

The Beautiful Inkberry Tree

A CHRISTMAS STORY
FOR YOUNG VIRGIN ISLANDERS

T H E

B E A U T I F U L

I N K B E R R Y

T R E E



A Story for Young Virgin Islanders

PREPARED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF ESEA TITLE III
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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NOTE: The Inkberry, a member of the Madder Family, (Rubiaceae) specifically, *Randia aculeata* L., is a deciduous shrub 5-10 feet high or small tree 20 feet tall, 3 inches in diameter with erect axis and thin crown of many nearly horizontal spiny branches which end with widely forking gray spines 1/4 - 3/4 inch long.

The names arbol de navidad and christmas tree refer to the use of the tree as a christmas decoration. A blue dye can be obtained from the berries, the source of the common names tintillo and inkberry. Fishing rods are made from the rigid stems.

Range - Southern Florida, Bermuda, throughout the West Indies from Bahamas to Cuba and Grenada, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago. Also in the thickets and open forests of the lower mountain range of Mexico, Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John, Virgin Gorda and Anegada.

REFERENCE:

E.L. Little, Jr. and F. Wardsworth, Common Trees of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1965), pp. 520-521.

P R E F A C E

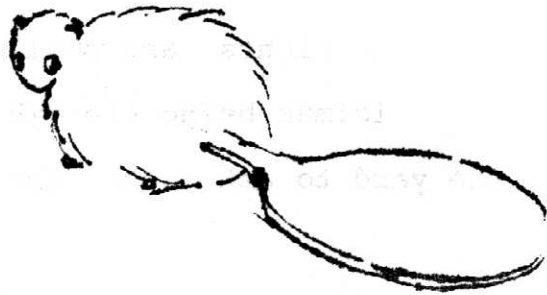
The "Beautiful Inkberry Tree" is designed primarily to present to the young Virgin Islander another reminder or phase of his heritage. Through a microscopic view of the past, reference is made to a typical family in its preparations for the Christmas Season. A broader purpose may be the strengthening of the concept that people everywhere are products of their backgrounds.

Keeping an alert eye on its basic objective: to stimulate the Virgin Islands child to achieve self-actualization, Project Introspection, ESEA Title III strongly affirms that to understand others better we must first understand ourselves well, hopes that this story will help each student to appreciate his family life and accept himself as a creature of his ancestors and to finally realize his indebtedness to them.

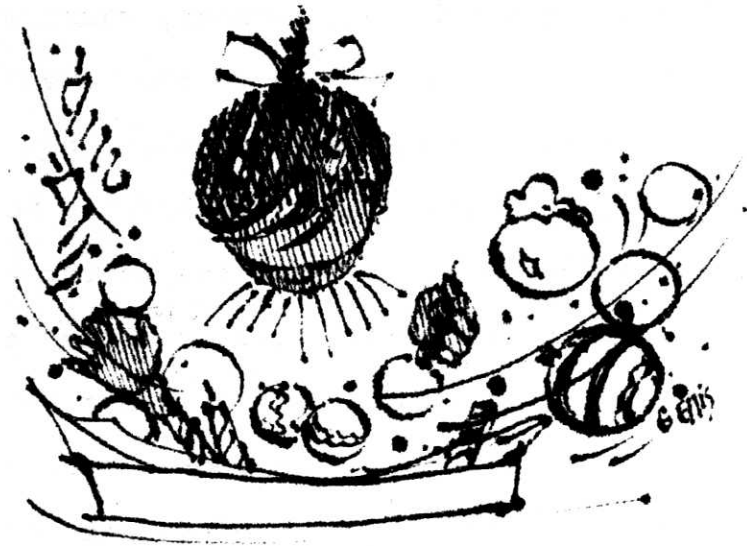




Helen was all excited, and she had reasons to be. It was Christmas Eve and her Aunt Leah and Cousin Audrey, whom she had never seen were coming to spend the holidays at their house. Nestled at the foot of Denmark Hill, Helen's house shone from within; it had been so scrubbed in readiness for the exciting days ahead. With her parents and three brothers, Helen lived in this cottage from birth. Mother had spent many evenings getting the house ready. Floors were scrubbed, furniture polished, new curtains were bought and hung in place. As Helen looked around she could hardly restrain herself from shouting with joy. What ten year old wouldn't with the sights and smells that were typical of Christmas being everywhere. She ran into the yard to ask mother about the



christmas tree but Mother just couldn't answer at the moment. She was too busy pushing the sweet breads around in the large dutch oven with the broad wooden paddle. Mother smiled as she pulled one of the sweet breads out - It was done and my, my, how good it looked - a rich brown round cake with prunes, cherries, citron and nuts peeping through the baked crust. Oh for a little taste! yearned Helen, but then she remembered Mother had given her the bowl and the wooden spoon to taste the batter - Gee, but that DID taste good. Finally Mother put the wooden paddle to stand in a corner and headed for the house. Helen looked back at the paddle and smiled. It reminded her of a picture of a beaver's tail she had seen in her library book. The only difference was that the base of the paddle was wider. She hoped that this same paddle would still be around when she grew up. (And that she would also make delicious sweet breads as well as those her mother made).



Joining Mother on the way to the house, Helen asked, "Will we get the tree before Aunt Leah and my cousin get here?" Mother put her arms around her daughter's shoulders and said, "Yes dear, as a matter of fact, Papa and the boys have already gone to Frenchman Hill to chop the tree - They should be here any minute". Helen clapped her hands and ran ahead of her mother straight to a cardboard box that was partly hidden under her bed. She pulled it out and removed the contents slowly and thoughtfully. There were boxes of small Christmas candles about three inches long, each candle had the same ribbed design, but different colors of red, blue, pink, yellow, green and soft orange. Best of all were the glass balls that looked like bubbles with frosting, while others were decorated with etched pictures. But there was nothing for the top of the tree! As she knelt near the box pondering over a star or an angel for the crown of the tree she heard papa's voice shouting to her eldest brother,



"Leon, bring that kerosine tin over here". The pan, thought Ellen - The tree is here! Now the excitement began. How the family worked together. The tree was brought into the house along with the tin which was about thirty-six inches high. Placing the tree in the tin, the boys next filled it up with rocks of different sizes to steady the pan. Then father stood off and looked at a job well done and mother looked too - She studied the shape - When everything seemed just right, the kids set about trimming the tree. To finish the job, sheets of gayly colored gift wrapping paper were wound around the can starting high at the base to hide the rocks and this was kept in place by a wide band of red crepe paper which ended in a large bow at the front. One thing seemed missing - Or was it really missing? No gifts were placed under the tree. And again, as if by magic, by nightfall there were packages and more packages of different shapes and sizes all gayly wrapped, lying under the tree.



Any minute now Aunt Leah should be knocking on their door. What seemed like a rather long wait for Helen soon came to an end as a taxi horn honked long and loud outside their door. Mother quickly dried her hands from washing the dishes, straightened her hair as best as she could and opened the front door. Hugging, kissing and introductions followed.

Her cousin Audrey, wearing heavy woolen clothes, looked almost identical to Helen - Her brown skin, however, was a lighter shade due to climatic conditions of a Northern city like New York. The girls liked each other from the start, and Audrey, who wanted to know about everything that seemed so strange, got ready answers from her cousin. Taking quick steps toward the tree, Audrey stopped suddenly and looked. She was puzzled and this was very plain to be seen. She pointed one finger to the tree and cried, "What's that!" Poor Helen - she just couldn't understand her cousin's surprise. Even though she was hurt- she tried not



to show it - She couldn't embarrass her visitor. Mother had taught her to be polite, and even more so, to visitors in the home. She replied slowly, "That's our Christmas Tree". Audrey threw back her head and laughed - "A Christmas Tree? - No its not. A pine tree is a Christmas tree; it grows straight and tall, bears needles and also grows cones instead of juicy fruits".

Aunt Leah, being very tactful, put her arms around the two girls, drew them gently down on the floor with her and as they sat together, Aunt Leah told her daughter and her niece the true meaning of Christmas. As she spoke, the two girls listened. Then Aunt Leah continued by speaking directly to her daughter - "So you see Audrey, around the world, Christmas joys take many forms. In the United States, we believe in Santa Claus, while some have other figures representing the spirit of Christmas. In cold countries, trees wither and dry in the winter time, but since evergreens remain green all year, they are chosen as Christmas trees.



In St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John, this Inkberry tree, (pointing to the tree in the tin) is chosen as the christmas tree because of its straight axis, its shapely clustered branches and mostly because of the gray spines that serve so easily as candle holders. When it is decorated, it is just as beautiful as any pine tree. This is the most beautiful christmas tree I've seen in a long time". Aunt Leah continued by telling the girls what good times she had as a little girl when she did the same things that Helen and her family were doing. Very slowly Audrey leaned over and kissed her cousin on the cheek. She didn't mean to hurt her and she was sorry. Everyone laughed and got up off the floor. Audrey asked, "Can I help dress the christmas tree too? Is there anything I can do?" Then Audrey remembered there was nothing for the top of the tree and said so.



Aunt Leah went to her bags and brought some small packages into the room - The girls watched eagerly. Opening them, she revealed some shiny bright silver rope. Together she and the girls made a star for the top of the tree. Taking the tinsel that was left, the two girls wound it around the tree laughing together as they went around and around, forward and backward. Audrey began humming the tune of "Oh Christmas Tree" and Helen and Aunt Leah joined in. When that was finished, dinner was ready and everyone, even papa, sang as they gathered at the table "We wish you a Merry Christmas". Papa alone sang the last line as he poured guavaberry in each glass. His loud tenor echoing through the house in a solo, "And a Happy New Year".

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SCHOOLS IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

THE BATTLE OF THE VOICES

With Apologies to Clement C. Moore's

A Visit From St. Nick

T'was the night before Christmas
when all through the house

Not a creature was stirring, not even
Aunt Lois

The sweet breads were placed on the
dresser with care

In hopes that the Carolers soon will
be there

The ham was all done, but it was still
sizzling

In cloves, other spices and rich
cherry herring.

Aunt Tillie in her kerchief and I in
my nightie

Just had another nip of good guavaberry

When around the bend came the sound of
voices

I sprang from my chair - spilling drink
and ices

Away to the door, I flew like a flash

Threw up the shutters, tore open the sash

The moon and the stars in the Tropical sky,

Was a breathtaking picture to the human eye
When what to my listening ears did I hear
But a band of Carolers, sounding very near
With a leader whose voice rose higher than
the clouds

I knew in a moment this MUST BE ALIC LLOYD
More sweeter than angels their jubilant
voices

Resounded! Hosanna, the glad earth rejoices
In spotless white and banners gleaming
The Carolers marched but continued singing
To the top of their voices, to the top of
the hill

And taking their places, I can hear them
still.

And then in a twinkling, I heard from afar
Another group, I just knew was MISS ESTHER.
As I stepped into the yard to listen closely
Around the corner they came in rhythmic
steps so lively

Miss Esther, for the occasion was correctly
attired

A straw hat, a white dress,

By all she was loved and admired.

Over her shoulders in the shape of an arc
Was a blue ribbon that read, MISS ESTHER MARKS
She resembled a prima donna waiting for her
cue

To let go the voice that opened earth and
heaven too.

The group, they all waited, till Miss Esther
nodded

Then together they sang - voices exploded!
As one after another, Carols they sang
In a challenge or competition to Lloyd and
his gang.

From over the hill, the answers came
Solo, duets, chorus refrains,
Hosannas, Hallelujahs, again and again.
Lloyd had accepted and supreme he reigned.
As each carol faded, the voices grew sweeter
But morning was breaking and the contest was
over.

So as daylight dawned and the sun began to
shine,

The Carolers retreated to rest and dine
But as they returned to homes cosy and merry
They sang "MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL AND ENJOY
YOUR GUAVABERRY".

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