

## **The Widow**

### **Hannah Piza**

1800-1880

As a widow, Hannah's status remained unchanged. For years old "Jeosuah" had been of no financial assistance. It was almost entirely by her own efforts that this remarkably energetic woman kept the children well dressed, attractive and healthy.

"On what do you feed them?" inquired the neighbors admiring their clear, fine complexions, and tall upright forms.

"Salt codfish and beans!" answered the widow triumphantly. She did not believe in luxury: she believed in saving. At the end of the year, she used sadly to calculate how much money she would have made, if she "hadn't spent so much on rent and food"; – as if those necessities were *extras*.

The stepsons Moses and Judah were married in 1835 and 1845, respectively, and after that time their own growing families made it impossible for them to be of any great financial aid.

Hannah was an inveterate match-maker and one by one all the handsome daughters found husbands among the prominent traders, mostly men from abroad whose business naturally

brought them to St. Thomas. It was commonly said that all the best *partis* went to the Piza girls.

Achy Piza was the youngest, and her mother's favorite child. In the year 1860, when the sons and all the other daughters were married, Achy became engaged at the age of twenty-two to Solomon Delvalle, twenty-five, a very promising young business man of St. Thomas. Hannah fretted that she could not give this pearl of daughters such a wedding-present as she felt she deserved.

On Saturday morning, while the old lady was taking a bath, a servant knocked at the door to tell her that a diver was there who had brought up from the bottom of the sea something that he was eager to show to his old customer at once, before taking it to anyone else.

"Hand it to me through the door", said the Widow Piza. Wrapping herself in a towel, and reaching out a bare arm for the packet, she examined it and found it contained a most beautiful diamond pendant. The stone was cut heart-shaped, and while no metal showed from the front, it was mounted in gold, with delicate filigree doors at the back which could be opened to clean the large white stone. The heart hung from a graceful diamond bow-knot, which was suspended from a slender golden chain.

Hannah's heart beat faster. Here was a jewel indeed worthy of Rachel, her pearl of daughters, so pious, so devoted. But she controlled the eagerness in her voice:

"How much?" she inquired of the owner, on the opposite side of the door.

"That's something very fine, Mistress. I ought to get \$300.00 for that!"

"Three hundred! Nothing of the sort", said Hannah, not forgetting to be a good business woman, even in her eagerness. "I'll give you \$200.00 in cash right now. Take it or leave it."

The diver took it, and Hannah became the joyful possessor of the beautiful Italian Jewel, rescued from the depths. She could scarcely wait until Rachel came home from synagogue to give it to her.

Achy examined it admiringly, and then gazed at her mother in thoughtful silence.

"Mamma, when did you buy this?" at length she asked.

Her mother flushed: "Today."

"Today! On the *Sabbath!*" Achy's righteous indignation knew no bounds. She absolutely refused to accept the sinfully acquired gift. The doting mother begged and pleaded, but it was hours before the pious daughter consented – not to *accept* it – that she would never do – but to *receive it in trust* for the first

daughter she should bear. She also required that her mother give to charity an amount similar to that which she had spend on the trinket.

(Achy did give the pendant to her daughter Judith, but frequently wore it herself.)

The Widow Piza really enjoyed being in business, and long after it was necessary for her to work, for her sons *were* successful, and her sons-in-law generous, we find her still at it. Ben and Aaron Luria, the husbands of her daughters Rebecca and Leah, would send her great chests containing samples of merchandise from Hamburg, thinking she might be able to utilize the fineries for herself. But the temptation to make a bargain was too strong for her, and nothing that could be sold would she keep. She gave directions to sewing women to make the silks, laces and fine materials into garments which she sold most advantageously. She was paralyzed for the last ten years of her life, but her indomitable spirit was as lively as yore. We must picture her beautifully dressed in a silken peignoir, a crisp lace cap on her head, seated in a rocking chair with a long table drawn up in front of her. On it are her wares. Nor does she allow her reputation as a splendid cook to languish: frequently she has the coal-pot brought in, placed close beside her rocker. In it she makes "*fungi*", more delicious than anyone else, and a guava soup that has no rival.

The two sons of Joshua Piza by his first marriage, and the nine children by the third alliance, were practically of different generations. Moses, the eldest son, was only eleven years younger than his stepmother. In 1835, the year he married Rebecca Lopez-Fonseca, his father and stepmother became the parents of Leah. Moses' first daughter, Bienvenida, was born a year later, but before his second child was born eighteen months after that, the older couple had produced Rachel, preceding their grandchild by one month. Hannah's nine children were a much livelier clan than the sons of the Dutch mother. In the superiority and conceit of their greater number, they used arrogantly to refer to the older branch the 'half-Pizas'. But their mother was too fair to allow that: "Half-Pizas, indeed!" She stormed. "They are the *real* Pizas. If there are any 'half-Pizas' it's you!" There could have been no jealousy in her nature, for she named her second daughter 'Bienvenida' after her husband's first wife.

Probably it was on account of the closeness of age of uncles and nieces growing up as one generation, that the marriage of Hannah's son 'Sampi' with her step-grand-daughter 'Rache' (second daughter of Moses & Rebecca) came about. They went by the Bible, and in that book the marriage of uncle and niece is nowhere expressly forbidden – (as is the union of aunt and nephew). Eugenics was an unknown science, and the idea that consanguinity was a bar to marriage never occurred to them. So these two were wedded. It was eighteen years after the minister's

death, but surely he would have made no objection, for years before he had not protested when his wife made the match between their eldest – and most beautiful – daughter Judith, and Hannah's brother Judah. After all, the number of people considered eligible as mates for their priestly breed was decidedly limited. The government circle was Danish, foreign, Christian. It was fear of this set that made the Pizas so anxious for the safety of the all too attractive Judith that they thrust her, unwilling, into the arms of her middle-aged uncle. The "natives" were blacks. The Jewish residents who lived in *Longpart*, 'poor Bukra', were common, ordinary; in short not to be considered. It was among the visiting Jewish merchants who came to St. Thomas to trade, that several of the sons-in-law were selected. But among the foreigners, those of German '*Tedesco*' origin were looked down upon as not noble enough for distinguished '*Sephardim*' to wed. However, an exception was made in favor of Herman Meyer when he wanted to marry Sarah – for he was such a good match that no sensible parent could object. The young Luria men who were with him in business, though Germans, were Sephardic, and eligible for Rebecca and Leah. Henry Mendes Belisario was welcomed as the first husband of Esther. Hannah, inveterate match-maker, boasted that she had married her nine children ten times. When they were all married and scattered over the globe, Achy (Mrs. Solomon Delvalle), always her mother's favorite, and most devoted child, though

herself the mother of twelve children, refused to leave St. Thomas as long as the old lady survived.

The last years of the widow's life were spent in a suite of rooms that she rented from some maiden ladies, the Misses Maduro, to whose meager exchequer the rent was a most welcome addition. In the midst of preparations for the celebration of her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Hannah died of influenza. It was also the 80<sup>th</sup> year of the Century.

Hannah Jacob Sasso Piza

Died St. Thomas 1880

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