a brief residence in the "Pearl of the Antilles," she is apt to slip as readily into the ways of the island as into those of her mistress; and then the only advantage remaining to her employer is the fact that she still speaks English.

It is a proverb in Cuba that the newcomer learns first to speak "kitchen Spanish," next the Spanish of the shops, and finally that of polite conversation. The last of the three is desirable, the others are necessary and fortunately easy "to pick up."

Every American woman residing in Cuba—and their numbers are largely increased with each year—will tell of her early experiences in the mazes of the new language, and she who boldly defied grammar and "picked up" the necessary phrases is she whose experiences were least harrowing. Probably a study of the subject would reveal the fact that in nine cases out of ten the first word acquired in the new language was "agua," for thirst, especially in a hot country, is even more compelling than hunger.

A few fortunate women keeping house upon a somewhat more elaborate scale have been able at the beginning of their Cuban career to engage the services of a house-boy who understands and speaks an English, perhaps not the English of New-York or Indiana or Kentucky, but yet an English of which three words out

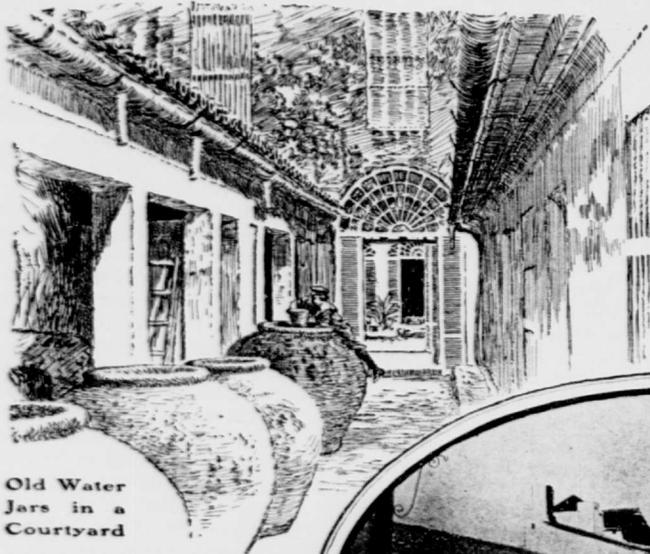
man in each family which can compass it by any effort. The maid-of-all-work, as she is known to us, is a rarity in Cuba, except in the country districts, and the cook declines to leave her kitchen and perform household tasks unless persuaded thereto by extra wages. Even then she seems to consider herself imposed upon and this kind of work is grudgingly performed; because that is "not the way Cubans do."

The cook in Cuba is also the purchaser of household supplies, which must be provided daily. If as is usual she lives at her own home, the money for the morning's marketing is always handed to her before her departure on the previous

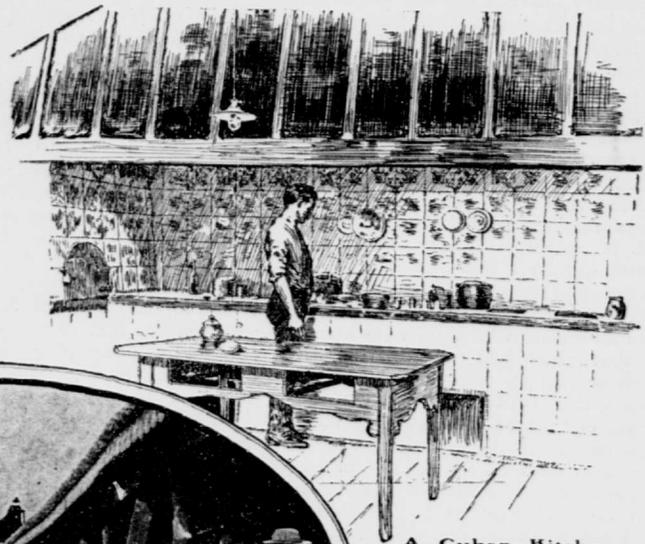
evening, and her arrival is not expected before from half-past eight to ten o'clock. The morning meal is so simple that the mistress herself, or the other maid, if one is retained, prepares it. In many cases the coffee is prepared in the evening, and only the milk remains to be heated and added to it. This leaves the cook free to devote herself to the purchase of food supplies, and this duty she usually performs with skill and economy. The wise housekeeper, however, occasionally visits the markets to acquaint herself with the current prices of food, which sometimes are surprisingly high or correspondingly low. The wages of a cook range from twelve to sixteen dollars a month in the cities; but of course are somewhat lower in the country. This naturally refers to the plain cook and not the chef, of whom the average American family resident in Cuba has no need.

The first meal of the day in Cuba, is, as has been said, a simple one in most households. The newly arrived American perhaps demands a more substantial one; but as a rule he discovers finally that the simple menu is sufficient. It usually consists of fruit, coffee, rolls and eggs. This is served early; for the morning hours are so delightful that it is advisable to enjoy as many of them as possible. What the Cuban calls "breakfast," and which corresponds to our luncheon, follows at from eleven to one, and is a substantial meal, beginning with soup, and following a somewhat elaborate menu to black coffee. Dinner is a slow affair, and is served not earlier than seven, and preferably eight; so the cook's day is a longer one than it would seem at first glance.

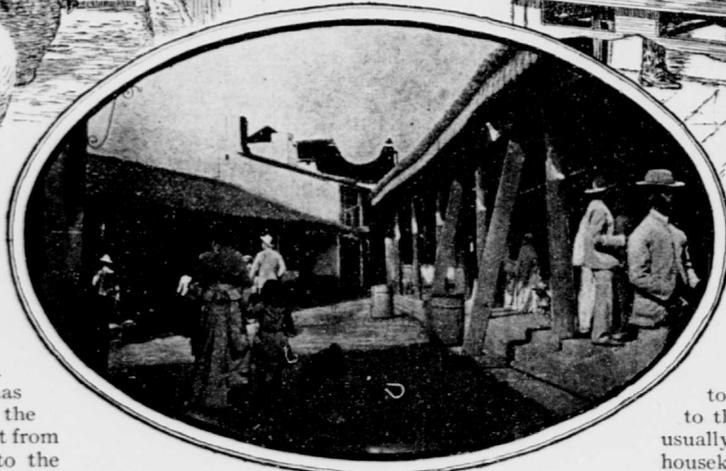
On the menu for the day the domestic bark is apt to ground. Cuban cooking is greasy and mysterious. It is unsuited for delicate digestions, and not always appetizing in appearance, although many of the dishes are excellent, and one soon learns what to avoid. On the subject of meats the housewife learns many things, and assimilates few facts which are pleasing ones. In Cuba meat is, alas! tough, badly butchered and tasteless. Steak bears a strong resemblance in taste and appearance to india-rubber cut thin; and roast beef is not conducive to family harmony while it is in process of being eaten and



Old Water Jars in a Courtyard



A Cuban Kitchen

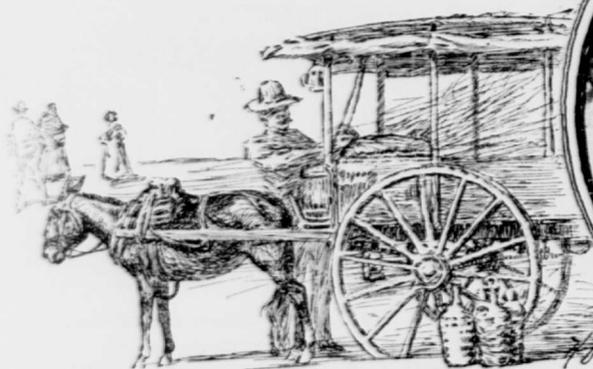


A Market in Cuba

of five are easily understandable. Gesture will do the rest; for the Cuban can talk most eloquently with head, hands, arms and shoulders. Not a few of these boys acquired a working knowledge of English and some idea of the American household requirements in the days of the American occupation and the subsequent incoming of pioneers.

The Cuban women, however, have not availed themselves of this opportunity, and until the mistress of the house acquires a little Spanish, the house-boy is the only link between her handmaiden and herself—unless a Jamaican treasure also has fallen to her share. In this connection, it may be remarked that the facility with which American children resident in Cuba learn Spanish is remarkable. Within a few months small boys and girls seem able to acquire a fluent, if not always a grammatical, vocabulary, and form excellent interpreters while their elders still are struggling with rudimentary text-books.

Perhaps, however, the woman who must learn Spanish at the point of the broom is in the end the one to be envied; for without despair she can see her treasure of a house-boy depart for the school in Havana where he is to learn a trade, or even a profession—for the Cuban is ambitious—and there is a desire for at least one educated



The Milkman



A Cuban Bazaar



A Traveling Merchant