

Jacob Piza
Joshua Piza's 5th child, Hannah's first son

1824-1886

Jacob Piza, the first born son of Joshua and Hannah arrived in 1824, after the exodus from Curaçao. His boyhood in St. Thomas was a time of greater prosperity for the family that had been those earlier years in the Dutch colony. We have already related that when Jacob and his brother Samuel were grown, their mother gave them each a thousand dollars to start them in business. Although the loss of the hard-earned money by shipwreck in the swirling Chagres seemed a tragedy at the time, they made their way very successfully. After the brothers' bitter quarrel, Samuel called his enterprise "Samuel Piza and Company", and Jacob – or "Coco", as he was invariably dubbed – called his "Piza, Piza". There was no Piza in it but himself: he merely wanted to make his firm the most "Piza" of all! His was a stern, unforgiving nature, which made him carry this quarrel, the cause of which has been lost through the decades, on even to the second generation; for he would never personally receive Samuel's son when as a lad he visited England. The brothers' children, however, became the best of friends.

He was a fine-looking man with a stern expression and a soldierly bearing. When he was ready to marry, he declared he would wed no young lady whose opportunities had been limited

to the West Indies and Panama. He would marry a European girl, and non but a beauty. His business interests took him abroad frequently, and when he met Bendita Ascoli in Hamburg, he knew he had found his ideal in this very young and handsome girl. But her parents, though poor, were in no haste to marry off a mere child, especially while her older – and less attractive – sister Buenhora remained unclaimed. They tried to persuade Jacob, a man in his thirties, to take the elder sister instead. The suitor had made his choice and refused to swerve. However the family was equally determined that Bendita should not marry until Buenhora was off their hands. The result was that Jacob occupied himself trying to find a mate for the older one. The story is that he had to wait seven year for his bride, like his namesake in the Bible. This tale cannot be credited though, as Bendita was only about eighteen years old when they did marry in 1860. She had a well to do uncle by the name of Jaffe who offered a modest dowry, but Jacob would not allow his bride to accept it.

After the wedding, he brought his statuesque blue-eyed spouse to Panama. She charmed them all. "Lard!" the Negroes cried, "Mr. Coco sure did bring home a doll!" But quite evidently the climate did not agree with her; for three times she started on the road to motherhood, and three times she lost her child. Leaving his Panama affairs in the hands of his nephew Morris Lindo, Jacob, whose interests were largely abroad, took

his wife to Manchester, England; and there they made their home for many years. Evidently the climate – or the stars – were favorable, for Bendita became the mother of eleven children in rapid succession. Later, when they lived in London, they had two more.

Perhaps it was while Coco was new to England, and the *conquistador* attitude of the West Indies still clung to him, that he was hailed into court for striking an impertinent servant girl. He cheerfully paid the fine of a pound, and said it was worth it.

The head of Piza-Piza made frequent trips across the ocean to keep his eye on his thriving business. Once he stopped off at St. Thomas to see his old mother. It was so long since he had been there that he was not generally recognized, though everyone commented on the likeness of the visitor to "Mr. Sampi". He was not as handsome as his brother, though both were of imposing appearance. Jacob had a large face and a leonine head of shaggy gray hair. When his eldest son Joshua was seventeen, he brought him out from England to learn the business. A year or so later he sent over his second son, Samuel. This proved most unfortunate, for soon the boy, a tall and handsome youth, was taken ill with yellow fever and died. Jacob was very bitter and felt that his son had not received proper care, and said so in no weak terms. The next year he *brought* out his son Walter to train him into the business. This one was stricken

down before his very eyes with the same dread disease; and he could not say that the lad did not have the best of care.

It was in Panama that Coco himself died in 1886, years later. While strolling in the street he stopped to play with a child, when he was prostrated by a heart attack. He was carried into the nearest store and his son Jossy was sent for. The young man arrived just as his father was expiring. Jacob Piza's life presents a picture of stubborn sternness, but also of strict integrity.

Bendita lived to be an old lady, always handsome, and with a bearing as soldierly as her husband's. She was very much the ruler of her large family. All but two of the nine daughters married: Anita to John Hands, Bettina to Harry Caro, Leah to Walter Gabriel, Ruth to Lionel Lowy, Alda to Walter Phillips, Emily ("Dottie") to Rudolph Kohnstam, and Ida to Alexander Hyams. Florence, the third daughter, became a nurse, and later the matron of a hospital. After years of hard work and sacrifice she had retired, when the Great War broke out, and she volunteered for service again. She worked so untiringly and effectively that she twice received Royal Decorations. Mabelle, next to the youngest, tall, handsome and vivid, was the other daughter who did not marry. She became a militant suffragette in the days of Mrs. Pankhurst. The vote gained, she devoted her splendid energies to the study of horticulture, and practiced her profession in England and in Palestine. The eldest son Joshua,

who had been brought to Panama in his youth, devoted his life to the business and branched out into many new enterprises – pearl-fisheries, cattle-ranches, and the establishment and maintenance of an electric-light and power plant. He was not married. Daniel, the only other son to grow to full manhood, was killed in the World War. Four of Jacob's grandsons gave their lives in the same cause.

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