

# Once in Puerto Rico

by Pura Belpré

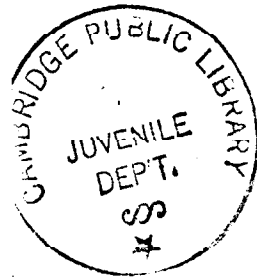
Illustrated by  
Christine Price

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—Pura Belpré

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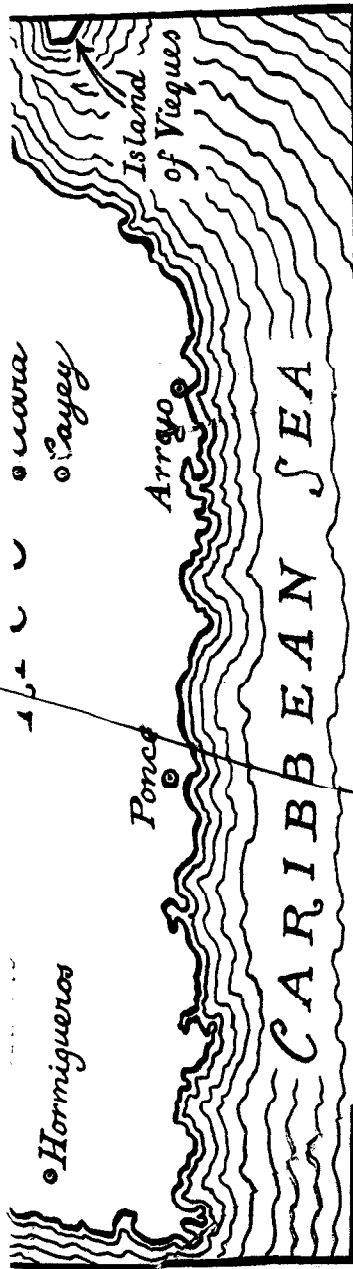
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## The Land of Brave Men

ONCE, CENTURIES AGO, bands of Arawak and Carib Indians came down the great Orinoco river in their dugout canoes. Leaving the vast green forests of their homeland in South America, the Indians sailed into the Caribbean Sea and moved through a chain of islands that lay to the north and east.

Four of the largest islands to the north are now called the Greater Antilles, while the smaller ones to the east are the Lesser Antilles. The Indians paddled their big canoes from island to island and made the islands their homes.



And so it came to pass that a tribe of the Arawaks who called themselves *Tainos*, which meant "The Good Ones," settled the smallest island of the Greater Antilles. They called the island *Boriquen*, which in their language meant "The Land of Brave Men." And brave they proved to be when the time came to defend their lives and land from their enemies—first the warring Caribs and then the Spanish Conquistadors.

The *Tainos* were farmers and fine fishermen. They lived in small villages, carefully laid out by the sea. They chose village chiefs, called *caciques*, to govern the people, and a supreme chief to rule over the whole land. Each *cacique* wore a golden disk, the *guanín*, around his neck as a sign of his power.

Religion, music, dancing and sports were all part of the daily life of the *Taino* people. They worshipped a good God called *Yukiyú*, and they feared an evil one, *Juracán*. They believed that *Juracán* stirred up the storms that lashed the islands with wind and rain. He destroyed the crops and homes of the people and made the sea waves rise in fury to sweep away the canoes.

The *Tainos* also had a *bohique*, a wise priest and medicine man. It was he who fashioned the *cemí*, the small stone idol which many Indians wore on their foreheads or hung around their necks. The people believed that the *cemí* had magic power to protect them and their homes.

The *Tainos* were wonderful dancers and singers,

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and they created a great ritual of dance and song  
called the Areito, in which all the people took part.  
The Areito was sung before going to war, as well as  
for tribal festivals. Through music and movement  
the people expressed their happiness and their grief,  
and told the stories of times long past and the deeds  
of Indian heroes. The men kept their bodies fit and  
strong by playing a spirited ball game called batú,  
with agility and skill; but it was the Areito that filled  
their hearts with courage and pride and made the  
warriors brave in battle.

These, then, were the people Christopher Colum-  
bus met when he first set foot on the island of Bori-  
quen, on November 19th, 1493.

Fifteen years later the lives of the Tainos were to  
be changed forever. They saw the Spanish settlers  
coming in tall ships from far across the sea. They heard  
the thunder of the white men's guns and saw their  
land seized by the strangers and their proud warriors  
enslaved. They saw the wilderness destroyed to  
make way for great farms and plantations; and they  
saw the coming of new people from across the sea—  
Negro slaves from West Africa, who were forced to  
toil on the estates and in the houses of the Spanish  
conquerors.

Each of these groups of people, who came to settle  
on the green island of Boriquen, brought its own  
language, customs and religious faith, its own songs,  
stories and dances—the things that make up the  
culture of a people. But as the years passed and the

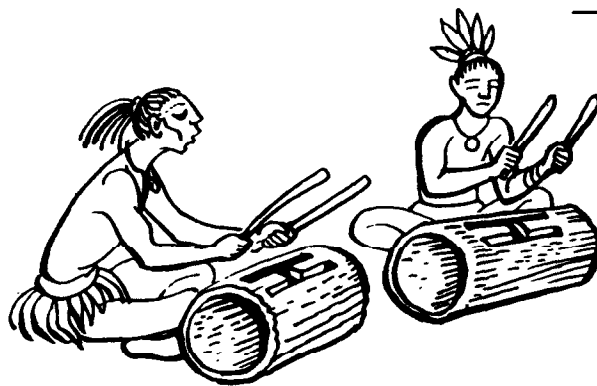
Indians and Spaniards and Negroes lived out their lives on the island, their separate cultures were gradually mixed and mingled. Out of that mixing came the culture of Puerto Rico.

The stories and legends in this collection reach back into the past of Puerto Rico and down to the roots of the island culture. They are the legacy of a people, old tales retold by generations of storytellers.

A few of the stories were discovered through careful research in Puerto Rico, but most of them I heard while growing up on the island. Some tales I first heard up in the highlands, after the gas lamps were lit in the evening; others at quiet siesta time, while the guinea hens paraded their chicks across the street in a small seashore town; and still others under the almond trees in little villages on lazy summer days.

These stories are like a key with which to unlock the door of time and step onto an island that the Tainos long ago called Boriquen, and that the world today calls Puerto Rico.

—Pura Belpré

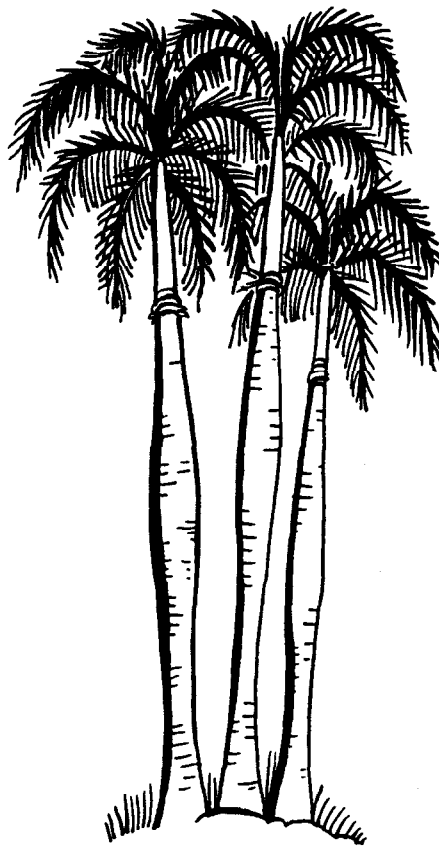


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## *The Legend of the Royal Palm*

**A**MONG THE TAINO INDIANS on the island of Boriquen there was once a man named Milomaki. He was tall, brave and handsome, and he had a wonderful singing voice, a voice possessed of strange power. If you were sick, his singing made you well. If you were sad, it made you happy. His fame spread all over the island, and people came from far away to see and hear him. But his popularity and his power over the people soon angered the Indian gods. They became jealous and plotted against him.



One afternoon, as the Indians were returning with their catch of fresh fish from the river, they came upon Milomaki.

"Sing for us," they said, "for we have been working since dawn and we are tired."

Milomaki began to sing songs that had the coolness of a soft breeze, and the Indians forgot their weariness and were refreshed. Then Milomaki sang heroic songs, and the Indians felt like fishermen no longer but like Indian chiefs performing mighty deeds in war. As they listened, caught by the spell of the music, the hot sun shone down on them and on the fish they had caught.

After a while the songs ended. The Indians thanked Milomaki, picked up their fish and went home.

When they arrived, their wives prepared the fish and they all sat down to enjoy the delicious meal. But after dinner a terrible thing happened. Everyone who had eaten the fish became ill.

"It is Milomaki's fault!" said the fishermen. "He made us forget the fish while he sang, and the hot sun has spoiled them."

All their happiness turned to anger. Only the Indian gods were happy. They had been waiting for just such an incident to occur. Now they stirred up the men against Milomaki, filling their hearts with evil thoughts. The Indians decided that Milomaki must die.

"Burn him at the stake!" they shouted. Their anger made them forget their illness, and off they went

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in search of Milomaki. They searched all night. It was not until dawn that they caught up with him. They pounced on him and bound him, and he gave in without a struggle. He felt no anger toward them, only wonder and surprise. Were these the same men who only the day before had quietly listened to his singing?

The Indians tied him to a heavy log. Then they gathered firewood and built a great fire. Milomaki understood what they were going to do and he became very sad. When everything was ready they lifted him up to stand above the fire.

Suddenly he began to sing. His song was more beautiful than any they had ever heard. He sang and sang. He was still singing when a soft rain began to fall. It clung to the leaves of the trees, moistened the grass and moss underfoot and touched with coolness the face of Milomaki as he sang.

His voice rose and fell under the spell of its own music. The Indians listened in awe and the spell of the music swept away their evil thoughts. Suddenly they were horrified at what they were about

to do. Gone was their anger. A feeling of remorse surged through their bodies.

“Milomaki, Milomaki!” they cried, and they rushed to untie him. But they were too late. Right before their eyes Milomaki’s form began to disappear. Where he had been standing there was now a tall regal-looking palm tree, its crown of leafy fronds spread out toward the sky. A gust of wind blew through its branches and they stirred with a soft rustling sound. The Indians had never seen such a tree before, and because it had a royal look and stood so tall and straight, they called it Royal Palm. Whenever they heard the wind blowing through its branches, they imagined it was Milomaki singing to them, and they would stop to listen with delight and wonder.

They told their children and their children’s children the tale of Milomaki, and when more palm trees grew on the island, as straight and tall and beautiful as the first of the Royal Palms, the voice of the great singer could be heard in all of them.



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## *Guaní*

**L**ONG AGO AMONG the Indians who roamed the highlands there was a boy called Guaní. He lived alone and spent his days wandering by himself among the mountains.

One day he came to a high peak and sat on a rock to rest. Far in the distance he saw two bodies of gleaming water. They were so beautiful that he looked at them for a long time. Then he stood upon



the rock, raised his arms above his head and called to his god: "O Yukiyú, I thank you for this day and for letting me see the waters!"

Then he scanned the open valley below, and suddenly his heart was filled with joy. Twelve goats were grazing on the green grass. Where had they come from? To whom did they belong? Guaní jumped down from the rock and ran to the meadow.

The twelve goats gathered around him as though they were his friends; and while he stroked and fondled them, a strange feeling came over him. He no longer felt alone.

"Someone must be the master of the goats," he thought, and he sat down to wait for the master to appear.

All the afternoon he sat, as only an Indian can, silent and motionless. The sun went down behind the hills and darkness came. The goats lay in the grass and dozed. All night the boy waited, and no one came to take away the flock. He greeted them with joy in the morning, and before the new day was gone, he had built himself a little hut and settled down to live in the meadow with his goats.

Every day at sunrise he thanked his god, Yukiyú, for the gift of the goats. Then he would lead them through the green meadows looking for the best pasture. One day he found a spring, hidden by trees and clumps of bamboo. A good spring meant prosperity and a happy life. Guaní ran joyfully to fetch his goats and left them at the spring to drink.

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They stayed away all day, and when he returned to the spring at sundown to bring them home, they did not move or bleat in answer to his call. The whole flock stood stiff and still. Guaní ran among them, and when he touched their bodies they were cold and hard. His goats had been turned into wood!

"O Yukiú!" he cried. "Why have you done this? What have I done to make you angry?"

Then he turned and fled into the hills.

For many days he roamed, but he could not ease the longing for his flock. One day, when he was worn out with wandering, he came to a hill above a little village. There he lay down under a great ceiba tree and fell asleep. The ceiba is a sacred tree, and as the boy slept, curled up between the mighty roots, he had a dream.

A tall majestic Indian stood before him. The man's black hair reached his shoulders and was tied back with a maguey cord. His body was painted with strange designs in yellow, black and red. "Guaní," he said, "follow the trail and come to me. Do not despair!"

Guaní awoke with a start and jumped to his feet. Who was this Indian and where was the trail? He looked at the village below, which was surrounded by a dense green thicket. Then he climbed up the ceiba tree to the very top, so high it seemed to touch the sky. Now he could see beyond the thicket to an open stretch of land and a mountain, and at the foot of the mountain was the beginning of a trail. It ran

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like a silver thread, winding higher and higher, until  
it disappeared into the very heart of the mountain.  
Guaní climbed down and began his journey.

He slipped through the village and into the thicket.  
The trees were so tangled with lianas that he had  
to break his way through. He struggled among bram-  
bles and waded knee-deep through swamps of mud  
and stagnant water. When at last he reached the far  
side of the thicket, dusk had fallen and he lay down  
and slept until morning.

At sunrise he faced the trail refreshed and rested.  
The way was steep and terrible. He dug his bare toes  
into the loose earth, for one false step would send  
him rolling down to certain death. Higher and higher  
he went, following the twisting path far up the moun-  
tain until a sharp turn brought him to the dark mouth  
of a cave. The trail led straight inside, and Guaní  
followed it, groping his way through the blackness.

Suddenly a great voice resounded through the  
cave; "O Guaní! The blessings of your ancestors be  
with you!"

As the voice spoke, the vast cavern was flooded  
with light, and there, sitting upon a throne, was the  
Indian Guaní had seen in his dream.

The boy approached the throne and felt no fear.  
"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am the Spirit of the Cave," the Indian replied.

"Why did you summon me?" asked Guaní.

"Because I saw the fate of your flock of goats. I  
watched you grieving. I want to help you."



"O Spirit of the Cave," cried Guaní, "how can you make my goats alive again?"

"Be patient and listen," said the Spirit. "At the bottom of the spring you found there lives a toad, an evil toad. He has slept for many years, but your goats awoke him when they stirred the water with their drinking. In his anger he cast a spell on them, turning them into wood."

"Then all is lost!" said Guaní.

"Not all," the Spirit answered, and he put in the boy's hand a slender piece of wood.

"What is this?"

"It is a flute. Only the music of this flute can break the spell."

Guaní caressed the little pipe, but his heart was heavy. "How can I make music come out of this? I know not how."

"Put the pipe to your lips and blow softly," said the Spirit. "Whatever is in your heart at the time, be it sorrow or joy, so shall your music be."

Guaní put the pipe to his lips and blew. Out came a melody that was full of grief and longing.

"Go now, Guaní," said the Spirit. "Play your pipe throughout your valley." And with those words the throne and the Spirit disappeared and in their place was a dark opening in the wall of the cave.

"O great Spirit. I thank you in the name of Yukiyú!" cried Guaní.

Then he crept silently through the opening and found himself in a secret passage under the moun-

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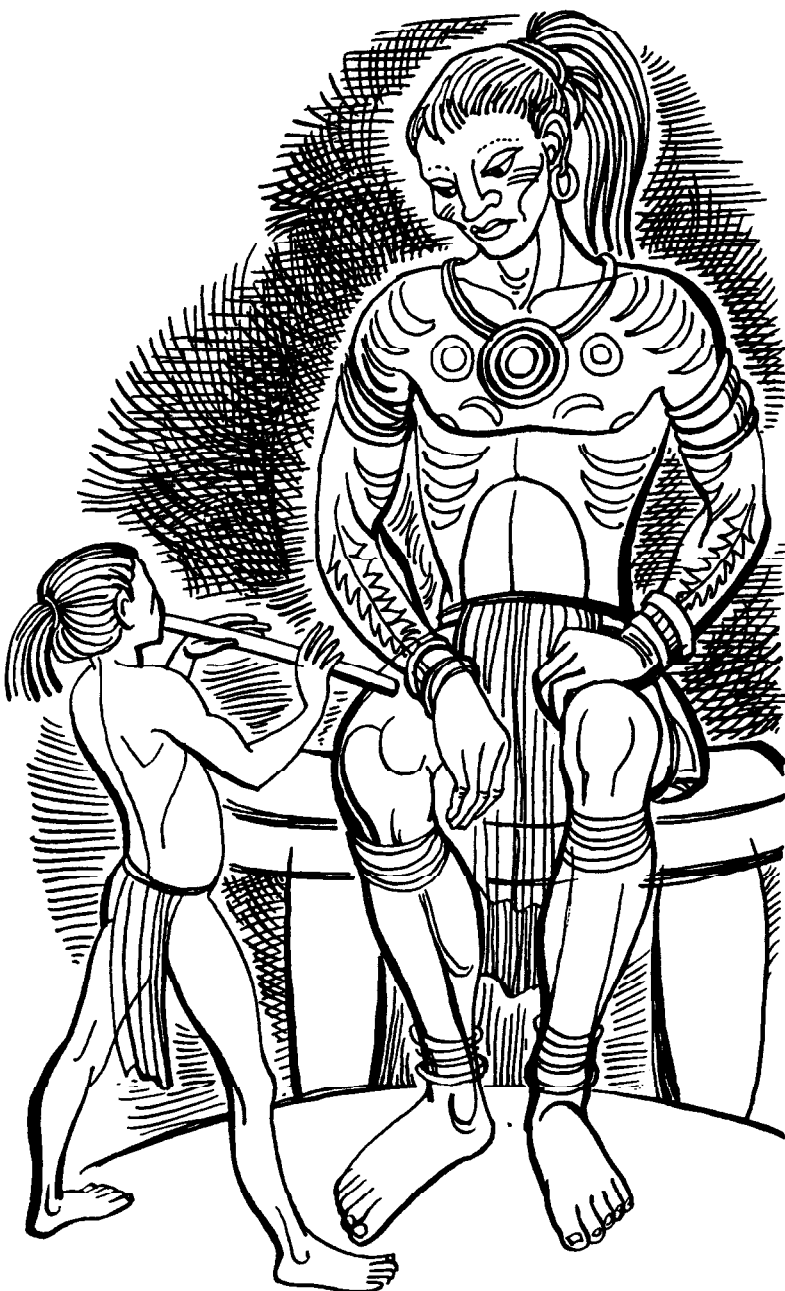
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tain. He walked on without fear, touching the cold rocky walls with his hands, and at last he saw the glow of sunlight far ahead. He began to run, and behold! At the mouth of the passage was country that he knew—the mountains and valleys near his home.

He could hardly wait to reach the hidden spring, and as he hurried on, he thought of his goats alive and skipping down the valley. He set the pipe to his lips and blew, and now a merry tune came out, filled with all the joy that was in his heart. The more he thought of his flock, the merrier was the tune. He walked on and on, playing and playing, until he saw the trees around the hidden spring, and there in the green meadow his goats came running to greet him.

“O great Yukiýú!” cried Guaní. “Your will be done!”

Once again he raised the pipe to his lips and blew, and the goats surrounded him and seemed to dance for joy. The tune was a song of thanksgiving, a tune that the boy played over and over as he ran home through the meadow with his flock.

He knew that with his goats and his flute he would never be lonely again.



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## *The Legend of the Hummingbird*

**B**ETWEEN THE TOWNS of Cayey and Cidra, far up in the hills, there was once a small pool fed by a waterfall that tumbled down the side of the mountain. The pool was surrounded by pomarosa trees, and the Indians used to call it Pomarosa Pool. It was the favorite place of Alida, the daughter of an Indian chief, a man of power and wealth among the people of the hills.

One day, when Alida had come to the pool to rest after a long walk, a young Indian came there to pick some fruit from the trees. Alida was surprised, for



he was not of her tribe. Yet he said he was no stranger to the pool. This was where he had first seen Alida, and he had often returned since then to pick fruit, hoping to see her again.

He told her about himself to make her feel at home. He confessed, with honesty and frankness, that he was a member of the dreaded Carib tribe that had so often attacked the island of Boriquen. As a young boy, he had been left behind after one of those raids, and he had stayed on the island ever since.

Alida listened closely to his story, and the two became friends. They met again in the days that followed, and their friendship grew stronger. Alida admired the young man's courage in living among his enemies. She learned to call him by his Carib name, Taroo, and he called her Alida, just as her own people did. Before long, their friendship had turned into love.

Their meetings by the pool were always brief. Alida was afraid their secret might be discovered, and careful though she was, there came a day when some one saw them and told her father. Alida was forbidden to visit the Pomarosa Pool, and to put an end to her romance with the stranger, her father decided to marry her to a man of his own choosing. Preparations for the wedding started at once.

Alida was torn with grief, and one evening she cried out to her god: "O Yukiú, help me! Kill me or do what you will with me, but do not let me marry this man whom I do not love!"

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And the great god Yukiyú took pity on her and  
changed her into a delicate red flower.

Meanwhile Taroo, knowing nothing of Alida's sor-  
row, still waited for her by the Pomarosa Pool. Day  
after day he waited. Sometimes he stayed there until  
a mantle of stars was spread across the sky.

One night the moon took pity on him. "Taroo,"  
she called from her place high above the stars. "O  
Taroo, wait no longer for Alida! Your secret was made  
known, and Alida was to be married to a man of





her father's choosing. In her grief she called to her god, Yukiýú; he heard her plea for help and changed her into a red flower."

"Ahee, ahee!" cried Taroo. "O moon, what is the name of the red flower?"

"Only Yukiýú knows that," the moon replied.

Then Taroo called out: "O Yukiýú, god of my Alida, help me too! Help me to find her!"

And just as the great god had heard Alida's plea, he listened now to Taroo and decided to help him. There by the Pomarosa Pool, before the moon and the silent stars, the great god changed Taroo into a small many-colored bird.

"Fly, Colibrí, and find your love among the flowers," he said.

Off went the Colibrí, flying swiftly, and as he flew his wings made a sweet humming sound.

In the morning the Indians saw a new bird darting about among the flowers, swift as an arrow and brilliant as a jewel. They heard the humming of its wings, and in amazement they saw it hover in the air over every blossom, kissing the petals of the flowers with its long slender bill. They liked the new bird with the music in its wings, and they called it Hummingbird.

Ever since then the little many-colored bird has hovered over every flower he finds, but returns most often to the flowers that are red. He is still looking, always looking, for the one red flower that will be his lost Alida. He has not found her yet.

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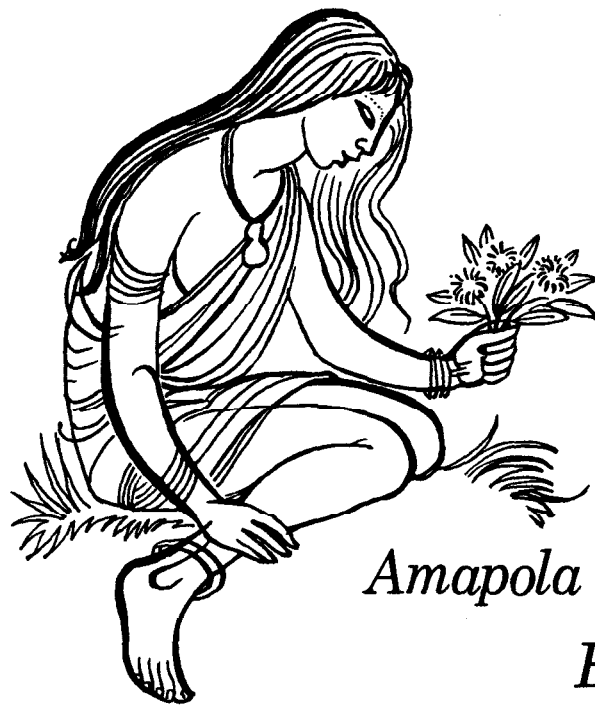
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## *Amapola and the Butterfly*

ALONG THE ROAD between the villages of Las Marias and Maricao the land rises in a great rocky hill. Among the rocks are deep dark caves, mysterious and terrible. Strange tales are told about the caves, stories passed down from the time when the land belonged to the Indians.

Long ago, in that far-off time, there lived in those parts an Indian girl called Amapola. She was very beautiful. Every young Indian wanted to marry her, but Amapola would look at none of them. She only had eyes for the land. Her loves were the trees of the forest, the flowers in the green meadows and the animals that shared her world.





When she was a little girl, her mother hung a small idol—a *cemí*— on a string around Amapola's neck. It was supposed to protect her from evil spirits. As she grew up, Amapola was told about strange happenings in the forest beyond her home, and she was warned above all about the forest witch who lured people to her cave. Those who followed her were never seen again.

One day, when Amapola's mother was in the house and her father in the field, she went to gather some flowers. As she moved about among the flowers, a beautiful butterfly flew out of the forest and fluttered over her head. She stopped to admire its colors, and suddenly she wanted, more than anything else in the world, to hold the butterfly in her hand.

She circled around, stretching out her arms every time the butterfly flew close. Once it flew so near that its wings brushed the tips of her fingers. But no matter how hard she tried to catch it, the butterfly was always out of reach. This made Amapola all the more determined.

The butterfly fluttered away and after it went the girl. In and out among the trees it flew, and in and out went Amapola. On and on, higher and higher into the forest they went. Then suddenly the butterfly disappeared, and just as suddenly a wrinkled, shaggy-haired old woman stood before the girl.

"You have lost the butterfly," she said, "but do not grieve. Come, I'll take you to that butterfly and to many others far more beautiful. Come!"

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And like one under a spell, Amapola followed her.

Up and up, deeper and deeper into the forest they went. Finally they came to a great cave, and the old woman led the way inside. It was dark as midnight. Amapola shut her eyes for a second, and when she opened them, the old woman was gone. There were no butterflies. The cave was filled with strange rocks, large and small.

Some were shaped like people, others like animals. Beads and necklaces were scattered on the floor. Curious scribblings and Indian faces were painted on the walls. In the center was a grotesque face, wrinkled, shaggy-haired and old. It was the face of the old woman who had brought her to the cave.

Suddenly Amapola remembered her mother's warnings. Here was the cave she had spoken of, the cave of the forest witch. The beautiful butterfly and the ugly old woman were one and the same!

Amapola shuddered with fear. She turned to go but could not move her feet. They felt heavy as stone. She tried to lift them up, but they seemed rooted to the ground. They had no life, no feeling.

Then her hands, fluttering in panic, brushed against the idol that hung around her neck. She clutched it between her palms and whispered: "Help me! Let your magic power protect me!"

And as she whispered the same words, over and over, a strange prickly feeling crept into her feet and up her legs. The heaviness was gone. Life was returning. Now she could raise her feet, and she bounded

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out of the cave and raced down the hillside as fast as she could go. She arrived home still clutching the little stone idol that had saved her.

That night the Indians gathered to hear Amapola's tale. When she had spoken, the elders pondered, wondering whether the rocks in the great cave were the bodies of people and animals that the forest witch had turned to stone. But there was no doubt in Amapola's mind. She was certain that they were. Hadn't she almost become one of them?

Time passed and other people came to live in the land that had belonged to Amapola's tribe. But the Indian tale of Amapola was never forgotten. Mothers still told the story to their children, and to this day no one dares to explore the caves on the rocky hill.

