

JESUS COLON

A PUERTO RICAN
in New York and
OTHER SKETCHES



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the first World War, it carried back thousands of canned food boxes, camp tents and boxes of small tent pegs. Those boxes were piled up in stacks of twos and fours that extended high up toward the dock's ceiling. At the top of each stack, two or four boxes were placed in such positions as to "tie" the stack together. When we received the order to place boxes in one of the transport ships, somebody had to go up to the top of each of those piles using nimble feet and a fine sense of balance, sharp quick reflexes and sharp eyes. They had to untie these by seeing that the boxes on top came into the same position as the others. With a sure, but swift push with one foot, while balancing on the other side of the stack with the other foot, you could see from the top how boxes came down to the dock floor. It was similar to those circus acrobats who, after standing on each other's shoulders for a moment decide to come down together from their human tower into the circus arena . . . Mr. Clark took me into his gang and told me how to do these simple things. Simple, after you knew how. Simple if you were young, a little care-free and adventurous.

I liked Mr. Clark. We all liked him and respected him very much. This respect and liking were the result of the knowledge he had about wharves, docks and dockwork in general. A knowledge that he demonstrated time and again. I never knew Mr. Clark's name. I think very few people knew it. But we all knew that he was born in Panama of Jamaican parents. Perhaps his father was one of those workers from Jamaica and the other English-speaking West Indies islands, who went to Panama at the beginning of the century to give their youth and blood in the building of the Panama Canal. Mr. Clark spoke fluently in many languages—Spanish, French, English—just as the descendants of West Indians frequently do and so too do many of the inhabitants of the islands. He knew how to load a ship better than anybody else . . . What should be loaded first, and what should go after. And what is more important, how to secure and place everything in the ship's bottom, so that no matter what the whims of the waves and storms, the cargo would stay right where Mr. Clark told us to place it.

8. On The Docks It Was Cold

I open this old black tin box once every five or six years. There I keep things that have made a mark or change in my life. Here is the red membership card they gave me when I joined the Socialist Party of the United States at its Tompkins Park Branch in Brooklyn around the year 1923. Here is the first photograph Concha gave me from a Kodak box camera . . . thin and delicate like a soul with a skirt and a blouse on. And here is that old working badge from the yards of the Lackawanna Railroad. About forty years ago I swore I would never change it for the money that was owed me upon its presentation for payment. For this badge reminded me of my experiences as a dock and train-yard worker.

I started on what were in those days called the Hamburg American Line docks in Hoboken. They were the long streamlined docks taken over from the Germans by the United States government during the first World War. The dockworkers seemed to me to be all "six-footers." The ones who were visibly smaller were built like beer barrels to which legs of football players had been attached by nature.

When Mr. Clark, the big tall Negro foreman with the gangling walk, told me: "You're on," I did not believe it. As he kept on talking, it started to make sense. "You are young, small and light in weight. We need somebody like you. Somebody to go up on top of the piled-up sacks and release the 'knot' on top. There are many chores on the docks that could be handled better by light men. We will teach you the ropes." As time went on, I learned Mr. Clark's "ropes" and a few other tricks of the trade from the workers which proved to me in practice what my uncle Marcelo liked to say very often: "Mas vale mana que fuerza." "It is better to have skill than strength."

When the transport Batterland came in from France during

Mr. Clark taught me everything of the art and science of using the hook . . . that very valuable all-purpose instrument of the dockworker. After you knew what to do and how to do it, you felt at home on a dock. Then you sort of sensed that Mr. Clark was there somewhere watching every move you made. He told us how to watch and safeguard each other's life and limb. Our gang was like a well-integrated team in which everybody participated in every move and decision and by which you were benefitting every hour as a result of the long work experience of everybody else.

It was in a certain way very funny. Everybody was Joe and Jack and Pedro and Tony but we only had one mister . . . that was Mr. Clark.

The only thing that bothered me from the beginning was the coldness of the docks. It was so cold during the winter that, if you spat on the floor, the spit almost instantly converted itself into a round greyish spot of ice.

Besides the heavy working shoes that we all wore, we had gotten ourselves some burlap sacks that we used to tie around our heavy shoes and legs making us walk in a zig-zag fashion like old bears ready for their final icy resting place. Most of us wore heavy undergarments which covered us from the shoulders down to our ankles. Over them we wore a heavy woolen shirt, and an old vest, muffler, coat and overcoat with a rope around the waist. We used to hang the hook from there when we were not using it. With all this you had to be jumping constantly from one foot to the other, keeping in motion doing something or other in order to generate heat for your cold body. The intermittent run to the dock lavatories was mostly to hog a place in front of the plumber's pipes attached to the walls and used as steam heat radiators. After a moment there, you went back to the docks and believe it or not, you felt the cold more.

The war finished, our gang dispersed around the docks of the New York-New Jersey waterfronts. For a time, I could not find any work. Finally I found work . . . trucking . . . at what they called the fruit docks at the foot of Chambers Street on the Hudson River side. Times were very bad. It was what they

called the period of readjustment. You had to take any kind of work to keep body and soul together. Some forty years ago I worked on those fruit docks from 11:30 at night to eight o'clock in the morning at \$2.75 for an 8-hour day . . . that is night. And all the apples and pears that you could disentangle from the fragile fruit boxes. We got half an hour for "lunch" at three-thirty in the morning. The only trouble with the fruit docks was that they were colder than the Hamburg American docks in Hoboken. It was real cold at the fruit docks. It seemed to me that the owner kept them that way, with hardly any steam in the men's lavatory so that you would not have the tendency to sit overlong in the toilet and so that you would have to be moving and on the go during the whole time you were working.

Another bad feature of the fruit docks during those years was that the hand trucks were the old fashioned ones with the two big wheels on the outside, heavy and burdensome to manage. But the worst part of the fruit docks was that after you came back from "lunch," at four in the morning, the light fruit boxes of pears, apples and peaches converted themselves as if by magic into the heavy little nail barrels that you see beside the counter of the old-fashioned hardware stores and other similar "light" articles to tickle your back as you trucked along during the night over the bumpy, cold pavement. You were supposed to carry three of those stout little nail barrels in your hand truck each time it was loaded for you.

One morning, as I was coming from work on the fruit dock, I met one of the workers in Mr. Clark's old gang. He told me that they were looking for me as our old gang was getting together to work for the Lackawanna Railroad next day. He told me where they were to meet. I did not go back to work on the fruit docks any more. I went with Mr. Clark to work on the Lackawanna Railroad.

Your work did not actually start until you were placed on one of the numerous trunk trains, river barges or storage houses that Lackawanna had on both sides of the river. Some days it took half an hour walking in the snow, hail and cold weather before a call from the general office could tell us where our gang

was most needed. The last day I worked there we were assigned to unload train wagons of coffee bags onto barges on the river below. The train wagons and the barges were connected by heavy gangplanks on which you almost had to fly to get to the barge while handling your handtruck with two heavy bags of coffee. While almost flying with the handtruck preceding you, one man in front of you, one on your heels, there were about half-a-dozen truckers on the barge trying to get away from where they figured you would land with your truck and coffee bags, while others were already moving themselves away in the train wagon on another less steep gangplank. As you reached the floor of the barge you had to maneuver your hand truck in between the two men who were ready to take the coffee bags off your truck and stack them up with others on the barge. You had about a minute to complete the operation unless you wanted to get run over, hand truck and all, by the men who were coming down the gangplank after you.

One of the times I was coming down the plank, it seemed that I gained too much speed with the result that the hand truck reeled down on just its left wheel. The two bags on my hand truck were perilously inclined to one side. It seemed as if any minute they were going to leave my truck to be gobbled up in the icy, cold waters of the river down below. I thought and acted fast. I moved the whole left part of my body to the right while pressing down the truck with my right hand and arm to the floor of the gangplank for a few seconds. While doing this it seemed that a counterforce inclined my body and truck handles way out into the left and off the gangplank floor. While I was trying to place myself into position to continue, I found myself in the air and entirely off the gangplank for a few seconds. My eyes kept contemplating the murky cold water of the river through the two handles of the hand truck. Those were the longest few seconds I had experienced in my life. As I reached the surface of the barge safely with my two precious bags of coffee intact, I waited until the two workers took them off my truck. I ran the empty truck up the other gangplank into the train wagon and instead of taking my turn on line to return to the barge I ran

my truck into a corner. Without a word to anybody, I just left the Lackawanna yards without cashing in my badge.

And there is the badge looking at me from the bottom of my old tin box. After almost forty years its shining red and silver is fresh and brilliant as the very day Mr. Clark handed it to me that cold winter morning, saying: "You are on." There is the badge beside my old 1923 membership card in the Socialist Party, and the first picture of Concha—my wife—looking thin and delicate, like a soul with a skirt and blouse on. Anybody else who sees the badge will say: "Just another badge."

But to me it is not "just another badge." To me it represents the millions of men and women on the seas and in the fields, in the mines and in the foundries, in the factories and on the docks who risk and lose their lives as their fathers' fathers have been doing for hundreds of years before them, every day doing thousands of dangerous tasks.

I would not say it will happen tomorrow. But one day in these United States the workers will ask themselves collectively: "For whom all this toil?" "For what?" And their collective answer will be heard around the world.

cold oil would come spattering down and smear your face and neck. Sometimes the oil used to run down your back until it reached the very tip of your spine . . . and more. So, no matter how you scrubbed yourself, some of the oil always remained all over your body from your head to your toes. When I took the old crosstown trolley car with its spongy yellow straw seats and sat in one of them on my way home, I usually left a mark of black moist oil like a great heart parted right down the middle.

It was way into the evening when I came in from my scaling job, I was very tired. The room was very cold, I chose to get into bed with all my clothes on instead of going through the task of starting a fire in the dead coal stove in the middle of the room. (Why is it so difficult for tropical people to start a fire in a hard coal stove?)

As if coming from way out in space through the cracks in my window and from the crevices dividing the door and the floor I heard a very low moaning sound. It went up and down like a wave. Then there was silence for a minute or two and then it started all over again in a repressed way as if the person from whom the crying, moaning sound came did not want to be heard by anybody. Then as if the pain or emotion could not be held back anymore a piercing cry full of self-pity and desperation came distinctly to my ears. At last I could trace clearly from whence it came. It was from another room on the same floor. I knocked at the door of the room. After a short pause, the door was opened by a man who then turned and sat himself on a narrow bed which filled the room.

He covered his face with his hands and then let his crying run fully. I could see that the man was robust, built strong as a bull. He was possibly accustomed to heavy work out of doors. It was sad, yes, tragic, to listen to such a specimen of man crying. So clumsily and innocently strong was he.

In between the minutes that he could control his emotions and his natural shyness, he told me of missing a boat where he was working as a coal passer. The boat belonged to a Spanish shipping company. He himself was Spanish. A story of the ignorance of the language, of fear of the immigration laws, of shyness and of pride, not to beg, not to ask for anything, followed.

9. I Heard A Man Crying

Around 1918 I was living in a rooming house on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. I was working then as a scaler. Long distances, long hours and the dirtiest kind of work you could imagine.

As the ships came in, a scaling crew moved in to clean the ship from top to bottom. Cleaning was done especially at the bottom, underneath the machine room, and inside and around the furnaces.

If the ship was an oil tanker, you had to go down to the bottom of that tank ship after the oil was pumped off and collect the oil that the pump was unable to swallow, with a small tin shovel and a pail. The pail was placed on a hook at the end of a rope and hoisted up by those working on deck. Pay was better "down below" than on deck, so I always chose to work inside the tanker. As the job was about finished we were supposed to "paint" the inside of the oil tank with Portland cement by just throwing cement at the inside walls of the oil-moist tank. Imagine twenty or twenty-five men throwing cement at the oily walls of an enclosed tank!

When we came out, our faces, eyes, brows and hair looked old and gray. We looked like the grandfathers of our own selves. Some winters when the snow and ice covered the river solidly, the temperature down below at the bottom of the oil tank was below zero. Good thing that we were given rubber boots which fastened at the top of our thighs and rubber pants, jackets and hats that made us look like old seafarers.

Everywhere we went at the bottom of that tank, we were followed by a long electrical wire at the end of which there were three or four electric bulbs protected from breakage by a wire net. Sometimes when we gave the order to hoist the pail filled with oil and we kept looking up at that hole through which a ray of sun kept mocking at us down below, the edge of the pail might abruptly hit the edge of the hole way up there and a splash of ice

The man had not eaten since . . . he didn't remember how many days. He was actually starving, gradually dying of hunger.

Have you ever heard a man crying? A young strong man crying? Crying of hunger in the midst of what is supposed to be the greatest and richest city in the world? It is the saddest, most tragic sight you could ever imagine.

At that hour we left the rooming house and went to the nearest restaurant. He ate as if he had never eaten before in his life.

Next day I took him to an old iron junk yard in which they were asking for young strong men. The job was to break old iron parts of machinery with a sledge hammer. My new Spanish friend wielded the big sledge hammer with the gracefulness and ease of a young girl skipping a thin rope on the sidewalk.

For the first few days I managed to bring him to his place of work. Then he would wait for me in the evening at the wide door of the junk yard until he learned how to take the trolley car that would take him to and from the rooming house where we were living.

I moved. I don't remember the last time I saw that burly, strong young Spaniard.

But I will never forget as long as I live, his deep anguished crying of hunger that night—long, long ago.



10. Kipling And I

Sometimes I pass Debevoise Place at the corner of Willoughby Street . . . I look at the old wooden house, gray and ancient, the house where I used to live some forty years ago . . .

My room was on the second floor at the corner. On hot summer nights I would sit at the window reading by the electric light from the street lamp which was almost at a level with the window sill.

It was nice to come home late during the winter, look for some scrap of old newspaper, some bits of wood and a few chunks of coal and start a sparkling fire in the chunky fourlegged coal stove. I would be rewarded with an intimate warmth as little by little the pigmy stove became alive puffing out its sides, hot and red, like the crimson cheeks of a Santa Claus.

My few books were in a soap box nailed to the wall. But my most prized possession in those days was a poem I had bought in a five and ten cent store on Fulton Street. (I wonder what has become of these poems, maxims and sayings of wise men that they used to sell at the five and ten cent stores?) The poem was printed on gold paper and mounted in a gilded frame ready to be hung in a conspicuous place in the house. I bought one of those fancy silken picture cords finishing in a rosette to match the color of the frame.

I was seventeen. This poem to me then seemed to summarize the wisdom of all the sages that ever lived in one poetical nutshell. It was what I was looking for, something to guide myself by, a way of life, a compendium of the wise, the true and the beautiful. All I had to do was to live according to the counsel of the poem and follow its instructions and I would be a perfect man—the useful, the good, the true human being. I was very happy that day, forty years ago.

The poem had to have the most prominent place in the room.

Where could I hang it? I decided that the best place for the poem was on the wall right by the entrance to the room. No one coming in and out would miss it. Perhaps someone would be interested enough to read it and drink the profound waters of its message . . .

Every morning as I prepared to leave, I stood in front of the poem and read it over and over again, sometimes half a dozen times. I let the sonorous music of the verse carry me away. I brought with me a handwritten copy as I stepped out every morning looking for work, repeating verses and stanzas from memory until the whole poem came to be part of me. Other days my lips kept repeating a single verse of the poem at intervals throughout the day.

In the subways I loved to compete with the shrill noises of the many wheels below by chanting the lines of the poem. People stared at me moving my lips as though I were in a trance. I looked back with pity. They were not so fortunate as I who had as a guide to direct my life a great poem to make me wise, useful and happy.

And I chanted:

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you . . .*

*If you can wait and not be tired by waiting
Or being hated don't give way to hating . . .*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on a turn of pitch and toss . . .
And lose and start again at your beginnings . . .*

"If," by Kipling, was the poem. At seventeen, my evening prayer and my first morning thought. I repeated it every day with the resolution to live up to the very last line of that poem.

I would visit the government employment office on Jay Street. The conversations among the Puerto Ricans on the large wooden benches in the employment office were always on the same subject.

How to find a decent place to live. How they would not rent to Negroes or Puerto Ricans. How Negroes and Puerto Ricans were given the pink slips first at work.

From the employment office I would call door to door at the piers, factories and storage houses in the streets under the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges. "Sorry, nothing today." It seemed to me that that "today" was a continuation and combination of all the yesterdays, todays and tomorrows.

From the factories I would go to the restaurants looking for a job as a porter or dishwasher. At least I would eat and be warm in a kitchen.

"Sorry" . . . "Sorry" . . .

Sometimes I was hired at ten dollars a week, ten hours a day including Sundays and holidays. One day off during the week. My work was that of three men: dishwasher, porter, busboy. And to clear the sidewalk of snow and slush "when you have nothing else to do." I was to be appropriately humble and grateful not only to the owner but to everybody else in the place.

If I rebelled at insults or at a pointed innuendo or just the inhuman amount of work, I was unceremoniously thrown out and told to come "next week for your pay." "Next Week" meant weeks of calling for the paltry dollars owed me. The owners relished this "next week."

I clung to my poem as to a faith. Like a potent amulet, my precious poem was clenched in the fist of my right hand inside my second hand overcoat. Again and again I declaimed aloud a few precious lines when discouragement and disillusionment threatened to overwhelm me.

*If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after you are gone . . .*

The weeks of unemployment and hard knocks turned into months. I continued to find two or three days of work here and there. And I continued to be thrown out when I rebelled at the ill treatment, overwork and insults. I kept pounding the streets looking for a place where they would treat me half decently, where

my devotion to work and faith in Kipling's poem would be appreciated. I remember the worn out shoes I bought in a second-hand store on Myrtle Avenue at the corner of Adams Street. The round holes in the soles that I tried to cover with pieces of carton were no match for the frigid knives of the unrelenting snow.

One night I returned late after a long day of looking for work. I was hungry. My room was dark and cold. I wanted to warm my numb body. I lit a match and began looking for some scraps of wood and a piece of paper to start a fire. I searched all over the floor. No wood, no paper. As I stood up, the glimmering flicker of the dying match was reflected in the glass surface of the framed poem. I unlooked the poem from the wall. I reflected for a minute, a minute that felt like an eternity. I took the frame apart, placing the square glass upon the small table. I tore the gold paper on which the poem was printed, threw its pieces inside the stove and placing the small bits of wood from the frame on top of the paper I lit it adding soft and hard coal as the fire began to gain strength and brightness.

I watched how the lines of the poem withered into ashes inside the small stove.

11. How To Rent An Apartment Without Money

A good way to find out if a Puerto Rican has been in New York over forty years is by asking him if he knew Markofsky. Markofsky had a coat and suit store somewhere on Second Avenue near 106th Street. The store looked like a tunnel with racks of suits and coats dangling from the walls. This tunnel of suits and coats had a little space in the back with a desk from which Markofsky waded out to greet you as you came in.

Old man Markofsky was quite a guy among the Puerto Ricans of those days. He was your clothier on the long, long installment plan. His name and his store was even mentioned in one of the most popular dance pieces of those days.

Markofsky was small, a little over five feet. His pace was deliberate, his steps were short. He walked a little bent to the front. He had a sort of dignity and confidence in his walk. His face always wore a sad smile over which he superimposed a cigar. If you observed him well, he seemed like a biblical patriarch who liked to be eternally smoking a cigar.

As soon as anybody came from Puerto Rico—especially during the winter—you would take him to Markofsky. Markofsky would take care of outfitting him with a winter suit and a heavy coat to repel the winter cold. Then the newcomer was set to go out and look for a job. All you had to do was to put two dollars on top of Markofsky's old desk and you walked out with an overcoat. Your credit would be good if you came with two dollars every week for a certain number of weeks. If you kept it up steadily and did not miss any weekly payments, I know you could even "touch" Markofsky sometimes for a five "until Saturday," when you received that urgent letter from Puerto Rico asking for a little extra money that week for some emergency.

My brother and I had reached the "touching" stage with old benign Markofsky.

We had to have an apartment. Our family was coming from Puerto Rico and we did not even have the money to pay the first month's rent or to buy a bed or a couch, to say nothing of tables and chairs. So we went to Markofsky. Instead of asking for a five "until Saturday," we asked to see the new suits that were just coming in. The jackets of the suits had belts with very wide shiny buckles. The suits looked very sporty and fashionable and they cost quite a bit of money.

The suits fitted in perfectly with our plans. The more they cost, the better. Markofsky gave us two identical suits with the usual small down payment.

From the store we went directly to a pawn shop a few blocks away. We pawned the two suits that we just bought. With the money we got from the pawn shop we paid the first month's rent on an apartment on 143rd Street between Lenox and Seventh. In those days the few Puerto Ricans around lived in the heart of the Negro neighborhood together with the Negro people in the same buildings; many times as roomers in their homes. Rents were not so high thirty-five years ago.

That very afternoon we got the keys to the apartment—a "rail-road" flat. My brother and I felt great.

Night came. We went to the home where we were rooming. Took our two suitcases, said goodbye and thanks and went to our long empty apartment. My brother went into the parlor, laid himself on the floor and with his suitcase as his pillow went to sleep as if he were in the Waldorf Astoria. I did likewise, lying down beside him with my own suitcase as my pillow. After a few minutes we were both sound asleep. Many a night we had to sleep like that.

The family came: mother, father, sisters, brothers, cousins, and just friends who, because of living with us so many years, had become part of the family. An old Puerto Rican custom. Many times we asked mother about someone who had been living with us for years. "In what way is Jose related to us?" And my mother, after a lot of genealogical hemming and hawing in which the more she explained the more she got involved and confused, would end with a desperate whimsical gesture: "He is just part of the family." And there it ended.

We moved to Brooklyn. Every year either my brother or myself went over to the pawn shop in New York and renewed the tickets for the suits, paying the interest and letting it ride.

One year we were in the chips and instead of renewing the pawn shop tickets we actually took out the two suits. I was saying to myself: "Now I have a new suit with which I can go out to dance the Charleston this coming Saturday night."

But we had not counted on one thing—time. When my brother and I unpacked the "new" suits that we had hardly seen, the color was something between one shade and another, but nothing definite. The lack of air in the closeness of the pawn shop vaults had played havoc with the material and the texture. After we took off the multiple tickets sewed to the pants and jackets, we started for the first time to thoroughly examine the cut and style of the two suits and compare them with what the young sports were wearing those days. The buckles and belts on the jackets looked like something out of a pageant of the medieval ages. When we finally put the suits on and looked at ourselves in the mirror we certainly felt as if we were seeing ourselves in one of those distorted freak mirrors in which you laugh at your own figure when you go to Coney Island.

We had certainly changed in a few years. We were fatter and even taller. The pants were too short. The coat sleeves reached just below the elbows. In short, we looked too ridiculous for words. We laughed very loudly at ourselves until tears came out of our eyes.

We should cry all right. That cheap first apartment we rented in New York came to be one for which we actually paid the highest first month's rent in our lives.

leggings and caps where we were working. Every item was supposed to be thoroughly examined by government examiners. Nothing that was the least bit defective was to be sent to the boys in France. But the opposite was the customary thing to do. Rotten old woolen material was used in the manufacture of this indispensable woolen apparel for the soldiers in France. The government examiners okayed anything, stamping their seal of approval on all that was sent to the soldiers in the front line. Why did the examiners do it? I will let you take just one guess. It seemed to my innocent young mind that on pay day the government examiners were happier than usual.

While father was leisurely promenading through the streets of Brooklyn, those in charge of the department store had chosen to change the display in that part of the window that my father had memorized in all its details. This was done without asking the consent of my father. Perhaps, out of elementary courtesy, they should have sent somebody to tell him they were changing the displays.

Tired of walking, father decided to come to his original place of departure: the department store window. This was the sign that would tell him that he was at the right spot. But, lo and behold! the display that he had memorized so thoroughly was changed.

He came to the store window. But he did not see any of the things he could have sworn he had seen there in the early afternoon. In a moment of confusion he decided that the store window he was seeing in the late afternoon was not the store window he had seen before he decided to take a little walk. He further decided in his mind that neither the store nor the street was the one in which his sons were working.

As my brother and I came out of the factory to go home, we looked around confident that we would find our father standing somewhere in front of the building waiting for us. We waited and then looked around some more on the streets nearest to the factory. No father in sight. Then we expanded the circle so to speak, and started looking in a wider area. No, we could not find father. We decided that perhaps it would be wise if I looked on some streets and avenues while my brother looked into some others. We agreed upon a certain time to come together at a predetermined corner

12. The Day My Father Got Lost

I was working in a factory with my brother in Brooklyn during the First World War. The shop manufactured woolen leggings and caps for the army. In front of the place where we worked, on the other side of the street, there was a big department store. My brother and I brought our mother, our father and the rest of the family from Puerto Rico. We were living in a railroad apartment on 143rd Street near Lenox Avenue. One day we thought that if we brought our father with us to the place where we worked in Brooklyn, perhaps we might be able to find a job for him.

The three of us went into the factory in the morning. We asked the foreman if there was something our father could do. The foreman told us there was nothing for him at the moment. "Keep on bringing him every day--somebody is liable to leave or not show up."

My brother and I started to work. My father sat somewhere out of the way. After we lunched he asked us if he could just take a walk and look around until our day's work was over and we could all go back home to Harlem.

Father did not know a word of English. Furthermore my good father was not too familiar with the first two of the three R's, even in Spanish. The third he just disregarded altogether. So to send him back home all by himself was out of the question. Before he started to walk around the factory neighborhood he looked at the things that attracted his attention. My father took a good look at all the objects that he could see in the department store window. He went as far as memorizing the color of the dresses the lady mannikins were wearing. He took the department store window and all that it contained as the sign where he had to return to after he got tired of whiling away time walking around the streets near the factory.

There were about one hundred men and women making woolen

we both knew well. This was done. After hours of looking around we got together at the agreed upon corner—without our father.

We decided to go home. We took the long subway ride from Brooklyn to 145th Street and Lenox Avenue subway station in Harlem. During the subway ride we were preparing ourselves for the rap we were sure going to take from the rest of the family when we told them that we lost our father in Brooklyn.

As we came in, there was a look of surprise on every face as we sank into a couple of chairs, tired and hungry, and informed the family gathered around us that our father was lost somewhere in the heart of Brooklyn. Strange to say, there were no questions asked. No excitement. No reproaches. A heavy silence served as a pall to conversation. Still there was an expression of mock surprise on everyone's face. All of a sudden we heard a voice from the farthest room in our railroad flat. "Hello, sons, I am safe and sound. The police brought me in. Good thing I had the address of this building on a piece of paper."

Then we had a good tired laugh while father told us all about his wandering in an unknown far away country called Brooklyn.

13. Hiawatha Into Spanish

The old *New York World* was a great paper. I bought it mainly for the Heywood Brown column "It Seems To Me," and for the pages and pages of Help Wanted Ads. I got many a "good" porter job through these Help Wanted pages of the *New York World*. Once, I also got myself a job as a translator from these same pages.

Those were the days of the silent films. A film agency somewhere in the Times Square area was asking for a person who could translate the explanatory material like "One Year Later," into Spanish, so that the films could be used in Latin America. Half a penny a word was to be paid. The translator was to work in his own home and all transactions were to be done through the mail. The agency gave a post office box number to which you were supposed to write.

I wrote. The agency mailed me the material to be translated for one short film. I returned the completed translation. Then they sent me a small check, and more work. It seems that they were satisfied.

Time passed. My old Oliver typewriting machine continued to grind translations of inspirational thoughts such as: "The morning after," "One week after," "Five years after." Sometimes a description or historical paragraph such as an introduction to a striking panorama or a scene helped to break the monotony of the hackneyed phrase and the routine short dialogue.

During the early twenties, the episode or chapter of a serial was a standard feature accompanying the main picture in a movie house. At the end of the episode the hero or more often the heroine was left hanging by two fingers from the edge of a cliff or surrounded by half a dozen lions in the middle of an African jungle. The idea was to excite enough curiosity for you to return next week to see what surely appeared, from all logical deduction, like cer-

tain death for the hero or heroine. But—what do you know! She or he was miraculously saved from a horrible ending by one of the thousand props that the director always had ready to extract from his shirt sleeve and the serial went on and on for months. Today, you can only see these serials chapter by chapter every week in the cheapest of the movie houses or on the most idiotic of the TV programs.

To me, these serials were a gold mine. I was the first to wish the hero eternal life—the longer the serials, the more money I could earn.

One morning I received a long poem that was supposed to be the life of a young American Indian. It was to be used in one of those nature pictures full of rushing rivers, whispering pine trees, bounding deer and flocks of birds suddenly rising out of the thick foliage frightened by the unexpected appearance of "man." The poem was long. The name of the poem was "Hiawatha" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Well, at last I got something worth translating! For a few days I concentrated on making a comparative study of the English and Spanish meter, poetic accent, rhyme and rhythm, before I actually tackled the task of translating the poem itself. It was work. It was fun. Some additional explanation in prose helped in giving clarity and unity to the many natural scenes in the film. The poem itself was broken into sections and these were inserted among the panoramic sequences. When I finished the translation I felt I had done a good job of it.

Hiawatha was sent to the film agency. A few days later I received a complimentary letter with a check. The letter also invited me to come to the office on a certain date. I was being offered steady employment at the agency at a weekly salary.

I got up very early the day of the appointment. I took a great deal of time washing, dressing and combing my hair so that I would look my best. I wore my Sunday suit. The office took up about half an entire floor, way up in a tall building. I asked for the man who had signed the letter. Yes, he was in.

The minute I told him who I was and showed him the letter he himself had signed offering me steady work as a translator, he assumed a cold and impersonal attitude. He made it short and to

the point. "Yes, I wrote that letter. I invited you to come to translate for us here at the office." And, pointing to the other side of the room he added "That was to be your desk and typewriter. But I thought you were white."

Then and there that day in the early twenties, I added one more episode to the maturing serial of my life.

the problems of the people by a group of the greatest minds of that country. In fact the world is still discussing the articles and studies that these young men printed in this little paper and we have not yet heard the last word on the idea that they elaborated in the pages of their small publication.

This group of young "dreamers" and "idealists" as they would probably have been called by the "practical and sensible" persons of their day called their little paper: "The Spark," and by golly, they succeeded in starting a conflagration of thought and ideas with it all over the world.

That is why you should never say no, when they invite you to start the publication of a paper. Even if the name is in Latin. You never can tell what could come of it.

With all the thirty odd dailies, weeklies and monthlies that I have contributed to and worked with, in one way or another, I have gained a precious thing . . . experience.

That you have to earn yourself . . . by doing things that come out right, or by publishing a magazine with the name in Latin!

15. A Hero In The Junk Truck

How many times have we read boastful statements from high educational leaders in our big newspapers that while other countries ignore the history and culture of the United States, our educational system does instruct our children in the history and traditions of other countries.

As far as instruction in the most elementary knowledge of Latin America is concerned, we are forced to state that what our children receive is a hodgepodge of romantic generalities and chauvinistic declarations spread further and wider by Hollywood movies.

We do not have to emphasize that the people are not to blame.

Blame rests on those persons and reactionary forces that represent and defend the interests of finance capital in education.

Last summer my wife and I had an experience that could be presented as proof of our assertion.

We were passing by, on bus No. 37, my wife and I.

"Look, Jesus, look!" said my wife pointing excitedly to a junk truck in front of the building that was being torn down. A truck full of the accumulated debris of many years was parked with its rear to the sidewalk, littered with pieces of brick and powdered cement.

Atop the driver's cabin of the truck and protruding like a spangled banner, was a huge framed picture of a standing figure. Upon his breast was a double line of medals and decorations.

"Did you notice who the man was in that framed picture?" my wife asked insistently as the bus turned the corner of Adams and Fulton Street.

"Who," I answered absent mindedly.

"Bolivar," my wife shouted.

"Who did you say he was?" I inquired as if unduly awakened from a daze.

"Bolivar, Bolivar," my wife repeated excitedly and then she added, "and to think that he is being thrown out into a junk truck," she stammered in a breaking voice.

We got out of the bus in a hurry. Walked to where the truck was about to depart with the dead waste of fragments of a thousand things. The driver caught us staring at the picture.

"What do you want?" he shouted to us in a shrill voice above the noise of the acetylene torch and the electric hammers. "You know who he is," I cried back pointing at the picture tied atop the cabin of the driver's truck like Joan of Arc tied to the flaming stake.

"I don't know and I don't care," the driver counter-blasted in a still higher pitch of voice. But I noticed that there was no enmity in the tone of his voice, though loud and ear-drum breaking.

"He is like George Washington to a score of Latin American countries. He is . . ."

"You want it?" he interrupted in a more softened voice.

"Of course!" my wife answered for both of us, just about jumping with glee.

As the man was unroping Bolivar from atop the truck cabin, the usual group of passersby started clustering around and encircling us--the truck driver, my wife, myself and Bolivar's painting standing erect and magnificent in the middle of us all.

"Who is he, who is he?" came the question of the inquiring voices from everywhere. The crowd was huddled on top of us, as football players ring themselves together bending from their trunks down when they are making a decision before the next play. "Who is he, I mean, the man in the picture?" they continued to ask.

Nobody knew. Nobody seemed to care really. The question was asked more out of curiosity than real interest. The ones over on the third line of the circle of people craned their necks over the ones on the second and first lines upping themselves on their tip toes in order to be able to take a passing glance at the picture. "He is not an American, is he?" someone inquired from the crowd.

My wife finally answered them with a tinge of pride in her voice. "He is Simon Bolivar, the liberator of Latin America."

Curiosity fulfilled, everybody was on his way again. Only my wife, myself and Bolivar remained.

Well, what to do next. It was obvious that the bus driver would not allow us in the bus with such a large framed painting going back home. Fortunately we have a very good American friend living in the Borough Hall neighborhood.

"Let us take him to John's place until we find a person with a car to take Bolivar to our home," I said. My wife agreed.

We opened the door of John's apartment.

"I see that you are coming with very distinguished company today:--Bolivar," he said, simply and casually as if he had known it all his life.

John took some cleaning fluid and a soft rag and went over the whole frame in a loving and very tender manner.

We heard a knock at the door. In came a tall and very distinguished looking man dressed in black, a blend of Lincoln and Emerson in his personality. "He is a real representative of progressive America," John whispered to us. The Reverend spoke quietly and serenely. Looking at the picture he said just one word:

"Bolivar!"

And we all felt very happy.

